

FROM POLITICS TO REASON OF STATE

*The acquisition and transformation of the language of
politics 1250–1600*

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Contents

Introduction	<i>page</i>	1
1 The acquisition of the language of politics		11
2 The philosophy of the city and the political man		71
3 Machiavelli and the republican concept of politics		126
4 Francesco Guicciardini: between politics and art of the state		178
5 The last glimmerings of civil philosophy		201
6 The triumph of reason of state		238
Epilogue. Politics as civil philosophy		281
<i>Bibliography</i>		296
<i>Index</i>		320

Introduction

Between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, the language of politics underwent a radical transformation which could be called “the revolution of politics,” even if the word “revolution” sounds somewhat too dramatic. Like all serious revolutions, it was global in scope, and had a wide range of intellectual and moral implications. Not only did the meaning and the range of application of the concept of “politics” change, but also the ranking of political science, the role of political education and the value of political liberty. The revolution entailed a loss of prestige. Having enjoyed for three centuries the status of the noblest human science, politics emerged from the revolution as an ignoble, depraved and sordid activity: it was no longer the most powerful means of fighting corruption, but the art of conforming to, and perpetuating, it.

In spite of its magnitude, the “revolution of politics” has received very little attention. This study attempts to fill this gap in the history of political thought. The story begins in the thirteenth century, when a shared language of politics reappears in Italy, and ends in the seventeenth century, when politics became a synonym for reason of state. To be sure, all through the seventeenth century, learned men continued to invoke the restoration of the idea of politics as the noble art of good government. Their efforts, however, did not succeed in fighting back reason of state, nor did they prevent the decline of the notion of politics as the art of good government.

The chronological and geographical boundaries of the story are, to a degree, arbitrary. Different stories of politics and reason of state could be told which would certainly be more interesting. One could begin with Plato’s contrast between the political man and the tyrant and trace the dispute between the champions of *Realpolitik* and the advocates of political ethics up to the present.¹ In addition to Italy, a

¹ This objection was made by Norberto Bobbio and Michelangelo Bovero during a seminar in Turin on December 21, 1990. I am deeply grateful to both for their criticisms.

skilled historian could also consider France, England, Spain and Germany. This would indeed be an interesting completion of the story that I am telling here.

However, I believe that there are historical grounds for beginning the story in the thirteenth century and concluding it in the seventeenth century. We have reasonable evidence that philosophers and learned men of the thirteenth century realized that, unlike their immediate predecessors, they had available a new science and a new language – the science and the language of politics. Whereas an anonymous student of the twelfth century complained of the lack of a science of the political good, Giovanni Villani recorded that Brunetto Latini had taught the Florentines the principles of politics. Three centuries later, the learned community acknowledged, either with regret or with approval, that a major change had taken place: politics no longer meant the art of ruling a republic according to justice and reason (to paraphrase Brunetto Latini's famous definition) but instead had come to mean reason of state – in the sense of the knowledge of the means of preserving domination over a people. Later on, the new notion of politics as reason of state also pervaded ordinary language: in the 1705 edition of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, after Latini's conventional definition, we read that politics also means “ragione di stato, jus regni.” Although the contrast between politics as the art of good government and politics as reason of state existed and still exists, the seventeenth century marks a turning point of a story that I believe is a real one and is worth telling both for its historical importance and for its consequences for our current language of politics.

In this study, I portray the genesis of the language of politics from the traditions of political virtue, civil law and Aristotelianism. I then reconstruct the intellectual and ideological transition from the language of politics, in the sense of art of good government, to that of reason of state. I stress that the triumph of the language of reason of state coincided with the demise of the language of politics that was elaborated in the second half of the thirteenth century and that enjoyed its moments of glory in the epoch of Civic Humanism.

We are accustomed to labeling “political” any practice of government, legislation and jurisdiction. But, for the people who concern me, politics was understood as being but a way of legislating, ruling and exercising jurisdiction. The story that I have tried to reconstruct reveals the distinction between politics as the art of preserving a

respublica, in the sense of a community of individuals living together in justice, and politics as the art of the state – the art of preserving a state, in the sense of a person’s or group’s power and control over public institutions (for instance the *stato* of the Medici). Undoubtedly, the concept of state was also used to mean dominion in general and in this sense it included the concept of republic as a particular form of dominion. However, odd as it may sound to us, the contrast between the state *of* somebody, and republic, was a fundamental component of the language of politics in early modern Italy. As is often the case, we must leave aside for a moment our mental habits, if we want to understand that “state” [*stato*] and “republic” were used in some instances as mutually exclusive concepts. If a citizen manages to create a network of partisans and to control the government and the magistrates, the city can no longer be said to belong to the citizens as a whole. It is no longer a republic, but the state *of* someone – a creation of the art of the state, not of politics. The art of the state and the art of the republic aim at establishing and preserving two alternative arrangements of public life. Historically, as I hope to show, the art of the state was the antagonist of politics and the predecessor of reason of state.

