Cicero and Machiavelli: Two Visions of Statesmanship and Two Educational Projects Compared

Giovanni Giorgini
Università di Bologna
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali
giovanni.giorgini@unibo.it

ABSTRACT
It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Cicero’s writings or his historical significance as an example in politics and in rhetoric for Italian Humanist and Renaissance culture. Machiavelli, well-educated in the classics, drew from Cicero the inspiration for embarking on a project of education of a new ruling class: Machiavelli’s “principe nuovo” is new when compared to his contemporary counterparts, imbued with Christian and Humanist notions of virtue; however, the “principe nuovo” has an old soul, since the new notion of prudence elaborated by Machiavelli has its roots in classical images of ethical and political virtue, in Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. Machiavelli, just like Cicero, felt that what he had not been able to do in deeds with his political action at the service of the Florentine republic, he could do through his writings: putting his knowledge of men and politics, his expertise gained through practical experience and constant reading of ancient authors at the service of his fellow-countrymen and of his patria. The novelty of Machiavelli’s teaching consists in advocating a new kind of prudence, which consists in the capacity to do evil in view of a good and elevated purpose: to save, preserve and aggrandize the State.

KEYWORDS
Cicero, Machiavelli, Renaissance

1. Prologue

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Cicero’s writings or his historical significance as an example in politics and in rhetoric for Italian Humanist and Renaissance culture. Cicero’s influence was both direct (through his works) and indirect (through authors who had read him and appropriated his ideas and style); it exerted itself both theoretically (his philosophical and political ideas) and stylistically. Quentin Skinner remarked that in Humanism and Renaissance Cicero was the best known and most widely quoted author of classical antiquity; Marcia Colish recalled that more than 600 hundred manuscripts of the De officiis survive to testify the importance of this text.1 A well-read person such as Niccolò Machiavelli could not avoid being exposed to the ideas and writings of

Cicero which, as I shall try to show, had a profound impact on him and were instrumental in enabling him to elaborate some of his most original views. More specifically, Machiavelli drew from Cicero, a man who lived in troubled times in a troubled republic similar to his own, the inspiration for embarking on a project of education of a new ruling class: Machiavelli’s “principe nuovo” is new when compared to his contemporary counterparts, imbued with Christian and Humanist notions of virtue; however, the “principe nuovo” has an old soul, since the new notion of prudence elaborated by Machiavelli has its roots in classical images of ethical and political virtue, in Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. Machiavelli, just like Cicero, felt that what he had not been able to do in deeds with his political action at the service of the Florentine republic, he could do through his writings: putting his knowledge of men and politics, his expertise gained through practical experience and constant reading of ancient authors at the service of his fellow-countrymen and of his patria. Amidst the civil wars which ravaged the Roman republic and which would soon put an end to it, Cicero wrote his last political works both as a testimony to something that was about to disappear and as a legacy for future generations of politicians: both authors were looking at the future because they could not detect any political personality who could work for the common good in their present factional circumstances; both were thinking of prospective young readers endowed with a sense of patriotism who could be educated in order to rise up to the supreme task ahead.

2. Machiavelli’s education in the classics

Carlo Dionisotti’s opinion about Machiavelli’s classical education is well known and I fully subscribe to it:

Machiavelli, among his other qualities, happened to be a well educated man in letters, endowed with a refined ear and an expert hand at the art of writing.²

Machiavelli received a traditional education in the classics for a man of his time and status: as a boy he learnt Latin, which he used interchangeably with the Italian vernacular as an adult, even in his private letters to his friends as well as in his official missives.³ We know the names of some of his early teachers and from

² C. Dionisotti, Machiavellerie, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, p. 113: “Machiavelli, fra le altre sue doti, anche ebbe quella di essere uomo letterariamente bene educato, che aveva orecchio fino e mano addestrata all’arte dello scrivere”.
³ For Machiavelli’s education see R. Black, Machiavelli, Oxford, Routledge, 2013. Black maintains that Machiavelli had a good Humanist education and compares his Latin writings to those of some contemporaries, like his friend Biagio Bonaccorsi, in order to maintain that
his father’s diary we learn which books were in his house and which other were borrowed or somehow circulated in the house and we can infer some of his possible readings.\(^4\) We also know that after his forced retirement from active politics, caused by the return of the Medici family to Florence in 1512, Machiavelli attended the literary meetings held in the Orti Oricellari, the gardens of Bernardo Rucellai’s house, which hosted the Florentine Platonic Academy after its move from the Medici’s villa of Careggi. This participation testifies, in case that his literary output was not evidence enough, that Machiavelli was genuinely interested in literary, philosophical and political questions which he liked to debate with his literary friends. We can therefore surmise that sometimes he did not have a first hand knowledge of certain texts, which he knew through these conversations.

