

REFLECTIONS ON POLITICS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE¹

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I INTEND to divide the question of reflection on politics into two parts: first the purely theoretical aspect dealing with writing on the notion of justice and on the notion of prudence, the nature of the end of political action and the nature of the means used to attain that end; and secondly what one might term the practical aspect, and by that I mean the existential problems which face the prince and even more those whose function it is to counsel him and to carry out his orders.

In describing the evolution of thought during the last half century, one can say that for a long time it was generally admitted that at one and the same time there had been in France during the sixteenth century two currents of thought, one pro-Machiavellian and the other anti-Machiavellian. It has, however, become apparent that nothing exists to lead us to believe that the innumerable treatises concerning the education of princes or the duties of a good king which saw the light of day between, for example, the *Institution* of Budé of 1547, the *Institution* of Ronsard of 1562 and the *Notable traité* of Claude d'Espence of 1575 or the *Discours de l'Estat et des offices d'un bon roi* of Jean de la Madeleine of the same year were conscious refutations of the theses of Machiavelli, any more than the work of the jurists of the school of Toulouse in their plea for a reinforcement of royal power were Machiavellian in inspiration or intention. Both remained in the line of traditional thinking.

It is, of course, true that after the massacre of the Protestants on Saint Bartholomew's Day in 1572 and especially between 1572 and 1585 there is a characterized anti-Machiavellian literature, largely the work of Protestants: one of the most notable works

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on Wednesday, the 19th of January 1977.

is that of Gentillet, the *Discours sur le moyen de bien gouverner*, recently reprinted in Geneva, in which the author opposes the "truly French way of governing" to the fashions of the Italians and their imitators. The king should avoid tyranny, take counsel, be pious, observe and cause to be observed religion. And he shows that the French tradition is the exact opposite of the teaching of Machiavelli in promoting clemency, just war, sincerity and the search for true peace. Others follow in the footsteps of Gentillet, notably La Noue in his *Discours politiques et militaires* of 1587 and François de Gravelle in his *Politiques royales* of 1596. But these and so many others remain largely pedagogical in tone, moralizing in intention and have little to say about the realities of political life.

A further element in the writings on this subject is the theory put forward by Toffanin in 1921 and taken up by others since, namely that the undoubted popularity of Tacitus in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was in some way linked to the interest taken in Machiavelli. The Italian had become a dangerous subject by the 1560s; Tacitus offered the same sort of lessons and had the advantage of being less suspect to orthodoxy. There is no doubt some truth in this but it needs qualification. Between 1570 and 1580, the two most eminent commentators of Tacitus were Muret and Justus Lipsius. Muret was particularly interested in the writer and the historian of the Empire; Lipsius also appreciated in Tacitus the exponent of *constantia* and it was he who contributed the most to the cult of Tacitus. He frequently refers to the interest that Tacitus has for the modern age: *aevum calamitosum*, he adds. It is sufficient to compare their position with that of Paschalius who composed the first political commentary on Tacitus in 1581. Whereas Lipsius considered it unworthy to use Tacitus to purely utilitarian ends by addressing himself to vulgar politicians, whereas his friend, Montaigne, whilst drawing attention to the fact that the work of Tacitus is a "seed-bed of ethical and political discourses for the provision and ornament of those who hold some rank in the government of the world",¹ nevertheless abstains from elaborating them, Paschalius in France and Scipione

¹ *Essais*, 3, 8.

Ammirato in Italy do indeed elaborate them and turn Tacitus into a political preceptor. As to the relations to be established between Tacitus and Machiavelli, the question is extremely delicate. It is true that Lipsius himself never made any secret of the sympathy which he felt for Machiavelli but his Tacitism was not mere disguised Machiavellism. He was searching for values more complex than the purely technical values proposed by the Florentine. Further there is a tendency in the early seventeenth century to distinguish quite clearly between Tacitus and Machiavelli and to place the latter very much below the former. In 1594 appeared the work of Ammirato entitled *Discorsi sopra Cornelio Tacito*, a work very much noted in France where it appeared in translation in 1628 and where, the following year, it was paraphrased by Laurent Melliet. Now the Tacitus of Ammirato is a master of virtue and Melliet takes advantage of this to contrast him strongly with Machiavelli whom he takes to task for his immorality and his atheism.

