MACHIAVELLI AND LEIBNIZ
From the laws of power to the power of law

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PREFACE: MACHIAVELLI AND LEIBNIZ – DIPLOMATS AT THE SERVICE OF THEIR PRINCES

Despite the spatial and temporal distance that separated them, and their theoretical divergences, Machiavelli and Leibniz shared similar experiences in their respective political practices, both in their diplomatic roles and in their work as historians at the service of their respective princes. Machiavelli was appointed an official reporter of Florence in 1519; the fruit of this work was to be his *Discourse on the Florentine Affairs After the Death of Lorenzo* (1520) and *Florentine Histories* (1525). Leibniz, for his part, received a formal document from Duke Ernest Augustus on 10 August 1685, which granted him financial support to write the history of the House of Brunswick-Lüneburg. From that moment onwards, Leibniz’s most important official obligation became the elaboration of this history, which gave him the opportunity to travel to southern Germany and Vienna, as well as to Italy, and to meet men of state and influential scholars. In the event, however, it took him more than twenty years to publish the first volume of this historical study, which took the title *Scriptores rerum Brunsvicensium illustrationi* (June 1707). It seems that over the years, a task he had begun with enthusiasm became a heavy burden that prevented him from pursuing his philosophical and scientific interests, and in 1716 he died leaving the portentously titled *Annales Imperii Occidentis Brunsvicensium illustratiuni* unfinished.

It is not my intention, however, to make an exhaustive comparative study of both authors – either in their work as historians, or in their practical political performance. Rather, I will simply address their differing concepts of ethics and natural

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2 See A I, 4, 205–206.

3 In this regard, see my article: “Maquiavelo y Leibniz: dos conceptos de acción política”, in: *La herencia de Maquiavelo*, ed. by R. R. Aramayo / I.L. Villacañas, México-Madrid 1999, pp. 179–208. As I have already highlighted there, very little has been published on the links between the work of the two authors discussed in this paper; the classic G. Gerber: “Leibniz Beziehung zu Machiavelli”, in: *Der Staat*, 3 (1967), pp. 367–376, is nevertheless useful.
law, and how – this is my thesis – this divergence leads them to two very different ways of conceiving of politics and, in particular, the notion of power.

Both Machiavelli and Leibniz evinced a subtle understanding of the human psyche: both recognised the driving forces of power (ambition, glory, and wealth) and how they could address the powerful to achieve their ends (or those of their masters), and both were aware of the transience of the results obtained. Moreover, they experienced a similar geopolitical environment that guided the international projection of their diplomatic endeavours. They faced the reality of a divided Italy, on the one part, and Germany, on the other, and sought – through their political activity – to contribute to their respective reunification, with the conviction that only a strong, united nation could stand up to the expansionism of other European states (in particular the French). The emergence of the modern ‘state’ and the rise of new national monarchies (Spain, England, France) placed Italian lordships and the German cantons alike (though at different points in time) at a disadvantage, as the larger states were inevitably driven to expand their territorial bases, and could count on superior military forces. This is why the question of war, and especially the need to replace armies of mercenaries with troops of citizens, is so important for Machiavelli⁴. Leibniz’s reflections on war, both philosophical and practical, were no less significant, nor were his ideas about achieving a lasting peace by reverting to the federation of German nations⁵.

The numerous Italian States revealed their inferiority, and even their impotence, in the face of this new reality⁶. The lack of unity made Italy easy prey for its two powerful neighbours, Spain and France. This is what led Machiavelli to stress the importance of monarchical absolutism: only through the virtù of a prince could a strong and stable political unity be achieved; only later – with Italy reunited by force – would the work of the ‘legislator’ begin, and the return of the people to their origins⁷. Since his youth, Machiavelli had been preoccupied with the question of identifying an ideal form of government. Throughout his political missions, however, he observed and verified how that question was subordinate to the issue of overcoming the fragmentation of the Italian peninsula into a multiplicity of states⁸.

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⁴ He devoted his essay *Dell’arte della guerra* (1525) to this subject. In this sense, the appeal for an army composed of citizens is tied to an exhortation (at the end of *The Prince*) to the Medici to serve as redeemers of the Italian peninsula and to free it from the yoke of the barbarians.