This image of a man of letters in constant conversation with ancient authors is confirmed by what Machiavelli himself tells us about his free time. We know, for instance, that in the years of forced political inactivity he found consolation in reading Latin poets such as Ovid and Tibullus, as is testified by his famous letter to Francesco Vettori dated December 10, 1513: “

I have a book with me, either Dante or Petrarch, or one of these minor poets, such as Tibullus, Ovid and the like: I read of their amorous passions and their loves, I remember mine, I take a lot of pleasure in this thought.\(^5\)

This impression is confirmed by the way Machiavelli writes, which is strongly influenced by the example and the style of Greek and Latin authors.\(^6\) To


\(^6\) This is a well-known fact, which has been systematically studied, with astonishing erudition, by L.A. Burd (ed), *Il Principe* by Niccolò Machiavelli, Oxford, Clarendon, 1891 (with an excellent introduction by Lord Acton); see also L.J. Walker (ed), *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950. C. Triantafillis, *Nicolò Machiavelli e gli scrittori greci*, Venezia, Tipografia del Giornale “Il Tempo”, 1875 is still an interesting reading for his extremist thesis: Triantafillis was persuaded that Machiavelli knew ancient Greek and therefore read Greek authors in the original and imitated them.
take only one instance: the famous dedicatory letter of the *Prince* is full of classical suggestions and borrowings. Its opening is taken after Isocrates’ oration *To Nicocles* 1-2. Machiavelli’s statement there that he did not make use of “other allurements or extrinsic adornments” (“qualunque altro lenocinio o ornamento estrinseco”) is again a reprise of Isocrates, this time *Philip* 27-28; his choice not to use “bombastic or magnificent words” (“parole ampullose o magnifiche”) refers to Horace, *Ars Poetica* 97, where it is said that the *ampullae* are bombastic expressions; while “varietà della materia e gravità del subietto” refers to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and to Cicero’s *De Oratore*, where *varietas* and *gravitas* are described as the two qualities which should always be present in a public discourse; the humble style which follows from these prescriptions is the style suited to teaching according to Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria*, XII, 10, 59). We may provisionally conclude that Machiavelli was a genuine literary person, who borrowed from the classics a style and certain expressions for rhetorical reasons, in order to make his prose more elegant and suited to his audience.

More substantially and to the point, Machiavelli was in constant dialogue with classical authors, from whom he drew inspiration and against whom he elaborated some of his most famous ideas. There is thus a twofold influence of classical authors on Machiavelli, one positive and one negative. This influence is, however, remarkably strong and I think we should take Machiavelli seriously when he states that the ancients were superior in most departments to the moderns and when he consequently advocates a return to ancient modes and ways, in politics, religion, morality and military art: his ‘revolution’ is in fact a return to the ancient.

3. *Machiavelli and Cicero*

Such twofold influence can be distinctly detected in Machiavelli’s relation to such a fundamental author for the Humanist culture as Cicero. Machiavelli appropriated certain insights of Cicero while he openly rejected other ideas of his, which he found mistaken; he debated subjects that had been examined and given a classic solution by Cicero (such as whether it is better to be loved or feared; or the pros and cons of liberality in politics). The relation between the two thinkers is strong and polemical—and therefore worth exploring. Since both authors were also first rank politicians in their respective countries, we may start from their opinion on the importance of political education. As Ezio Raimondi observed, Humanist

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8 Colish too maintains that Cicero exerted a positive as well as a negative influence on Machiavelli: p. 82.
culture followed Cicero in making the orator a paradigmatic hero: Cicero, for his part, had found in the *eloquentia* which follows from *ratio* the defining feature of our shared humanity.\(^9\) For Cicero the orator, the statesman, is the epitome of a capacity which is unique of human beings, that of creating laws and operating for the common good through eloquence;\(^{10}\) the statesman is both a man of letters and of action, a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (where the accent is not only on the *bonus* as it was the case for Cato);\(^{11}\) the flourishing of *eloquentia* brings human beings out of their initial bestial condition where violence stands in place of eloquence and the strongest rules.\(^{12}\) The condottiere Francesco Colonna in the *Art of War* is exactly some such complex character, a general who is also a man of letters and an orator, capable to quote Frontinus, Plutarch and Xenophon, dexterous on the battlefield as well as eloquent in spurring the soldiers to fight.

