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IS BIOGRAPHY AN APPROPRIATE TOOL FOR STUDYING THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL IDEAS?

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INTRODUCTION

Let us initially set the scene: a historian of political ideas relies on the historical biographical work of other researchers.¹ This research on Machiavelli has therefore not consisted of digging through archives and unearthing new documents, but rather in relying on the historical work carried out by eminent fellow historians (Ridolfi,² Vivanti,³ Fournel and Zancarini,⁴ Guidi,⁵ ...) in order to demonstrate the importance of the biographical contribution to understanding Machiavelli's thought in the first instance, and to understand the advent of "modern" political thought in the second one.

Therefore it seems that the characteristic feature of political modernity that can be fully grasped in Machiavelli, and which is entirely intended

¹ The aim of this work is therefore quite different from that of a synthesis of historians' biographies such as that proposed by Giovanni Levi, "Les usages de la biographie," *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 44, no. 6 (1989): 1325–1336, <https://doi.org/10.3406/ahess.1989.283658>.

² Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli* (Roma: Belardetti, 1954).

³ Corrado Vivanti, *Machiavel ou les temps de la politique* (Paris: Editions Desjonquères, 2007).

⁴ Jean-Louis Fournel and Jean-Claude Zancarini, *Machiavel, une vie en guerres* (Paris: Passés Composés, 2020).

⁵ Andréa Guidi, *Un segretario militante: Politica, diplomazia e armi nel cancelliere Machiavelli* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

by the Florentine, is the programmatic nature of political thought and discourse.⁶ The reduction of its theoretical and universal dimension⁷ clearly takes second place with Machiavelli, who intends to emphasise the place of political discourse in current politics, even if it is also a question of going beyond the purely conjunctural and attempting to think about political action in the medium term.

So, for example, in my next book, I intend to show that *Il principe* [The Prince] and the *Discorsi* [Discourses] do indeed aim first and foremost at Italian unification, along two radically opposed paths that are set out according to the possibilities offered by the Florentine political situation at the time of writing and the audience to which these writings were addressed. In France, there is a tendency to see Machiavelli as a philosopher whose ideas could be understood at any time and who would provide the “keys” to politics. If this is to mean that evil can succeed in politics and that we must either use it or never forget it, the lesson is well known and of little interest.

The problem, then, in understanding Machiavellian thought is to understand the dynamic at work between theory and action. Theory is not philosophical because it is linked to a concrete action that is at least possible, and the action is not purely pragmatic and cynical because it is a part of the historical context to which it intends to bring about a substantial change. Through the Machiavellian case, this reflection aims to draw attention to a wider problem, which is part of the history of the forms of distinction between Antiquity and Modernity. The focus is not on biography per se, but on the importance of biography in the history of political ideas, and ultimately on its significance for our contemporary political systems.

It is easy to see that this is no more than a sketch of a series of hypotheses to aid common reflection, and not the assertion of a definitive thesis. The idea put forward here is to examine the fact that the study of biographies, in our culture, forms a kind of history of the conflict between the individual who acts and whatever resistance they may encounter. This paper is an attempt to suggest a brief history (necessarily oriented and partial) of this question.

⁶ This thesis forms the core of my book *Machiavel par lui-même* (Paris: PUF, 2025).

⁷ Already well highlighted by Marie Gaille, *Machiavel et la tradition philosophique* (Paris: PUF, 2007).

THE “MODERN” REVIVAL OF BIOGRAPHIES FROM ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

Plutarch⁸ is one of the fundamental ancient authors who formed the biographical reading of literary figures from the Renaissance to the 19th century. His *Bioi Paralleloi* [Parallel Lives], in the various editions and translations, and even various extrapolations, literally marked out the readings of these periods. We know that Machiavelli demanded a version in as early as 1503, when he was on a mission and therefore at odds with the actions of Caesar Borgia⁹ and that Bonaparte, who had not read Machiavelli, had a version in his personal library.¹⁰ These two examples illustrate the vital importance of their dissemination in literary and political circles at the time.¹¹ Plutarch’s work is that of a moralist. We know that he attempted, through the parallel comparison of two Lives, of a Greek and a Roman, to judge several things: the moral and human quality of Greece versus Rome; the moral and human quality of each individual faced with chance; the meaning of human action in politics in the face of Destiny.