⁸ As he states in the *Discourses* (I, 12): “Never has any country lived united and prosperous if, like France and Spain, it has not completely submitted to a single government: republic or monarchy”. See also “Discurso sobre la paz entre el emperador y el rey” (1501) and “Retrato
It was his hope that Florence would become the champion of Italian political unity. Thus, it seems that the exhortation to Florence (the Medici) to liberate Italy from the barbarians that Machiavelli makes in the last chapter of *The Prince* is not merely conjunctural; rather, it is evident that he considers unification a necessary preliminary step in the construction of a strong republic.

More than a century later, many of Leibniz’s political proposals would echo Machiavelli’s desire to combat the strength of French absolutism (the glory of Spain having already come and gone). Such is the case of his efforts to achieve German unity in the form of a federation of States (as was subsequently realised) or his project of expedition to Egypt (in order to deflect the expansionist spirit of Louis XIV away from European territories). Likewise, his struggle for the reunification of the churches is not divergent in spirit from this idea of German political unity: it, too, is aimed at achieving balance in Europe to offset the power of France. In the case of Leibniz, his writings are not about re-establishing the *Sacrum Imperium*, as I have shown elsewhere, but about helping to establish the unity of the German nation (a process that began following the Peace of Westphalia), and about teaching the dangers of absolutism. That is why, in his proposal, he envisions an empire that follows the maxim of ‘multiplicity in unity’ as a constitutional principle of federalism; in Leibniz’s words: “an empire is a system of federated states”, i.e., ‘a family of states’ or a ‘community of states’ subject to the sovereignty of a general ‘State’.

In this way, Leibniz departs from Grotius’s conception and from the prevailing tradition, in which the state was only a ‘natural community’ (such as marriage or family) that pursued the well-being of its subjects; instead, he conceives of it, fundamentally, as an ‘administrative unit’, the goal of which is the security of citizens in the face of an external threat. This defensive purpose and the principle of unity for the sake of a common administration is what I believe makes Leibniz one of the...
pioneers of the modern state. For Leibniz, a federal state of this sort would elude absolutism13 while contributing to the building of a strong nation (necessary to maintain the European equilibrium) that was capable of facing its two potential aggressors: Louis XIV’s France to the west and the Ottoman Empire to the south-east. It was therefore a project of national federalism that sought a ‘balance of power’ within Europe, and that therefore, to him, did not seem transferable to a European confederation. From a purely political point of view, Leibniz the diplomat had to defend the interests of his prince and work towards a strong German empire that was capable of resisting French attacks, but above these particular interests are the universal considerations of a philosophy that tends towards the metapolitical idea of a harmonious ‘European cultural community’, a community that, through science, would spread across the bridge of Russia to the heart of Asia and on to other foreign countries. Thus, the creation of scientific academies serves universal interests that transcend borders, their mission being to influence sovereigns by privileging the government of right reason over the ambitions of power.

This application of political activity to a rational cosmopolitan project is what makes Leibniz (in my opinion) an Enlightenment thinker avant la lettre, and separates him from Machiavelli – although it does cast him as a faithful representation of Machiavelli’s heroic ‘virtuoso’, fighting against the arbitrariness of fortune.

LEIBNIZ – CRITIC AND ADMIRER OF MACHIAVELLI

The young Leibniz encountered Machiavelli’s doctrine through the teachings of Jakob Thomasius, and his first written reference to it is in a 1663 commentary to the latter’s *Philosophia practica* (1661), where Leibniz states sharply: “Just as in moral philosophy, the name of Epicurus is despised, so too is the name Machiavelli in the field of politics”14. In this statement, he does not try to settle whether or not the accusation is fair; what matters to him is to describe the theories of the ‘Machiavellians’ as unacceptable. Following Thomasius’s example, Leibniz finds the Machiavellians unsatisfactory for several reasons: 1) because for them the ends of the state do not coincide with the pursuit of common happiness; 2) because their political criteria are reduced to increasing the power of the ruler and obtaining the greatest benefit, casting honest action to the side where necessary; and finally – and, I believe, most importantly – 3) because as they see it, law remains subordinated to the principle of utility.

A century after Machiavelli’s death, the same religious and moralising current continued to prevail in Europe that had led to the inclusion of his writings in the

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13 Although he might agree with Hobbes that human nature tends towards conflict of interests (‘the war of all against all’), his trust in reason prevents him from believing that the only way to master that nature is through an allmighty State-monster (the Leviathan). His doctrine of law is, in fact, a continuous attempt to find the balance between law (which should not be confused with laws) and power.