A few years later, in 1640, Perrot d'Ablancourt, in his dedicatory letter to Richelieu, placed at the head of his translation of the *Annals* of Tacitus, writes the following :

Tacitus is so great and so admirable that although I have taken away part of his grace and almost all his force, he nevertheless retains, in the state in which I have left him, majesty and grandeur . . . For fifteen hundred years he has been the oracle of politics . . . It is he who has engendered all the politics of Spain and Italy ; it is in his learned writings that instruction has been sought in the art of ruling ; it is he whom the Princes of the House of Austria consult daily in the circumstances of their affairs.

Then these lines of the highest interest :

But, My Lord, it would be ungracious of me to praise my author and to say nothing in your praise. It is Your Eminence who have known how to use these great maxims, and who, leaving to our enemies the less generous ones, have joined under the reign of Louis the Just the magnanimity of Francis 1st and the politics of Louis XIth, without having the defects of the one or the other.¹

In other words Tacitus serves the highest form of political activity. An excess of magnanimity takes too little account of realities, refractory to the ideal ; the contrary excess consists in abstaining from introducing into the real that quantity of idealism

¹ Perrot d'Ablancourt, *Les Oeuvres de Corneille Tacite* (Paris, 1658).

which the real is capable of absorbing. Tacitus helps to achieve the honest norm.

Interesting as these different points of view are, and they have been put forward by various people at various times over the last forty or fifty years, they have never been able to give a satisfactory answer to one very important question, which is the following. How is it that, in face of the undoubted anti-Machiavellian tradition in France in the sixteenth century we find attitudes expressed very early indeed in the seventeenth which go far beyond the Machiavellism of Machiavelli. Even if we give weight to the hypothesis that Tacitism worked in the same direction as Machiavellism—and there is good reason to doubt this—it is not easy to explain why, in view of the strong anti-Machiavellian tradition in France, certain men should adopt positions so extreme as to cause Machiavelli to appear outdated and therefore useless. The fact is that while preaching absolute wickedness if that is necessary to attain a given end, Machiavelli makes a perfectly clear distinction between the categories of the wicked and of the virtuous. When, for example in the *Discorsi* he stated that a new prince who wishes to be absolute must change everything in the state, demolish the cities and move the inhabitants to new places, he goes on :

These methods are utterly barbarous and incompatible not merely with Christian society but with any form of civilised life. Every man ought to abhor such practices and choose rather to be a private citizen than reign at the cost of such devastation.¹

Nevertheless, he continues, he is willing to provide a maxim for “the man who does not wish to take the highest path of righteousness”. In other words, Machiavelli, whilst attaching to a certain conduct all the importance which it merits from a technical point of view, nevertheless has no doubt that this conduct is wicked from any moral standpoint. It is therefore all the more curious to read the criticism of Machiavelli made a hundred and twenty years later by Descartes. At the request of the Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes has read the *Prince*, and in this letter he gives her his observations on what he has

¹ *Discorsi*, I. 26. Quoted by Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London, 1955), p. 106.

read. His major criticism, he says, is that the author has not sufficiently distinguished between princes who have acquired their states by legitimate means and those who have acquired them by illegitimate means, with the consequence that he gives to all the precepts which are appropriate only to the latter. But then he continues :

in order to instruct a good prince, albeit newly arrived in a State, it seems to me that one should propose to him completely contrary maxims and suppose that the means which he has used to establish himself were just : as, indeed, I believe that they almost all are, when the princes who practice them consider them so, for justice between sovereigns has other limits than between private individuals, and it would seem that in these circumstances God gives the right to those to whom he gives the force. But the most just actions become unjust, when those who perform them think them so.¹

This text of Descartes would appear to indicate that the distinction between the just and the unjust is not to be established by reference to any objective norms. It is the prince himself who is the arbiter. For Machiavelli, on the contrary, objective norms do indeed exist : the only question which arises is that of deciding whether or not it is opportune to respect them, and given Machiavelli's pessimistic view of human nature and his conception of the conditions of efficient action, it would appear that, at least on occasion, he would counsel total non-acceptance, but then total non-acceptance still remains for him as synonymous with total wickedness. Not so with Descartes, as we have seen.