The great Victorian editor of the *Prince* Lawrence A. Burd had already drawn the readers’ attention to the dependence of certain ideas of Machiavelli from topics examined by Cicero in his works. For instance, Machiavelli’s treatment “on liberality and thriftiness” in *Prince* 16 is strongly influenced by Cicero’s considerations “de beneficientia ac liberalitate” in the *De officiis*. This work was particularly congenial to Machiavelli and “operates like a shadow text for parts of *Il Principe*”.\(^{13}\) it contained a lengthy praise of political life, together with famous arguments in support of a possible reconciliation or rather harmonization and identification of *utile* (the individual interest) and *honestum* (the common good). The possible reconciliation of *honestas* and *utilitas*, the honourable and the expedient, was not a novel idea for Cicero, who had already argued for it in his *De inventione* (written about 86 BCE) and in the *De oratore* (55 BCE). In the *De officiis* (44 BCE) Cicero went on to state that there is one simple “rule” (*regula*) for all cases in this matter, namely “that which seems expedient must not be morally wrong (*turpe*); or, if it is morally wrong, it must not seem expedient”.\(^{14}\) In the *De officiis* Cicero also maintained that liberality, when supported with one’s personal wealth, destroys its own source, causes impoverishment and forces to rob other people, thereby becoming a source of hatred instead of love for a politician; these considerations are obviously very

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\(^{10}\) See for instance *De officiis* I, 13 where Cicero says that only human beings possess the *veri inquisitio atque investigatio*, which arouses the desire to be governed only by just people who care about the common good.


\(^{12}\) See Cicero, *De inventione* I, 2 and, in general, the *De legibus* and the *De officiis*.


similar to those put forth by Machiavelli on this subject.\textsuperscript{15} It is at this level, however, that the two authors part way, for Cicero goes on to link true liberality with moral duty (\textit{officium}) and right (\textit{iustum}); whereas Machiavelli is notoriously uninterested in the moral consequences for the individual and looks at the practical and political result of liberality: he therefore suggests to the prince, if he is “prudent”, not to care about being considered thrifty, “non si curare del nome del miserò”.

On the other hand, it is against Cicero’s teaching that Machiavelli’s famous admonishment concerning the duty to keep one’s word is directed. In examining this topic in a passage in the \textit{De officiis}, Cicero maintained that it was imperative to stand by what one had sworn even in war; he condemned at the same time those who commit injustice through fraud (\textit{fraus}) and violence (\textit{vis}), which he personified with the fox and the lion, respectively, which he judged “utrumque hominum alienissimum”.\textsuperscript{16} In the final lines of Book I, then, Cicero concluded his account by vehemently stating that the political community (\textit{communitas}) should not have priority over everything, including temperance and moderation: for there are certain actions which are so deplorable or so evil that the wise man (\textit{sapiens}) would never commit them, not even to save his country. For Cicero the question can in practice be set aside because he cannot conceive of situations in which the country may ask the wise man to do such actions.\textsuperscript{17} It seems evident that the part of chapter 18 devoted to the “dua generazioni di combattere” of the \textit{Prince} aims at refuting Cicero’s doctrine, which would have come to mind to all contemporary readers. This is even more evident because the beginning of the chapter, the topic examined and structure of the argument clearly refer to Cicero’s treatment of loyalty and the prohibition of fraud, which should not be used even in war. Machiavelli, on the contrary, after stating that there are “two ways of fighting”, one through laws the other through force, one typical of men the other of beasts, goes on to say that the constraints of politics force the prince “to know how to use the beast”. The clear tribute to Cicero, although it is devised to refute his argument and actually to overturn it, serves the purpose to confer a dramatic tone to the subject at hand: Machiavelli seems to be saying that when the statesman is faced with the possibility of the destruction of the State, he is entitled to use all sort of means to avoid this end; \textit{contra} Cicero, namely against the authority of tradition. It may be interesting to note that Cicero, in his turn, was accused to have used glib, if not illegal means to have Catilina and his cronies declared enemies of the Roman republic. Machiavelli would have commented that

\textsuperscript{15} See Cicero, \textit{De officiis} I, 42-44 and II, 52-58.

\textsuperscript{16} Cicero, \textit{De officiis} I, 41.