14 A VI, 1, 63. The text is a faithful reflection of *Philosophia practica*, XXXII, I, 5 by J. Thomasius.
Index Librorum Prohibitorum, with the author deemed an ‘enemy of morality and religion’\textsuperscript{15} and a ‘corrupter of politics’, and considered both ‘bloodthirsty’\textsuperscript{16} and ‘a charlatan’\textsuperscript{17}. This is precisely the image that Leibniz receives through Thomasius, and is reflected in his negative use of the term ‘Machiavellianism’ in the first letter sent to his teacher from Jena on September 12, 1663\textsuperscript{18}. That said, after the young Leibniz’s initial criticism of Machiavelli, he dares to point out – foreshadowing what would become a staple of his criticism of Hobbes in later years – Machiavelli’s rejection of the subordination of the law to the principle of utility. According to Leibniz, the error of Hobbes and Pufendorf (here identified with Machiavelli) lay in measuring the justness or unjustness of actions by their consistency with the will of the sovereign and the laws of the state – an approach that fails to question the justness of the laws themselves. This would become a recurring theme in his Elementa juris naturalis (1670–71)\textsuperscript{19}, and especially in the Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice (1703)\textsuperscript{20}.

In my opinion, the young Leibniz’s notes from 1663–64, written in Jena and Leipzig, show that he shares, with his teacher Thomasius, the Aristotelian theory that politics should not be distinguished from ethics\textsuperscript{21} – but also that he was reading the works of Machiavelli more favourably (across a multitude of criteria). He thus affirms simultaneously that: “We cannot praise Aristotle’s political writing enough. Scioippius and Conring have led us too many positive opinions about Machiavelli”\textsuperscript{22}. However, Leibniz was later to criticise despotism in his Specimen demonstrationum politicarum pro eligendo rege polonorum (1669) by unhesitatingly describ-

\textsuperscript{15} Because of this, in the Protestant world he was called “Machiavelli-Jesuit” or “Ignatius Machiavelli”. See R. del Águila: “Maquiavelo y la teoría política renacentista”, in: Historia de la teoría política 2 (see note 7), p. 89.
\textsuperscript{16} In Elizabethan England, this is how Shakespeare referred to Machiavelli.
\textsuperscript{17} In the Spain of the Counter-Reformation, Gracián makes Cratilo put his disciple on guard against a charlatan named Machiavelli (Gracián: El Críticón, Iª parte, Crisis VII, “La fuente de los engaños”, in Obras Completas, Madrid 1944, pp. 479–80).
\textsuperscript{18} A II, 1, 4. To this letter, he attached the Dissertatio de ministissimo, which W. Schröder had just presented in Jena and which ended up being confiscated by Duke Ernest the Pious due to the threat it potentially posed to the state. See the aforementioned article by Gerber: “Leibniz Beziehung zu Machiavelli” (see note 3), p. 370.
\textsuperscript{19} A VI, 1, 457–65. See Mollat, 41–70.
\textsuperscript{20} See Mollat, 41–70. See the new edition by Stefan Luckscheiter, in: “Das Recht kann nicht ungerecht sein ... “. Beiträge zu Leibniz Philosophie der Gerechtigkeit (Studia Leibnitia, Sonderheft 44), ed. by W. Li, Stuttgart 2015, 144–179.
\textsuperscript{21} “Politica ab ipsa Ethica non est distincta”; Grua, 563 ff. See Aristotle: Politics, Book VII.
\textsuperscript{22} “Scripta politica Aristotelis laudari satis non possunt. Pro Machiavello Scioippiuset Conringius multa bene monuere”; Grua, 563. Leibniz is referring to two famous defenders of Machiavelli: C. Schoppe: Paedia politices sive suppetiae logicae scriptoribus politicis latae (Roma 1622); and H. Conring: Animadversiones politicae, in N. Machiavelli librum de principe (Helmstedt 1661). Conring was professor of Political Law in Helmstedt, and Leibniz maintained a correspondence with him between January 1670 and February 1679. Their correspondence was initiated through the mediation of Johann Chr. V. Boineburg, who in 1668 had sent Conring Leibniz’s Nova methodus with a glowing endorsement (see J.D. Gruber: Commercii epistolici Leibnittani ..., 1745, p. 1285).
ing it as “Machiavellian”. Consequently, in legitimising his candidacy in support of Philipp Wilhelm von Neuburg, he rejected Cosimo (crown prince of Tuscany) because “the Italian, due to his relationship with Machiavelli, was used to despotism”.