It therefore appears necessary in order to explain what, at first sight, presents itself as an exacerbated form of Machiavellism—but which in fact it is not, since its underlying presuppositions are quite different from those which subtend the doctrine of the Florentine—to interrogate the thought of the period precisely on the question of the nature of the just and of the unjust. Do objective norms, which Machiavelli still admits, really exist? Is there not, in France, a current of thought which rejects them? And in that case is not the notion of justice on the speculative plane, and that of prudence on the practical plane, of all necessity, subject to a new evaluation? An examination of this central problem would appear to be more fruitful than further speculation concerning the influence of Machiavelli or of Tacitus.

¹ Descartes, *Lettres sur la Morale* (Paris, 1955), pp. 145-6.

Traditional monarchic theory used the concept of natural law to limit royal power. Through its connection with divine law it guaranteed the possibility of equating positive law to the canons of the just. This notion undergoes a crisis in the late sixteenth century.¹ Certain jurists of the period, such as Bodin and Hotman, tend to claim autonomy for French national law based on custom against those who vaunt the merits of a rigid code which, theoretically just, may well not correspond to the specific conditions of the different nations. And whilst the relativists did not themselves question the existence of natural law, limiting themselves to stating that the concrete expression of natural law should be in harmony with the national situation, nevertheless their point of view had the effect of encouraging a much more revolutionary idea, namely that the differentiation of the various national legislations is the expression of purely contingent and conventional values which cannot be referred to any objective criterion.² The discovery of the New World powerfully reinforced this view; the traditional notion of natural law appeared to be denied by the social customs of the inhabitants of the new countries. One learned from accounts and descriptions of travellers that there were communities to which private property was unknown, where the relations between the sexes were not subject to any regulation, where habits were in contradiction with the fundamental norms of our traditional morality. Faced with so many contradictions, Montaigne doubts the existence of a single criterion of justice :

If man knew any rectitude and justice with substance and true essence, he would not attach it to the conditions and customs of this country or that; it would not be from the fantasies of the Persians or the Indians that virtue would take its form.³

And he goes further. The canons of natural law which orthodoxy present as the basis of positive law do not exist, or at the very least cannot be perceived by the human mind :

Men are ludicrous when, in order to give some certainty to the laws, they say that there are fixed, perpetual, immutable ones which they call natural, that are imprinted

¹ See Julian H. Franklin, *Jean Bodin and the Sixteenth-century Revolution in Methodology of Law and History*, Columbia University Press, 1963.

² For greater detail see Anna Maria Battista, *Alle origini del Pensiero Politico Libertino* (Milano, 1966).

³ *Essais*, 2, 12.

in the human race by the condition of their very essence . . . they are so pitiable that of these three or four laws they choose, there is not a single one which is not contradicted and disavowed not by one nation but by several.¹

In short, natural law in its traditional form is, for Montaigne, nothing more than an abstract hypothesis which concrete facts seem to deny. And when he puts into contrast the so-called perfection of American society and the conventional character of our own :

Over there is always perfect religion, perfect government, perfect and accomplished usage of all things . . . In those people are living and vigorous the true, most useful and natural virtues and properties which we have let degenerate in ourselves.²

he makes a sharp distinction between the primitive and as yet uncorrupted state of society on the one hand and society as we know it on the other. In this way Montaigne denies the possibility of equating the State, which is the expression of corrupt nature, with eternal and absolute values.

The disciple and continuer of Montaigne, Pierre Charron, goes even further. Whereas the spectacle of American society seemed to suggest to Montaigne the existence, albeit in another place, of a natural order, for Charron it is only one further proof of the absence of any form of universal consent and consequently of any justification of the notion of natural law. Customs are merely the fruit of arbitrary and subjective interpretations of the idea of justice. In this way the just tends to be identified with its positive and specific expressions and ethical norms to be dissociated from the norms of political value.