For each life, Plutarch sets out to identify the element of “happiness,” in other words fortune, in the sense of both chance and providence that this term had in pagan antiquity. At that time, Fate was conceived as imposing itself on Zeus himself. The individual’s intrinsic merit, i.e. his or her individual moral value, had to be reconciled with the contingencies of life, which could be seen as signs of fate, for good or ill. Thus, in absolute terms, we could

⁸ In his general introduction to the symposium, Gregor Pobežin eloquently recalled the importance of biography in Greco-Roman thought. We refer you to his work for a more complete and erudite vision than our own, see e.g. Gregor Pobežin, “Martyrology, a (Pseudo-)Historical Source: The Case of Prudentius’ Hymn in Honour of the Martyr Quirinus,” in *Rzym a Półwysep Iberyjski: Różnorodność Relacji od Starożytności po Współczesność = Roma y la Península Ibérica: Variedad de Relaciones desde la Antigüedad hasta la Contemporaneidad*, ed. Adriana Grzelak-Krzyszczak and Maria Judyta Woźniak (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019), 101–116.

⁹ Cf. letter from Biagio Buonaccorsi to Machiavelli, dated October 21, 1502, in Nicolas Machiavel, *Toutes les lettres officielles et familières de Machiavel, celles de ses Seigneurs, de ses amis et des siens*, ed. and trans. Edmond Barincou, 2 vols. (Paris: NFR, 1955), vol. 1, 216.

¹⁰ See Patrice Gueniffey, *Bonaparte* (Gallimard: Paris, 2013).

¹¹ For military circles, see Frédérique Verrier, *Les armes de Minerve. Humanisme militaire dans l’Italie du XVIème siècle* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997). His work on *anasurma* is literally punctuated by the presence of Plutarch, who is quoted twenty-one times throughout the work and examined particularly on pages 75–84. Cf. Frédérique Verrier, *Catarina Sforza et Machiavel ou l’origine d’un monde* (Roma: Vecchiarelli Editore, 2010).

have distinguished the best of men even through the worst of misfortune, or the worst of men through insolent luck.

Of course, all this needs to be put into perspective, since in Plutarch's time it would have been unthinkable for the worst of men to benefit from too much divine favour, or for the best and therefore most pious of men to be overburdened. In this respect, the work as a whole was intended to measure who was the best of the Greeks or the Romans, but also to determine the meaning of this divinity of Destiny, whose obvious blindness in certain cases called into question the meaning of human action in politics. The coherence of man's relationship with the gods was certainly not the essential point of any attempt at analysis, which explains why modern readers are perplexed by the paradoxes raised in the tribulations of Ulysses, the Greek tragedies, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or the theoretically more substantial writings that we believe should constitute well-documented biographies.¹²

Of course, Christianity considerably altered both the scope and the form of this questioning, and the rediscovery of Plutarch was first and foremost a pleasure for historians and enthusiasts of antiquity, who were delighted to rediscover real-life heroes pleasantly described by a narrator from their own time. One may also imagine that it served as an alternative to the biographies of saints, whose increasingly fabulous character was becoming difficult to assimilate, and whose inherently hagiographic mode rendered the material unsuitable for critical discussion, for the weighing of political judgment, and for a secular evaluation.

THE RENAISSANCE AND MACHIAVELLI, THE IRRUPTION OF MAN INTO HISTORY, HIS ABILITY TO PRODUCE "NEW" POLITICS

Machiavelli, whose biography forms the core of our work to date, offered a radically new perspective to the study of antiquity and to biography. As he wrote in the *Discourses*,¹³ antiquity, which serves as a model for art and science, must also be taken seriously in political matters. The *Discourses*

¹² On Greco-Roman religiosity, we can only refer to the work of Pierre Hadot.