Leibniz’s first explicitly positive quote on Machiavelli appeared just three years later, in 1672. In his Consilium Aegyptiacum (which sought to curb the expansionism of Louis XIV in Europe by diverting his attention to Egypt), he evaluates the usefulness of undertaking a holy war that would provide the monarch with earthly fame and success. Some pages earlier, he had underlined the importance of Machiavelli’s claim that “the nerve of a military success is not money, but weapons” – an idea to which he later returned in Mars Christianissimus (1683). Furthermore, ten years later (1682), a time when he was applying his energies to the technical design of armaments, Leibniz compared his drawings with those that Machiavelli presented in Dell’arte della guerra (1521), countering the Italian’s assertion that firearms restricted the mobility of the troops, on the basis that weapon-making technologies had since been vastly improved.

We can confidently affirm that Leibniz knew the work of Machiavelli well. Indeed, in his Entwurf einer Bibliotheca universalis selecta (written from memory for the Emperor Leopoldo I during his travels in Italy of 1689) he lists The Prince and the Discourses among the most important works of political writing. However, Leibniz never entirely abandoned his scruples regarding the Florentine’s amoralism, which persisted alongside his admiration, as is shown in his letter of 6 December 1697 to Antonio Magliabechi. Positive aspects of Machiavelli’s thought reappear

23 Most of Leibniz’s negative quotations about Machiavelli focus on his references to The Prince as executor of an absolute power. A IV, 1, 93: “[...] que quid Italus et quidem Machiavelli popularis florentinus despotico dominatui assuetus [...]”. See chap. 18 of Machiavelli’s The Prince.

24 A IV, 1, 376, 398.

25 Leibniz is picking up the meaning of §10; Book II of the Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius, in which Machiavelli expressly says that “the nerve of war is good soldiers”.

26 A IV, 1, 461.


28 A I, 5, 440. Along with these works by Machiavelli, he mentions the most relevant works of Plato, Aristotle, Bodin and Hobbes, among others. But it should be noted, as Gerber does (“Leibniz Beziehung zu Machiavelli”, see note 3, p. 368), that Machiavelli receives special treatment, being the only one in regard to whose work he mentions secondary literature, namely his detractors and most significant supporters: among the former, J. Gentillet (Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix un royaume ou autre principauté contre N. Machiavel, Geneva 1566) and Bozio (who wrote three essays against him in the years 1593, 1594 and 1595, respectively); among the latter, C. Schoppe and H. Conring, whose works I have already mentioned in note 22.

29 See Dutens, V, 122. In his previous letter (October 24, 1697), Magliabechi had informed Leibniz of the appearance of G.L. Lucchesini’s (S.J.) book, Saggio della sciocezza di Niccolò Machiavelli (Rome, 1697), noting that in Machiavelli there is not much of the good or the divine – but that nor was the good as scarce as the Jesuit imputes to him. Magliabechi was employed as a librarian in Florence when Leibniz made friends with him during his trip to Italy in 1689; having returned to Hanover, Leibniz sent Magliabechi a poem to thank him for the al-
in references from Leibniz’s late writing, in which he quotes Machiavelli to criticise Hobbes’s ‘homo homini lupus est’ doctrine, and the ideas that man is good by nature (a kind of critique avant la lettre of Rousseau)\(^\text{30}\). For Leibniz, the natural instinct is composed of aggression and philanthropy in equal parts. A couple of years earlier in his *Theodicy*, he had used this same Machiavellian idea to criticise Bayle:

> Regarding virtue and vice, there is a certain middle ground in the world. Machiavelli said that there are few very bad or very good men, and that this leads to the miscarriage of many large endeavours. It is, in my opinion, a fault of historians that they are more inclined to notice evil than good. The main purpose of history, like that of poetry, is to teach prudence and virtue by means of examples, and thus present vice in a way that causes aversion, and that serves to prevent it\(^\text{31}\).