\textsuperscript{17} Cicero, \textit{De officiis} I, 159.
“the country is well defended in whatever way it is defended, either with ignominy or with glory”.18

Similarly, the question of what makes the statesman more influent and capable “ad opes tuendas ac tenendas”, whether love or fear, is thoroughly examined first by Cicero. Quoting his beloved Ennius, Cicero had stated that there is nothing more suited to preserve one’s power and the State than the love of one’s fellow-countrymen; while there is nothing more alien than fear, because fear generates hatred and thus the desire to see the hated statesman dead. Cicero went on to produce the case of Caesar (without mentioning his name) in order to show that the people’s hatred brings about death, even in the case of a most powerful person: “multorum autem odiis nullas opes posse obsistere, si antea fuit ignotum, nuper est cognitum”.19 In chapter 17 of the *Prince* Machiavelli examines this subject but deems very important to make a significant correction: he separates fear from hate and famously maintains that what is important is “not to be hated by the people (*lo universale*)”; this will remain one of his deepest convictions as it is repeated in many places and in many works. On the other hand, Machiavelli is persuaded that fear constitutes a stronger bond than love, in consideration of men’s notorious unreliability and selfishness; most times—he considers in a sad vein in *Discourses* III, 21—people follow and obey those who make themselves feared more than those who make themselves loved. Being loved, feared or hated depends on the qualities of the statesman and here the visions of the two thinkers diverge completely. For Cicero is adamant in maintaining that pretence and appearance are not conducive to real glory because they are soon discovered; whereas Machiavelli overturns completely Cicero’s argument and utters one of his most famous statements: since human beings judge by the appearances and “everyone sees what you look like but few touch what you are” what matters is to appear virtuous; indeed, he adds with unabashed consistency, if one actually possesses certain virtues cannot refrain from exercising them; in politics, however, it is better to “seem to possess them” so that one can exercise them or not according to the necessity of the circumstances.20 It is important to notice that Machiavelli is not replacing Cicero’s virtues with a “technique” —as most commentators still argue—here;21 rather, he is replacing Cicero’s virtues with a

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18 Machiavelli, *Discourses* III, 41.
19 Cicero, *De officiis* II, 23.
21 See J.J. Barlow, “The Fox and the Lion: Machiavelli replies to Cicero”, *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999) pp. 627-645: “Cicero is thinking of virtues, Machiavelli of techniques” (p. 634); Barlow finds Cicero to be altogether incoherent and this fact explains such contrasting interpretations of his text (p. 644). D.J. Kapust, “Acting the Princely Style: Ethos and Pathos in Cicero’s *On the Ideal Orator* and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*”, *Political Studies* 58 (2010) pp. 590-608; Kapust maintains that Machiavelli overturns completely Cicero’s vision and that even if the prince possesses a virtue, this is certainly not the moral virtue and decency of Cicero.
different virtue, a new kind of prudence which consists in the capacity to do evil in view of a good and elevated purpose, nay the most important purpose: to save, preserve and aggrandize the State. This new virtue is the result of a process of political education which starts with the identification of the final goal of political activity, its *sumnum bonum* – the preservation of the State; which is different from the preservation of the ruler's own power, although the two ends may sometimes coincide. Having a grim view of human nature, Machiavelli believes that without the authority of the State and the law and order it guarantees, no good life, no virtuous or ethical life of any kind, indeed no life at all is possible. This virtue enables the (new) statesman to remain ‘good’ even when he commits evil deeds; namely, it enables him to identify correctly those dramatic circumstances in which there are no honourable or straight means to preserve the State and therefore it is necessary to use unjust, illegal and immoral means. Isaiah Berlin identified very well this point in Machiavelli, whom, in his opinion, uncovered an insoluble dilemma: he realized that not all ultimate values are necessarily compatible with one another and therefore recognized that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other. Machiavelli therefore warns his prospective new statesman that by entering politics he may wind up damning his soul. This is because the virtues and ends of Christian morality are different from those requested by responsible politics, a realm in which there is an element of necessity which Machiavelli brings to the fore and emphasizes repeatedly: the new prince, in order to preserve the State, is often forced “to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion”. He must therefore be able to “enter evil, if necessitated”. Evil remains evil in Machiavelli’s vision and human beings face thus a tragic choice: if they want to follow the injunctions of Christian religion, they should refrain from entering politics; if they do enter this realm, they must be aware that it might be required from them to act in a way incompatible with the salvation of their soul. Machiavelli unveiled how politics is the realm of tragic existential choices.