¹³ Nicolas Machiavel, *Discours sur la première décade de Tite-Live*, trans. Alessandro Fontana and Xavier Tabet (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), book II, foreword, 252, 255.

illustrate this by their use of various historical authors, particularly Livy and Polybius. Machiavelli seeks to recover the Roman sense of civic virtue by, as it were, passing over Christianity, which he regards as apolitical and which, in his view, distorted the political nature of the Italians and hastened their decline through their inability to unite and to avoid becoming the stake of the Italian Wars during which he lived and wrote.¹⁴

In addition, Machiavelli wrote *La vita di Castruccio Castracani da Lucca* [Life of Castruccio Castracani da Lucca] and numerous other portraits in his histories, which reveal an evolution in the art of biography, not hesitating to visibly falsify actual history.¹⁵ Basically, Machiavelli returns to Plutarch for a fundamental reason, articulated in chapter 25 of *The Prince* on the respective roles of *Virtue* and *Fortune*, mediated by free will. He concludes that everything is held in balance, in an unstable and shifting equilibrium, unpredictable by nature. Machiavelli's operation is indicative of the change in mentality. Through the irruption of Christian free will in this no less than Christian author, Machiavelli stops the Plutarchian moralist and sanctimonious questioning and neutralises it. The question is no longer to assess and judge each man, but to see, in the biographical study, the reasons for his successes and failures in order to learn from them for action in comparable circumstances. Faced with the Greek's philosophical and moralistic questioning, the Florentine inaugurated a political use, in the form of lessons leading more or less to a form of knowledge that was properly political.

This change in attitude is engaging. As moderns, we are careful to distinguish between hagiographies, which we regard as scarcely scientific and hardly very estimable, and biographies, whose purpose is, at least in principle, to consist a man in the spirit of his time in order to distinguish what he really did, and therefore his share of possible merit. But what interests us above all is to understand the relationship between an individual and his time; the choice of the individual therefore allows one, almost automatically,

¹⁴ On these points, see Jérôme Roudier, *Machiavel par lui-même* (Paris: PUF, 2025).

¹⁵ Felix Gilbert mentions in particular that Renaissance historians "had political purposes when discussing historical events and thus consciously constructed a historical myth." See Felix Gilbert, "Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Valori on Lorenzo Magnifico," *News* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1958): 114. The *Life of Castruccio Castracani da Lucca* is absolutely full of deliberate errors in order to draw a parallel with that of Scipio, and is thus full of winks to a readership that cannot be mistaken.

to discern the positioning of the biographer's line of inquiry.¹⁶ Machiavelli, on the other hand, intended to judge the successes and failures of political actions. His portraits aim only to explain the mechanisms of the dynamic struggle that forms the maelstrom in which all the circumstances and all the players play out. His aim, moreover, is not so much to elucidate the past for its own sake as to draw from its lessons for the now. This is the political programme that characterises all Machiavelli's work and thought.

THE TRANSITION FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERNITY IS THAT FROM MORALITY TO EFFICIENCY; BIOGRAPHY IS NO LONGER THE STORY OF MAN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST DESTINY, BUT THAT OF AN INDIVIDUAL CONFRONTED WITH THIS NEW POLITICAL CREATION, THE "STATE"

The use of political biography from Machiavelli to Bonaparte can thus be placed alongside that which culminated in art with the thinking of Jacob Burckhardt and his fusing vision of the prince and the artist, the two united in the same radically creative desire, one for a "state" never before imagined, the other for forms and practices that were totally new.¹⁷ Clearly, the dated and romantic character of these analyses will not suffice here; yet it is worth emphasizing that, in the arts, Vasari already undertook during the Renaissance, through his *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* [The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects], to offer the public a biographical entry point into the history of art – one that presupposes and implements a conception of activity centred on the master craftsman, who is thereby designated as an artist. The same phenomenon, of course, can be observed across all domains of activity in the societies of the period, and Machiavelli's own reflection thus loses some of its originality,

¹⁶ Stephan Zweig's biographies are particularly suited to this type of reading. It goes without saying that the 20th century and the horrors of totalitarianism have radically altered this type of perspective, where the attitude is generally one of "understanding."