Indeed, Machiavelli had stated in the *Discourses* § 26, Book I, that “men generally decide upon a middle course, which is most hazardous; for they know neither how to be entirely good or entirely bad”. But behind these words, more than in Leibniz’s corollary, we can detect Machiavelli’s aversion to actions devoid of *virtù*\(^\text{32}\), a quality that is perfectly compatible with moral evil. For Machiavelli, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as moral predicates thus appear subordinate to the political success of an endeavour with its own ‘necessity’, while for Leibniz, ‘good’ depends on wisdom.

By the end of his days, Leibniz had sufficient experience to recognise that political realities differ from what they ought to be in a moral sense. This is evidenced by his criticism in *Mars Christianissimus* of the immoral behaviour of the Christian king Louis XIV, which also serves as an indirect indication of his respect for the Machiavellian notion that politics does not identify with moral or religious ideals. Thus, we can surmise, from the few references that Leibniz left us, that he is in favour of some of Machiavelli’s ideas (when considered discretely), and that he admires his clear exposition of political reality, but also that he does not agree with Machiavelli as to its logical consequences, namely that politics loses sight of ethical ends.

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\(^\text{30}\) “Ce qu’on y dit d’abord, mais ironiquement, en faveur de ceux qui declarent les hommes loups les uns aux autres, et contre ceux qui sont pour leur bon naturel, est agreablement tourné. Mais ont peut dire, que les hommes ordinairement ne sont ny assésmechans ny assés bons ; et Machiavell a bien remarqué, que les deux extremités sont egalment rares, ce qui fait que les grandes actions le sont aussi”. This passage is from an annex (*Sur Shaftesbury*) to a letter addressed to Coste on May 30, 1712; GP III, 424. Leibniz is referring here to chapter 27 of the 1st part of the *Discourses*, in which Machiavelli explains how “very rarely there are completely good or completely bad men”, as mentioned above.

\(^\text{31}\) GP VI, § 148, 198.

\(^\text{32}\) On the complexity of the Machiavellian term *virtù* (identifiable with the Roman *virtus* and in clear opposition to the Christian), consult the aforementioned article by Águila: “Maquiavelo y la teoría política renacentista” (see note 7), especially pp. 89–126. See also A. Saoner: “Virtud y virtù en Maquiavelo”, in: *Convicciones políticas, responsabilidades éticas*, ed. by J.M. González/C. Thiebaut, Barcelona 1990, pp. 21–40.
Despite the affinity between Leibniz and Machiavelli in their ‘realistic’ conception of practical politics, there are many elements that separate them when it comes to the theoretical basis of politics. In what follows, I intend to show how Machiavelli’s fundamental interest was to assert the autonomy of politics, whereas Leibniz dedicated himself to demonstrating the extent to which politics depends (and indeed, must depend) on ethics, and how this is only possible through the mediation of natural law.

MACHIAVELLI AND LEIBNIZ – DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICS AND POLITICS

Undoubtedly, the relationship between ethics and politics is one of the subjects that has garnered most attention among interpreters of Machiavelli. While some insist on a total split between both areas (considering Machiavelli’s greatest contribution as having granted politics an autonomous status), others emphasise the assimilation of politics and aesthetics to reveal the amorality of Machiavellian thought. The first thesis was originally proposed by Benedetto Croce, while the defenders of the second include Jakob Burckhardt and Friedrich Meinecke. Isaiah Berlin criticises both theses in his own interpretation, which stresses the Machiavellian differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life – that of the pagan world and that of Christian morality – a distinction he contends represents (rather than the supposed amorality of politics) the conflict between two types of morality, ethical codes or value systems. However, I consider it unanimously agreed that Machiavelli gave the definitive impetus to the institution of politics as a science, what today we might also call ‘the art of politics’. With Machiavelli, political science not only finds a new beginning (as Agnes Heller emphasised), but also introduces a fundamental issue to the philosophical discussion: the separation of public and private life, spheres that are governed by different rules and serve diverse purposes, and that – ultimately – are incompatible with one another. In this context, perhaps the paradox that Machiavelli brought to light (and that is still painfully present) is that the

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welfare of the state (or, equally, the ‘welfare state’) does not correspond to the happiness of each of its citizens; indeed, it is often achieved at their expense.