Latini’s *Livres dou Tresor* (1266) and Botero’s *Della Ragion di Stato* (1586) can be regarded as convenient milestones in the story. Latini elaborated the definition of politics that constituted the nucleus of the conventional language of politics until the sixteenth century; Botero forged the definition of reason of state that was later to become the core of the new language of politics. The two definitions – of politics as the art of ruling a republic according to justice and reason, and of reason of state as the knowledge of the means of preserving and enlarging a state – reveal at first glance the difference between the two arts – a difference that concerns the ends as well as the means. In the case of politics, the aim is the republic; in the case of reason of state the goal is the state, regardless of its origins and its legitimacy. The goal of politics has to be preserved through justice and reason; the goal of reason of state can be pursued by any means.

The presence of the term “reason” in both Latini’s and Botero’s definitions does not imply a conceptual affinity. Rather, it signals another important difference. In the definition of politics, “reason” stands for the Ciceronian reason – the *recta ratio* – which teaches us the universal principles of equity that must govern our decisions in legislating, counselling, ruling and administering justice. In the case

of reason of state, “reason” has an instrumental sense, meaning the capacity to calculate the appropriate means of preserving the state. Certainly, both the advocates of politics and the champions of reason of state praised prudence as a fundamental virtue of rulers. However, for the former, prudence was understood as *recta ratio in agibilium*, and therefore never to be detached from justice. For the latter, prudence was the capacity to decide what is most appropriate for the preservation of the state. Ludovico Zuccolo, one of the most perceptive theorists of reason of state, admitted that one can speak of the tyrant’s prudence; however, no civic humanist would have agreed: the tyrant may be cunning or shrewd, but never prudent.

The language of politics and that of reason of state were not incommensurable, but the transition from politics to reason of state was a profound change in the manner of speaking about, and thinking of, politics. It could be said that this entailed a mere change of vocabulary. I would respond that it was indeed a matter of words, but would add that words were used to sustain, advocate or condemn political practices, and that the whole story is one of a profound change in the common way of assessing and interpreting politics.

It would be naive to believe that before the triumph of reason of state political action was always good, and rulers, princes and citizens were only committed to the common good. Brunetto Latini, and later humanist political writers, were rhetoricians who deliberately produced eulogistic definitions of politics. In their writings, they aimed to persuade their readers to pursue a praiseworthy ideal. Those who wrote about the art of the state and reason of state were instead describing actual political life. It is, then, plausible to consider the transition from politics to reason of state as a salutary passage from political rhetoric to a realistic view of politics. Who would seriously deny that Machiavelli’s *Prince* or Guicciardini’s *Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze* are an enormous philosophical and intellectual improvement on Palmieri’s *Vita Civile* or Bruni’s *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*?

We should not forget, however, that the theorists of reason of state, just like the humanist rhetoricians, also intended to sustain, advocate or invoke particular courses of political action. It would, then, be misleading to characterize the distinction between politics and reason of state as a contrast between a persuasive and a realistic definition of politics. Historically, the contrast was between two ideologies that were meant to uphold certain political practices and condemn others. An obvious example is that all the advocates of the art of the state

justified, and indeed invoked, the policy of distributing offices and money to the friends of the prince; in contrast, all the advocates of politics as the art of the republic condemned it as the most corrupt practice.

History, and life, are more complex than definitions and concepts, and this holds true also for the concepts of politics and reason of state. The distinction does not exclude overlappings. Just as republics were also states, politics, at times, overlapped with the art of the state. A republic is a state *vis à vis* other states and their subjects, if it possesses a dominion, as was the case with Florence. Moreover, the republic is also a state in the sense of a power structure built upon the apparatus of coercion. In dealing with other states, subjects or rebels, the representatives of the republic may easily find themselves “necessitated,” as they used to say, to apply the same rules of the art of the state: fighting unjustly an unjust war, treating the subjects harshly, repressing a rebellion with cruelty. The most perceptive theorists of Renaissance Italy, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, clearly spelled out the need for a ruler to be prepared to use both the art of good government and the art of the state.

The theoretical and practical overlappings between politics and the art of the state do not alter the fact, however, that the two ideologies competed in the Italian scenario as fundamental enemies, even if they did occasionally look at each other with interest or even fascination. There was not, and there could not be, room for both: either the city of all and for all, or the state (*stato*) of someone.