¹⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *La civilisation de Italie au temps de la Renaissance*, vol. 1 (Paris: Le livre de Poche, 1958), in particular vol. 1, "Part I: The State as a Work of Art" followed by "Part II: Development of the Individual," the first chapter of which deals with "The Italian State and the Individual."

becoming instead a point of departure conventionally accepted by his successors in political thought.

At this stage of the argument, it is necessary to point to another phenomenon, in theory independent of biographical activity. In the half-century following Machiavelli's death and the publication of works that would henceforth be regarded as definitive (*The Prince* and the *Discourses*, neither of which he edited during his lifetime), Western Europe – defined by its membership in Christendom – underwent a major rupture that placed its survival and “civilizational” unity in jeopardy: the Reformation. The response to what was perceived as an intolerable division of Western European societies was long and painful and took multiple directions. Yet, schematically speaking, in those countries genuinely traversed by the Wars of Religion, two types of political solution emerged: freedom of worship, or the creation of the state.

This radical novelty is of the utmost interest, since, in retrospect, it is known that the state would become one of the political forms through which political modernity came to name itself. In French, the term carries such a powerful connotation that the title “President of the Republic” is systematically reinforced by that of “head of state,” as though the Republic alone were not enough. Consequently, no Frenchman trembles in the face of a “government” logically perceived as transitory and weak in the face of this “cold monster”¹⁸ constituted by the State.

The State is obviously not a simple reality, but to continue Foucault's reflections on a critique of political reason,¹⁹ it is characterised from the outset by a number of features that give it its impersonal character, both in theory and in practice, in the form of a programme or a definition.

First of all, as a result of the counter-reformation, the State had a duty to go beyond individuals in order to control them better. In Botero's thought²⁰ it may be outlined this is clearly an undertaking linked to the new capacities

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1903). State is “the coldest of cold monsters.”

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, “*Omnes et singulatim*: Towards a Critique of Political Reason,” *Le Débat* 41, no. 4 (1986): 5–36, <https://doi.org/10.3917/deba.041.0005>.

²⁰ Giovanni Botero, *De la raison d'État (1589–1598)*, ed., transl., and with notes by Pierre Benedittini and Romain Descendre, introduction by Romain Descendre (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).

for calculating and understanding the world made possible by importing tools from commercial practices into political analysis.²¹ But it is worth pointing out that this is also the programme of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. In both cases, political invention is significantly tied to rational activity: Botero rightly stresses its connection to calculation, while Hobbes emphasizes its relation to law – a relation whose almost mystical bond with reason has been recognized since Cicero.²²

From this dual origin, and from this dual claim to use reason to get out of the unprecedented and dramatic problem of the Wars of Religion, we can quickly observe two distinct trends in political thought. On the one hand, there was political thought, which could quickly be described as liberal, which was initially built up against Hobbes and attempted to replace the pure force of law or calculation with reasonable coexistence between individuals. These two ways of emphasising the unifying and regulating potential of reason inevitably tend to limit or even suppress the freedom of individuals. This is clear in Hobbes.

Through the use of calculation in human interaction, we arrive at statistics and therefore rational and reasonable forecasts that enable policies to be more effective. Pushed to extremes, as was the case in the scientific political thinking of the late 19th century²³ and in the totalitarian ideological delusions of both the Communists and the Nazis, the State can become an end in itself, totally detached from the diverse social reality it dominates. Confronted with the temptation of unification through reason and the state – which may aim at the ruthless suppression of all differences and minorities – the liberal political tradition seeks to assign to this same political organization, now preferably termed “government,” a different purpose: that of managing differences so as to produce a dynamic and free society.

²¹ Giovanni Botero's *De la raison d'État*, for example, is the result of a synthetic use of both the accounts of merchant ship captains and those of ambassadors to the Republic of Venice. Similarly, the “reason” of State, in his language, refers to the power of calculation [*ratio*] linked to observation to control a territory and its population.

²² Cicero, *De legibus*, where the beginning of the work forms a kind of explanation of the “divine” nature of law through reason: since reason was granted to men by Jupiter, just law must conform to reason and therefore be divine.