Whatever the case, the implication of the independence of politics suggested by Machiavelli is that it ceases to be governed by the principles traditionally considered as moral (Christian) and must instead seek its own principles. In other words, this means the reduction of politics to a sort of technique for acquiring, conserving or increasing power, whether within the state or between states, and the introduction of a private sphere in which the state has its own legality – what would later come to be known as ‘reason of state’\(^{38}\). However – and herein lies the danger – it also implies that politics can no longer be judged from a perspective that transcends it, but only from the immanent point of view of its internal logic, i.e. of the adequacy of the means to the end\(^{39}\). However, it seems that this was not what Machiavelli himself intended by the isolation of the political world; rather, he meant to describe a political reality that (as Rafael del Águila has pointed out) was already ‘Machiavellian’ before Machiavelli\(^{40}\) – a reality that, although it can be condemned by moral judgments, cannot be suppressed, since it follows the laws of its own ‘necessity’. This is how Bacon understood the Florentine’s writings, affirming that: “We should thank Machiavelli and other writers like him, who openly and frankly show what men are accustomed to doing, not what they ought to do”\(^{41}\).

Unlike Machiavelli, Leibniz insisted on the subordination of political ends to higher ethical goals; or rather, he affirmed that politics does not constitute a different sphere from ethics: *Politica ab ipsa Ethica non est distincta*\(^{42}\), as he stated in his early writing. He reasons that politics and ethics share a common foundation in prudence, which cannot recommend anything unfair, because it is part of justice\(^{43}\). Ethics and politics are, for Leibniz, two sides of the same coin\(^{44}\), two facets of the same reality; the best of all possible worlds is harmonious as a whole, despite (or indeed we might affirm, thanks to) the disharmonies that it contains, because conflict is inherent to living beings: it is a unique process in which evil becomes a necessary and constitutive moment of good. At the end of the *Theodicy*, he uses the apt example of the myth of Sextus to illustrate his claim that great crimes can lead to great good: “It will be the origin of the emergence of an all-powerful empire that will serve as an example”\(^{45}\).


\(^{40}\) Águila: “Maquiavelo y la teoría política renacentista” (see note 7), p. 89.


\(^{42}\) Grua, pp. 563 ff.

\(^{43}\) “Elementa juris naturalis” (1669–1671\(^{2}\)); A VI, 1, 434.


\(^{45}\) GP VI, § 416, 363.
But how is the Sextus myth different from Machiavelli’s statement about Cesare Borgia in chapter XVII of *The Prince*? “Cesare Borgia,” Machiavelli writes, “was considered cruel, and yet his cruelty restored order to Romagna, unified it, brought it peace and ensured its obedience”. Likewise, he asserted that Brutus had the right to kill his children, because with it he saved Rome, whereas Soderini, by lacking the stomach to commit similar actions, brought ruin on Florence. Thus, for Machiavelli, what is reprehensible in a politician is not his crimes, but his mistakes. While evil appears to Machiavelli as a political necessity, it does not mean it is justified as good. It is politics that he is concerned with, and he notes that the actions that are carried out on its behalf are rarely in line with morality. In Croce’s words: “[Machiavelli] boldly maintains that politics is neither the same as morality nor the negation of it, which is to say, evil; rather, it has its own, distinct essence, an animating force which no other force can dominate nor reason erase, just as what is necessary shall not be dominated or erased”\(^{46}\). What Machiavelli is describing is the reality of politics, but (as Miguel Angel Granada has shown) his work is in no way the systematic exposition of a theory of the state, nor is it formulated in tandem with an explicit and fully-elaborated philosophy of universal scope – of the sort we find a century later with authors such as Hobbes, Spinoza and Leibniz himself. Rather, he offers an objective description of how things are, leaving aside how they ought to be or how we might want them to be. It is in this that we find the yawning abyss that separates his work from the utopias written by his contemporaries as a means of finding a way out of the unpleasantness of reality\(^ {47}\).