How many laws in the world are unjust and strange [says Charron] not only in the minds of individuals but also in the light of universal reason, yet with which the world has lived a long time in profound peace and tranquility and with as much satisfaction as if they had been very just and reasonable. Whoever tried to change and reform them would appear as an enemy of the public.³

So Charron develops a form of ethical relativism which attributes to political and practical justice a content different from that of its ideal, abstract model.

Know that there is a double justice, one natural, universal, noble, philosophical, the other artificial, private, political, made and constrained to the need of govern-

¹ *Essais*, 2, 12.

² *Essais*, 1, 31.

³ *De la Sagesse*, 2, 8.

ments and states. The former is much better ordered, more rigid, clean and beautiful, but it is obsolete, unfitting to the world as it is.¹

Charron breaks then with a long tradition when he asserts a little further on that justice which is concerned with the *honestum* only is merely theoretical and that it is therefore a waste of time to talk about it. The two bases of political action are necessity and utility, which in the end are one and the same thing since the only criterion of the necessary is formed by utilitarian considerations. The just prince therefore is the one who seeks personal and collective advantage rather than the realization of ethical norms ; the unjust prince is the one who seeks to apply to political action the abstract norms of morality.

Let us now pass to the connex problem of the nature of prudence about which so much was written at the time.

In the *Nichomachian Ethic* Aristotle made a clear distinction between the intellectual activity which consists in studying the absolute of things, that is to say, things which could not be other than they are and things which could be other than they are. He writes :

That which is the object of knowledge can be proved, whilst art and prudence are concerned with that which is of the order of the possible.²

It is however difficult to see to what principles prudence appeals. Defined as " a practical disposition accompanied by right reason (*recta ratio*) concerning that which is good or bad for man ",³ prudence appears as a faculty, which, so far from applying to contingent cases fixed and universal principles, acts according to specific requirements under the direction of a conscience morally formed. For there is for Aristotle a narrow relationship between prudence and moral virtue. It is indeed virtue which determines the end of action, whilst prudence has the function of choosing the means of attaining the end proposed. Aristotle distinguishes between prudence and cunning. When the end of action is morally good, the faculty is deemed to be prudence ; when it is bad prudence gives way to malice, guile, cunning. " It is impossible, says Aristotle, to be virtuous without prudence, or prudent without ethical virtue."⁴

¹ *De la Sagesse*, 3, 5.

² *Ethique à Nicomaque*, 6, 6.

³ *Id.* 6, 5.

⁴ *Ethique à Nicomaque*, 6, 13.

Further, whereas Aristotle distinguishes between prudence and political science, as he does when he writes "Political science and prudence depend on one and the same disposition. Nevertheless, in their essence they are different",¹ there is a marked tendency amongst the commentators of the modern age not to make this distinction. There is a tendency to adulterate ethical imperatives by a revaluation of the concrete exigencies of the State, to equate the morality of governmental action to its practical success. The importance of the lesson of Aristotle lies in its recognition of the autonomy of a faculty directed towards concrete action, a faculty which whilst ideally conditioned by ethical considerations is nevertheless distinct from them. Once political prudence is identified to Reason of State, implying thereby a strictly political end, then ethical values no longer exercise a directing function. Prudence becomes the capacity to realize the interests of the State, whilst ethics become the instrument of prudence which uses them to purely positive and utilitarian ends. Thus Charron assigns to moral values no longer a corrective role but merely a utilitarian role. Prudence is a virtue in the same way as justice, force, temperance; it consists in "consulting and deliberating well, judging and resolving well, conducting and executing well". But the word "well" is not synonymous of "with rectitude", *bene* is not synonymous of *recte*.² Prudence is essentially a political virtue; it refers to the art of manipulating men, of obtaining their obedience. That which is licit is that which the most aptly fulfils the exigencies of absolute power.

It is then generally accepted that the end of political action is interest. Henri de Rohan writes, and Richelieu would have fully approved:

Princes rule over peoples, and interest rules over princes . . . The prince may be mistaken, his council may be corrupt; but interest alone can never be lacking; according to whether it is well or badly understood, it causes States to live or to die.³

The pursuit of interest is presented in the writings emanating

¹ Id. 6, 8.