²³ Pierre Favre has published *Naissances de la science politique en France, 1970–1914* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), an overview of the birth of political science in France, focusing on the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th and the emergence of “scientific” criteria in political studies and research.

ATTENTION TO INDIVIDUALS OF
NO PRIMARY IMPORTANCE CORRESPONDS
TO A REACTION TO THE FRIGHTENING
DEPLOYMENT OF THE POWER OF THE STATE

In this context, biography provides a useful counterpoint to the weight of administrative and state organisation, which is increasingly prevalent and necessary to manage increasingly complex and multiple societies.

From Plutarch and Voragine, who used biography as a means of moral reflection on the meaning of human action on earth, to Machiavelli, who saw in biography the possibility of understanding the mechanisms of the complexity of political action in order to enlighten an *acteur*, to Bonaparte, a true Machiavellian hero, who wanted to change the political reality of his time, to Burckhardt, who established as fundamental in art as in politics the possibility of creative genius, to Huxley²⁴ and Arendt,²⁵ who saw in biography a means of better understanding the irreversibility of political action in human life for the latter and a reminder of the mystical foundations of our most secularised political organisation for the former, biography is first and foremost a counterweight to our modern political structures, whether we call them “States” or otherwise. The power of calculation and forecasting must, in our culture, be counterbalanced by a reassessment of the place human action holds.

This may be one of the meanings of writing and reading biographies today. Biographical studies, in all its meanings, can be understood as an effort to counterbalance the weight of the state by maximising that of citizens and individuals. Even biographical studies conducted in terms of “micro-histories”²⁶ can hold this meaning, regardless the fact that the biographical study of political actors remains the preferred approach.²⁷

²⁴ Aldous Huxley, *L'éminence grise, études de religion et de politique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2022). This biography focuses on Father Joseph, Richelieu's minister who organised his cynical and mystical foreign policy.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Vies politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019).

²⁶ Carlo Ginzburg's work is exemplary in this respect.

²⁷ Alessandro Barbero, *Le marchand qui voulait gouverner Florence, et autres nouvelles du Moyen-Age* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017), presents a succinct but suggestive biography of Dino Compagni, who was perhaps the predecessor, eclipsed by Machiavelli, of those thinkers of

Biography today, from the point of view of writing, reading or scientific work, remains a way of justifying our present liberal state policy, where the efficiency of the state is identified with maximising the individual potential of its citizens. The counter-examples identified by Federico Zuliani concerning Italian Protestants during the 16th century²⁸ reveal the reality of the contribution made by biographies in establishing the individual in political history in the face of the State. The censorship, explicit or otherwise, of personalities perceived as “undesirable” in the biographical dictionaries of different periods must be identified and commented on for what it is: the stranglehold of a majority on the history of a people. In France, the history of women playwrights is an example of this erasure, which was first deliberately misogynistic and then became an intangible dogma.²⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

History permeates everyone’s biography, and biographical study in general consists essentially of measuring the relative proportion of individual quality and the weight of history in each individual, as Patrice Gueniffey has clearly emphasised.³⁰ From this point of view, we return to the classic view from antiquity, brought to its highest point by Plutarch, that a man’s worth is judged by examining his circumstances, whether favourable or not.

Biography in the modern sense, as this paper tries to suggest, places greater emphasis on the weight of history, where the Greek moralist’s primary aim was to judge men and propose models. But in both cases, and particularly in the study of political ideas, biography allows us to assess more accurately, to understand in a sense from the inside, the movement

politics who were also its actors. See Dino Compagni, *Chronique des événements survenant à son époque* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2002).

²⁸ Federico Zuliani, “Which Place for the Biographies of 16th-Century Religious and Linguistic Minorities in Italian and Swiss Historiographies?” in “*V življenju slednjega od nas je zgodba*”: *dvodnevni mednarodni simpozij na temo biografike in njene vloge ter usode v digitalnem svetu: program simpozija in povzetki referatov* = “*There’s History in All Men’s Lives*”: *A Two-Day International Symposium on the Subject of Biography and Its Role/Future in the Digital World: Conference Programme and Abstract Booklet*, Atrij ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana, September 25–26, 2023.