Like Machiavelli, Leibniz chooses not to abandon realism. Thus he acknowledges that, at times, within the framework of political activity, the committing of crimes or the starting of wars are unavoidable. However, he does go beyond mere Machiavellian descriptivism, asking instead: ‘is this how things ought to be?’ and, thus, channelling his ethical and legal efforts in this direction. As we have already said, politics was for him “the science of utility”, while ethics was the “science of what is just”, defining as “just in a universal way what is of public utility”\(^ {48}\). Political utility is therefore subordinate to the ethical principle of justice, namely the principle “of what is useful to the community”\(^ {49}\). This is why, in a letter to H. Conring of 23 January 1670, he identifies ethics and natural law as sciences of the just, while at the same time stressing that the exercise of politics (as a science of what is of public utility, or of what is fair or equitable) required, first, the foundation of ethics\(^ {50}\). It should then properly be said that for Leibniz, politics deals with what is useful to different individuals (including princes), while ethics deals with what is fair or useful to the community. Likewise, for Machiavelli, “it is not the individual good, but the common good that makes cities great”\(^ {51}\) – although ‘utility of the

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\(^{46}\) Croce: “Una questione che forse non si chiuderà mai ...” (see note 33), p. 3.

\(^{47}\) See Granada: “La filosofía política en el Renacimiento” (see note 6), p. 545.

\(^{48}\) “Nova Methodus”; A VI, 301.

\(^{49}\) Ebd., 287.

\(^{50}\) A II, 1, 29.

\(^{51}\) *Discourses*, II, 2.
state’, here, is not in any way understood as the happiness of the state’s constituent individuals (citizens). Rather it is they who, in imitation of the Greek *polis*, are willing to die for the public good, this being an end in itself\(^{52}\).

**LEIBNIZ – FROM POLITICS TO ETHICS THROUGH (NATURAL) LAW**

Thus, the fundamental difference between the theories of politics in Machiavelli and Leibniz lies in their differing conceptions of law. For Machiavelli, there was only positive law, whereas for Leibniz, natural law builds a bridge between ethics and politics, encouraging the State (with the monarch at its head) to mediate between the private good and the public good. To achieve the latter condition, one of the main requirements of the prince is to see to the education of his subjects, so that they can achieve a balance between private interests and those of the community. The benefit of the self would thus be the starting point of all our voluntary actions (as he writes in 1691 to Mme Brinon)\(^{53}\), but through the notion of justice that is common to all rational beings, we learn to overcome individual selfishness, replacing it with the love for our neighbour that allows us to put ourselves in the place of the other and obtain happiness from their fulfilment\(^{54}\). Therefore, “the supreme rule of law is to direct all our actions to the achievement of the general good”\(^{55}\). There exists for Leibniz a kind of ‘universal jurisprudence’ that is revealed in natural law, and that is situated above positive laws, these only being valid in a certain time and for certain peoples\(^{56}\). As such, it is the legislator’s task to ensure that the multitude of positive laws do not oppose natural law, nor enter into contradiction with the laws of morality. It is precisely at this point that the ‘genius’ (which we might consider synonymous to the Machiavellian *virtù*) of enlightened princes is needed, to ensure that natural law be extended, without corruption, into the diverse sphere of positive law – though it is essential to remember that it is better to define the state less by the absolute authority of its leaders than by the union of wisdom and power\(^{57}\).

For Leibniz then – given that “the optimal republic is that in which all men live happy, safe and respected”\(^{58}\) – the factual exercise of power constitutes a good form

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\(^{52}\) See Berlin, “La originalidad de Maquiavelo” (see note 35), pp. 114–15.

\(^{53}\) “Notre propre bien, véritable ou imaginaire, est le but de toutes nos actions volontaires” (Klopp VII, 110).


\(^{55}\) On the three degrees of natural law and that of the people (1677–78), see Mollat, 14.

\(^{56}\) *Theodicy*, § 182, GP VI, 224.


\(^{58}\) “Elementa juris naturalis”; A VI, 1, 446. My article “Del deber ser al ejercicio del poder” (see note 303) addresses this.
of government only insofar as the monarch and the subjects (but especially the
monarch) take the progressive attainment of this optimal republic or moral world as
the ideal end point, and direct their behaviour towards achieving it. The powerful
ought to be just in proportion to their power, but this seems contrary to our experi-
ence. Political objectives are commonly corrupted, which is why, as Leibniz
writes to Thomas Burnet de Kemney in 1701, the purpose of political science must
be to make the rule of reason flourish, preventing any arbitrary power (whether of
monarchs or assemblies) from triumphing. Justice cannot be dependent on power,
because this leads to the confusion of ‘law’ and ‘laws’.