² Battista, *op. cit.* p. 243.

³ Henri de Rohan, *De l'interest des Princes et Etats de la Chrestienté* (Paris, 1639), p. 104.

from the entourage of Richelieu as a perfectly natural phenomenon and the admonitions of theologians as impertinent interventions. One of the most important of the pamphlets of the sixteen twenties, *Le Catholique d'Etat*, suggests that theologians should restrict themselves to their speciality and abstain from making pronouncements on matters of politics which do not concern them.

If the doctor wants to judge the controversies of theology; if the advocate wants to decide cases of conscience; if the magistrate wastes his time with the disputes of Aristotle, there is not a theologian, nor monk of whatever order he may be, who would not blame that as being a very pernicious confusion. And is it not the same thing and very much worse, if a theologian, shut up in his cell, attempts to interfere and play the councillor of State?¹

Then after enumerating the various alliances concluded between Catholic powers and the infidel or the heretic, the author goes on :

I recall these actions, alliances and histories, not in order to blame these Princes, whose names are great in the universe and whose actions are illustrious in Christendom; but to blame those theologians who make them blamable by their theology.²

He pronounces a complete divorce between justice as defined by the theologians and justice as practised by Princes, and he gives his approval to the latter :

The States of the House of Austria have a justice which is not to be measured by ordinary rules, and . . . their Councils have other laws than those of the University of Louvain and Salamanca. I do not blame them for it: quite the contrary, I admire their order and the passion with which they promote the greatness of their State.³

In the last analysis, the only limiting factor in political action is power. Referring to the seizure of Portugal by Philip II, Ferrier, author of *Le Catholique d'Etat*, says :

Philip, the wisest king of his time, did very well and very justly to join Portugal to his States, since he could do it, and the opportunity fell into his hands.⁴

If only the kings of France had the same Council of conscience as Philip and were not led astray by vain scruples of justice!

Another text concerning the pursuit of interest is taken from the letters of Henri IV's ambassador to the Holy See, the

¹ Hay du Chastelet, *Recueil de diverses pièces pour servir à l'histoire, 1637*. 1. 93.

² Id. p. 116.

³ Id.

⁴ Id. p. 120.

Cardinal d'Ossat. The Pope wishes for a suspension of the alliance between France and England against Spain in 1597. D'Ossat reports his conversation with the Pope in a despatch to the Chancellor of France, Villeroy :

I said to His Holiness at the beginning of my audience on the said day the 24 January that I had done what His Holiness had commanded me, having written to the King about the Abbey of Saint Honorat in Provence and about the Peace, and considering more closely this second point, the doubt which I had always had about it had increased, namely that the King, who made a particular profession of keeping his word, could not so soon extricate himself from this alliance which had only just been renewed and sworn. The Pope replied that this oath had been made to a heretic, and that His Majesty had made prior oath to God and to himself the Pope ; and then he added what he had said to me at the previous audience, namely that kings and other sovereign princes took the liberty of doing everything which turns out to their profit ; and that matters had gone so far that no one blamed them for it. And he quoted a saying of Francesco Maria, Duke of Urbino who used to say that if a mere gentleman or a non-sovereign lord failed to keep his word, he would be dishonoured and blamed by all ; but sovereign Princes, for reason of State, could, without incurring any great blame, make treaties and tear them up, take alliances and lay them aside, lie, betray and all such things.¹

D'Ossat adds : " I had only too much to retort to all that, but I considered it prudent to restrain myself on a slope so slippery and smelling so badly." The editor of the letters of D'Ossat, Amelot de la Houssaye, in his commentary, recalls that Alfonso of Aragon used to say that the word of the Prince should be no less sacred than that of the private citizen and he adds : " But it is no longer the Evangel of Princes. Good faith will be lacking in the execution of treaties so long as interest is alive, and interest will always be alive so long as princes reign."

We come lastly to the aspect of the moral problem. There is relatively little written on the subject and what there is is for the most part from sources other than French.