²⁹ Aurore Evain, *En compagnie, histoire d’autrice de l’époque latine à nos jours* (Paris: Ixe, 2019).

³⁰ Patrice Gueniffey, “A biográfia a megújuló politikatörténetben,” *Aetas* 3 (2000): 136–149.

of an author's thought. For, unlike any other form of knowledge, politics is embodied. Machiavelli, through his radical criticism of what we would today call "ideology," i.e. a theory whose concrete realisation we are not concerned with but only its theoretical "truth" (but which?) or rationality (but, again, which?), fundamentally emphasises that the only valid question in politics lies in the realisation of one's ideas.

Without going so far as to accept this point, which is too radical and leads, on principle, to the exclusion of all forms of speculation, it should be emphasised that the course of history in Western Europe since the Italian wars can no longer be the object of idealistic or religious contemplation, or, more precisely, that the modern mind, wishing to have a grip on things and events, consists precisely in refusing, particularly in the social and political domain, a contemplative attitude which would be perceived as passive, even cowardly. From then on, he assigns a truly programmatic, i.e. achievable, perspective to his thinking. And at that point, the history of political thought becomes inseparable from the history of human political action that leads to the study of the State, which completes the approach of the Intavia project: the study of biographies in Slovenia is linked to the creation or promotion of a State.

Biography in the modern sense is thus no longer a work of moral philosophy for measuring the force of destiny and, in turn, the strength of character of the individual, but a way of understanding the possibilities and modalities of human action in history. For the history of political ideas, biography can provide a less disembodied appreciation of the history of political ideas in general, a form of comprehensive perspective based on the anthropological model. I would therefore like to stress the need for a study – inseparably biographical, political and philosophical – of the men who shaped the transition to this new form of political and social relations that constitutes modernity. It seems to me, for example, that we need to carry out in-depth studies of the "senior civil servants," the political experts who emerged during the religious wars and who relied on politics to regulate, curb and halt the horrors of denominational civil wars.³¹

³¹ As Carl Schmidt happily wrote in *Hamlet ou Hécube* (Paris: L'Arche, 1992), 42: "In the person of King James I, a lover of philosophy and theology, was embodied all the dissension of his time, a century of divided faith and denominational civil wars."

The interest in the biography of this new category of political experts, which emerges (it has no doubt always been present through the various forms of “advisors to princes,” of course) through the mastery of bureaucracy, archives, and the bookish and cartographic knowledge that gives a grip on social reality, including ultimately what we will later call the statistical tool, leads to a new field of research, of which Machiavelli is the starting point in spite of himself and which, this time, fully joins the history of political ideas as currents of thought. More generally, in the history of political ideas, a careful study of the intentions and political experience of the authors can help us to better understand the reasons why this history has developed and has had a decisive influence on real political life. Basically, since the end of the Middle Ages, we could also propose to characterise political modernity by the fact that conceptualisation no longer takes place *a posteriori*, as in Greek and Roman antiquity or in the Christian world, but concomitantly with the evolution of political life. It is remarkable, for example, that the concept of the “State” was born precisely at the moment when the State was being established, in a form that Botero ultimately approximated in a highly satisfactory and enlightening way. “State” is not just a new way of naming political power, it is also a programme: “State is solid lordship over peoples.”³²

The great novelty of modern political thought lies in the fact that it is both an effort at description and conceptualisation based on the classical model of the Ancients, but also one of creative imagination. Faced with the wars in Italy, Machiavelli noted the inadequacy of the usual ways of proceeding and sought, in a deliberately disruptive enterprise, to create a new political entity of a size that could meet the strategic challenges of his time. Two generations later, some of the less fanatical Secretaries of societies torn apart by religious infighting turned to his enterprise to draw inspiration from his method, namely to create a new political form capable of curbing denominational civil wars. In order to grasp this truly astounding change in the way we think about and experience politics, where, to paraphrase Arendt, the treasure of tradition is by definition lost because it is immediately considered insufficient, since the present arises from what has never been

³² Giovanni Botero, *De la raison d'État*, 67. Romain Descendre adds in a note that this inaugural passage does not appear until the 1596 edition.

seen before,³³ a biography seems to me to be essential. In my opinion, it is all the more essential if we are to understand the incredible novelty that seized these men in their time: the denominational civil war, which no previous political or religious experience had really preceded.