The contrast between the two thinkers on this subject is exemplified by their different judgment on Romulus and the killing of his brother Remus. For Cicero, when Romulus “decided that it was more expedient for him to reign alone than to share the throne with another, he slew his brother”: blinded by a false appearance of utility, he showed no piety or humanity and committed a terrible

Kapust concludes, echoing Cicero’s definition of the orator, that Machiavelli’s prince “is certainly not a good man, skilled in speaking” (p. 606).


crime.\textsuperscript{25} Machiavelli, on the contrary, while still considering Romulus’ action a crime, excuses it on the ground that it was committed to create a new political arrangement, a republic and a \textit{vivere civile}, and therefore for the well-being of the country and the common good: “it follows therefore that, while the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him” –he concludes.\textsuperscript{26}

Another Ciceronean influence can be detected in Machiavelli’s idea that the princes are responsible for the behaviour of their subjects and, more generally, that their example has a very significant impact on the citizens. In the \textit{De legibus} III, 32 Cicero had stated that:

Hence vicious princes are the more pernicious in their effects on a republic, in that they not only themselves introduce vices, but impregnate the citizens with them; so that they are nuisance not merely because they themselves are corrupt, but because they corrupt others and by example do more harm than they do by sinning.

Machiavelli, besides continuously encouraging the prince to give “great examples” to his citizens,\textsuperscript{27} comments that in the States where there are robberies the blame falls on the princes and their “wickedness” (\textit{tristitia}), not on the \textit{natura trista} of the peoples.\textsuperscript{28} Conversely, Machiavelli argues that the example of a “good man” can bring a republic to its original good condition and can therefore preserve it. This is because institutions need to be ‘vivified’ by the virtue and work of a good man; other good men will follow his example. Indeed, if a republic was so lucky to have someone who from time to time renovated the laws with his example, it would not only escape the inevitable ruin, it would last forever (\textit{la sarebbe perpetua}).\textsuperscript{29}

4. Cicero and Machiavelli: Two conflicting educational projects

We may conclude that notwithstanding their different takes on important subjects, Cicero and Machiavelli had two important features in common. Both lived in very troubled times for their countries, characterized by prolonged civil wars and neglect for the common good by all parties involved. In this grim situation both believed that the only way out consisted in educating a new generation of statesmen who had their priorities straight and who therefore cared for the common good, the \textit{respublica}, above all other things. They were both achingly aware of the desperate situation their countries were living in and they

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Cicero, \textit{De officiis} III, 41.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Machiavelli, \textit{Discourses} I, 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} See Machiavelli, \textit{Prince} 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Machiavelli, \textit{Discourses} III, 29.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Machiavelli, \textit{Discourses} III, 1 and III, 22.
\end{itemize}
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both had an acute sense of personal failure for not having been able to be more effective in their political action. Indeed, by looking at Cicero’s inability to save the Roman republic from the ambitions of such politicians as Caesar, Pompey, Antony and Octavian Machiavelli was prompted to elaborate his own ideas about how a “well-ordered republic” should deal with extremely ambitious personalities: it should welcome citizens who gain their reputation “publicly”, who are honoured for their services and good counsels to the republic; it should forbid all attempts to gain reputation “privately”, namely through marriages, lending money and doing other things which create partisans.30

As a result, Cicero and Machiavelli both fell back on the project of creating a new kind of statesman through their writings; indeed, writing replaced political action, as they both candidly declare.31 Being both practical men, their eyes were certainly on the current situation but their mind was looking at the future, at those future politicians who could be created, moulded through education.32 Replying to Atticus in his dialogue De legibus, Cicero states very clearly that his discourse on laws and education is not conceived for the present men or the current senate but rather addresses future statesmen (de futuris: III, 29). As for Machiavelli, he states many times in the works he wrote post res perditas that his intention was to instil virtue in the young people who read his writings:

For it is the office of a good man to teach others that good which because of the malignity of the times and of fortune, he has not been able to accomplish, so that, many being capable, some of those more loved by Heaven can accomplish it.33

“Many being capable”: Machiavelli’s project was to educate in the art of State many young readers and turn them into the statesmen of the future. Interestingly enough, in order to do so he deemed it necessary to teach the prospective politicians the virtue of the ancients so that they could avoid the vices of the moderns.

31 In De officiis III, 3 Cicero says that he learnt from educated men that “among evils one ought not only to choose the least, but also to extract even from these any element of good that they may contain”. This notion is very similar to Machiavelli’s advice to pick the less bad course as good in Prince 21.
32 See the very interesting observations on the use of rhetoric in this context by V. Kahn, Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.
33 Machiavelli, Discourses II, Preface.