This concern for what ‘ought to be’ is missing in Machiavelli’s analyses; when
he uses formulations of the type ‘a prince ought to think’, there is always some sort
of strategic rationale behind them. The reason for this (as Skinner emphasises) is
that, for Machiavelli, the four classic virtues are reduced to three: “courage, to de-
defend our freedom; temperance and order, to maintain a free government; and pru-
dence, to enable the greatest efficiency in both civilian and military enterprises”.
Conspicuously absent is justice, which for Cicero was the crowning glory of the
virtues. This does not mean that the question of justice is entirely absent from the
Discourses, but Machiavelli does categorically reject the affirmation that the obs-
ervance of the virtue of justice invariably favours the common good. For him, the
qualities of prudence and wisdom are at the service of effectiveness; that is, they are
relevant qualities for making practical judgments, which are understood as the care-
ful and efficient calculation of possibilities and results. On the other hand, we do
glimpse a legal-moral desideratum in Machiavelli, when he affirms that laws must
express the general will and must prevent any particular member of the political
body from exerting undue or coercive influence over the will of the others. In other
words, the function of law is none other than to curb or temper the ambition of the
grandi and preserve a vivere libero.

59 “Meditación sobre la noción común de justicia” (1703); Mollat, 43 ff., new edition by St.
Luckscheiter, in: “Das Recht kann nicht ungerecht sein ...” (see note 20).
60 Klopp VIII, 273 (There is another version in GP III, 277).
61 “The law can not be unjust, which would be a contradiction, but laws can be, because it is the
power that gives and keeps the laws”, “Meditación sobre la noción común de justicia”; Mollat,
45. This approach earned Leibniz the criticism of Kant for having confused the sphere of legal-
ity with the sphere of morality, as it is clearly expressed in Reflection 7.261. In Reflection 6.579,
Kant suggests, in lapidary fashion, “The ancients confused natural law with ethics”.
62 “La idea de libertad negativa: perspectivas filosóficas e históricas”, in: La filosofía en la histo-
ria. Ensayos de historiografía de la filosofía, ed. by R. Rorty/J.B. Schneewind/Q. Skinner
63 Ebd., p. 247.
64 See for instance Discourses I, 10 and III, 28. See also Villacañas: “Excepcionalidad y modern-
idad” (see note 35), pp. 15–42.
CLOSING THOUGHTS

We observe, then, that despite the differing conceptions these two authors have of the relationship between ethics and politics, they converge on both the conservation of order in the state and the achievement of freedom and happiness (the common good) among citizens. Both underline (with varying degrees of systematic discourse) the importance of laws for controlling political power. For Machiavelli, however, such laws are entirely subservient to the achievement of practical ends within the political framework, whereas for Leibniz they serve a broader ethical-metaphysical and legal project, since for him, to divorce the honest from the useful is unthinkable. In other words, it is precisely the two authors’ divergent theories of law that generate the differences in their conceptions of the theoretical foundations of politics. While Machiavelli considers no law beyond positive law (and the laws to which it gives rise), Leibniz uses much ink in asserting that positive law is different from, and subordinate to, natural law, in the belief that “laws can be wrong, but the law cannot”. However, we cannot say that Machiavelli defends a radical positivism either (as Hobbes would do) and that, for him, there is no justice beyond ‘legal justice’. In fact, in the Discourses he dedicates a chapter to distinguishing the just from the legal (I, 7), even though, for him, injustice may be justified when it is perpetrated in the name of the state or the fatherland (III, 41). For Machiavelli, given the understanding that justice is subordinated to the broader purposes of politics, there existed the possibility of a legal injustice. And it is this that allows us to affirm that the fundamental difference between the two authors lies in Machiavelli’s defence of political autonomy, and in the subordination of politics to ethics and (natural) law in Leibniz.

65 “[…] jamais il ne peut arriver un divorce entre l’honnêt et l’utile”, “Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice” (1701); Mollat, 74.

66 The famous phrase of the Discourses reads: “[…] For ordinarily when a citizen is oppressed, even if he has received an injustice, little or no disorder ensues in the Republic, because its execution is done by neither private nor foreign forces which are those that ruin public liberty, but is done by public force and arrangement which have their own particular limits, and do not transcend to things that ruin the Republic” (I, 7).