I'm not sure we're completely rid of this initial problem, where societies unified by a fairly well established and rigid religious dogma were torn apart from within and had to, at the cost of their very survival, invent, for example, the concept of tolerance, which was largely antithetical to the monistic tendencies of each political society, but also the conditions that made it possible to impose it on the members of their own societies; in other words, a political power capable of striking at every individual in society, whoever they were and wherever they were: the State.³⁴

On an even deeper level, it seems to me that the current interest in biography, particularly the lives of individuals who do not belong to the foremost ranks of activities socially valorised by contemporary society, does not apply solely to the analysis of the societies that they help to complete and, in a way, anchor in reality. Thus, while historical work may indeed provide a deeper insight into the spirit of a society through the biographical entry of people who are both revealing and unspectacular, it seems to me that it is above all revealing of our times and of some of its most eminent characteristics.

We live in societies that place excessive value on the individual and individualism – at the very moment when the means of circumventing and controlling them (and thus effectively preventing them from using their free will) are more powerful than ever. Writing biographies, and seeing them as a positive and effective way of understanding the evolution of our own societies (as well as other societies, and in particular the older stages of our societies), is a singular and revealing attitude, especially if it is combined with a re-evaluation of previous biographies, in order to correct past errors and prejudices. The pessimists will say that it remains to correct those of the

³³ Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture*, “préface: la brèche entre le passé et le futur” (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

³⁴ In this, I do not believe that a theological-political reality should be assumed. On the contrary, I am more in line with Géraldine Muhlmann's reflection on its fundamental non-existence. The fact remains that what is philosophically false can have multiple and profound effects in political reality. Cf. Géraldine Muhlmann, *L'imposture du théologico-politique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2022).

present. In any case, the leaders of authoritarian or even totalitarian political regimes would doubtless not think of undertaking such critical research.

Within the biographical enterprise inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity, the irreducible antagonism between the individual acting upon the world and the hold exerted by the world (gods, God, religion, politics, the state, society) over the individual is constantly at work. While it is clear that this question runs throughout European culture shaped by the dual Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition, it is no less true that changes in the way the issue is framed through different modes of biographical writing and the selection of biographical subjects considerably alter the interpretation that can be drawn from it.

After Machiavelli, it seems to us that we are entering a period – modernity – of which we are still a part, and which helps us to understand why a recently created state such as Slovenia would decide to propose such a research endeavour. Admittedly, this initiative can be understood as a way for the state to affirm its presence to its own population and to foster forms of national identification through recent and clearly Slovenian reference points. Like other European countries, Slovenia participates in the long-standing logic of state formation commonly described as that of the nation-state – that is, the idea that the ideal state is composed of a single people, understood as a certain historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic unity. While the effective reality of the nation-state as such may be questioned, it remains clear that this “political program,” first articulated with particular clarity by Machiavelli, constitutes a key point of reference for recognizing and understanding European political culture since the Renaissance.

To this obvious point others may be added, less visible yet no less compelling, of which at least one deserves emphasis: today, in the wake of the totalitarian phenomena that bloodied Europe in the 20th century, there has emerged the idea (fundamentally liberal in nature) that the state derives its value less from itself than from what it enables the individuals who compose it to achieve. Biography has thus, in a sense, become a sign, a proof, or a model of perfect success, whereby an increasingly dominant and coercively capable state governs and administers its population in the most effective manner by allowing the highest capacities of all its members to be realized. It is, moreover, in its ability genuinely to include each citizen

in their singularity – therefore through its concern for minorities – that the reality of the freedom it affords may be judged; *damnatio memoriae* is absolutely prohibited.

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