There are some sixteen works on the legate or ambassador between 1500 and 1600, whereas there are more than twenty in the first twenty years of the seventeenth century.² It appears certain that in a pacified Europe interest in diplomacy increased. It also appears certain that the problem which had always been inherent in the case of the resident ambassador acquired a new

¹ *Lettres du Cardinal d'Ossat* (Amsterdam, 1708), ii. 358-9.

² Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London, 1955), p. 213.

acuity in the atmosphere of sharpened ideological conflict which marks the early seventeenth century.¹ How is one to preserve one's integrity as a man of honour whilst at the same time playing a role in public affairs? Montaigne had already drawn attention to the dilemma when, reflecting on his experience in Bordeaux, he says: "He who prides himself, in times as sick as these, on showing, in the service of the world, a natural and sincere virtue, either does not know what such a virtue is, as opinions follow manners into corruption, or, if he does know it, prides himself wrongly, and, whatever he may say, does a thousand things of which his conscience accuses him." As far as the ambassador is concerned, his problem is as follows: What are the limits of his duty to the prince his master and of his duty to the prince to whom he is accredited? What must he do in the case of incompatibility of the two duties? How is he to resolve the conflicts that may arise between the orders he receives from his master and the dictates of his own conscience? The first work in French on the subject, that of Jean Hotman de Villiers, son of the jurist, raises the central problem, that of the lie. In his work, *De la charge et dignité de l'Ambassadeur*, Hotman says that some people excuse the ambassador who lies on the grounds that he has been ordered to do so, just as one can excuse a man who carries arms on his prince's orders, without inquiring whether it is in a just cause or not, but then he goes on: "It is hard to an honourable man who does not willingly wound his conscience to acquire the title of skilful man; it is hard to a man of generous and open spirit who, by lying, violates his nature: for to lie and to dissimulate are sure signs of a non-noble heart. An honourable man must always keep before his eyes honour and conscience, even if it is useful to do wrong."² But the most important works on this subject are Spanish. The reason for this is no doubt that in the Spanish context there is a revival of Aristotelianism, a neo-Thomism which reaffirms the reality of natural law. This leads to a method of accommodation of the exigencies of reality with doctrinal considerations. There is much reference to justification from the Scriptures, and to the

¹ Id. p. 219.

² Jean Hotman, *De la charge et dignité de l'Ambassadeur* (Paris, 1604), p. 38.

Patristic. The command of Christ to his disciples is exploited by Saavedra Fajardo and Gracián amongst others. "Behold I send you forth like sheep among the wolves; be ye therefore prudent like the serpent and simple like the dove." Saavedra embroiders on this in his 44th emblem:

Doubtful is the course of the snake twisting now to one side and now to the other with such uncertainty that even its body does not know where its head is leading it; the snake points the movement in one direction, and carries it out in the opposite direction, its passage neither leaving traces nor revealing the intention of its journey. Hidden in this way the counsels and designs of princes must be.¹

But of all those who treat these subjects, the most interesting is Vera. Vera y Cuñiga, Spanish ambassador to the Holy See, courtier and man of letters, published in 1620 in Seville a work which enjoyed immense popularity throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *The Ambassador*, translated into French in 1635.

I will end by giving you just one opinion of Vera, one which contradicts the conceit so often found in literary and doctrinal works of the period, in Corneille, in Guez de Balzac and others, namely the myth of the scapegoat minister or counsellor. According to this conceit, the prince can only have upright intentions; if he behaves in a manner contrary to the moral law, it can only be that he has let his inherent moral rectitude be surprised by the counsels of infamous men. Vera makes a sharp distinction between the world as it is, and indeed always has been, he says, and the ideal world. To attempt to live in the city of Romulus as if one were in the Republic of Plato, as Cato did, can only bring dissensions and catastrophe.²

But then he appears to place the blame for this lack of continuity of the real and ideal on princes themselves, when he says: "These pure and just princes and Republics will never be found until philosophers reign or kings philosophise."³

¹ Saavedra Fajardo, *Idea de un príncipe político-cristiano* (Madrid, 1945), ii. 183-4. See Monro Z Hafter, *Gracián and Perfection*, Harvard University Press, 1966.

² Antonio de Vera y Cuñiga, *Le Parfait Ambassadeur* (Paris, 1635), p. 160.

³ Id.