In Italy, it turned out to be the state of someone. The free city-republics were superseded by principalities and tyrannies, and the language of politics was supplanted by that of reason of state. The transition took the form of a process of exhaustion: the language of politics gradually became obsolete. After all, what was the point of using it in a principality or in a tyranny? Neither the prince nor the subjects had any reason to do so. Instead of speaking the language of politics, the rulers and their counselors, as well as the scholars, began to speak openly the language of the art of the state. Originally regarded as an inferior practice, the art of the state had, by the end of the sixteenth century, assumed a respectable role. It was recognized as “the new politics,” later simply as “politics.”

The story that I have tried to portray deals only with Italy and focuses only on a particular issue. It neither pretends to have a world-wide scope, nor to cover the whole ideological history of Italy

from the Middle Ages to the late Renaissance. We have available now scholarly studies that provide us with excellent comprehensive surveys of the period in which the transition from politics to reason of state took place. We have also available studies that have substantially enriched our knowledge of the major political thinkers of early modern Italy. To my knowledge, however, a story of the intellectual and ideological transition from the notion of politics as art of the republic to politics as reason of state has not yet been written. Like other stories, it occurred in part independently of the intentions of those who actually contributed to its occurrence. When Guicciardini introduced the concept of reason of state in the *Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze* he meant to point out to the intellectual pupils of Cicero that justice is not enough to preserve republics which hold dominions. Nevertheless, he made available a concept that confirmed a pre-existing set of beliefs and practices and was soon to become the nucleus of a new understanding of politics. By not using the word *politico* when he spoke about the art of the state, and by using it only for the art of the republic, Machiavelli helped instead to preserve the conventional republican meaning of politics. Whether he did so deliberately or not, we shall probably never know. And it is not terribly important to know. What matters is that he used different vocabularies for politics and the art of the state and used both consistently.

The transition from politics to reason of state is, I think, an important story that compels us to reconsider several long-established interpretations of the origins and transformation of the modern language of politics such as the idea that the modern history of politics begins with the Aristotelian renaissance of the second half of the thirteenth century. Before the diffusion of the Latin translations of Aristotle's *Politics*, the Ciceronian tradition of political virtues and Roman "civil wisdom" had already provided the basic idioms of a shared language of politics. Even after the acquisition of the main body of Aristotle's political thought, the Ciceronian tradition and Roman civil philosophy continued to be one of the major components of the conventional notion of politics and political man.

We should also reconsider the image – this, too, a commonplace – that the Quattrocento was above all the century of the *querelle* between civic humanists and advocates of the life of solitude, between the bards of the beauty of civil life and its critics. All this is true, yet it is also true that the fifteenth century witnessed the ascent of the art of

the state as the practice and ideology that was later to supplant the language of politics. The contrast between republic and state was no less important a feature of the ideological panorama of the time than the well-documented contrast between civil and contemplative life.

The distinction between politics and art of the state is also important to understand the historical meaning of the notion of reason of state. What was the point of forging this new concept? What sort of practices was it intended to sustain? To answer these questions we have to consider the conventional language of politics of the time and focus on the fact that politics held the monopoly of reason: ruling in justice, shaping just laws, framing and preserving good political constitutions were, in fact, regarded as the most genuine achievements of reason. The practices of the art of the state could claim no rational justification. Given the identification of politics and reason, the only way to provide some sort of justification for the art of the state was to invent another reason and assert the impossibility of ignoring it. Waging an unjust war, treating the citizens unjustly, using public institutions for private purposes – all practices that the language of politics regarded as contrary to reason – attained, through the new concept of reason of state, a justification of some sort. They were no longer practices that contravened the principles of reason, but practices accomplished on behalf of a new notion of reason: the reason of the states.

We cannot understand the birth of the modern concept of reason of state by looking at its Roman equivalents (*ratio publicae utilitatis*, *ratio necessitatis*). Even though the words are similar, their meaning is different. To understand what Guicciardini meant to say when he used the term reason of state, we have to take into account the context of the conventional language of civil philosophy. He resorted to the locution “reason of the states” to point out the fundamental incompleteness of the current language of politics which granted the blessing of reason only to ruling in justice and making just laws and well ordered constitutions. In putting the term “reason of the states” in the mouth of his spokesman in the *Dialogo del reggimento*, Guicciardini intended to criticize the conventional language of politics, and advocate the necessity of practices hitherto regarded as repugnant to reason. He ultimately meant to justify the state as a product of mere force, and to absolve its art, the art of the state.

As with the language of politics, the language of reason of state also underwent developments and transformations. From the formulation

of Guicciardini to the definition of Botero, an important change took place. While Guicciardini had explicitly pointed to the illegitimate origin of all states (with the exception of republics, in the strict sense of the community of citizens), Botero assumed the existence of the states as a fact. From the perspective of reason of state, it is irrelevant whether the state is legitimate or not. As a result, the concept of state was rescued from the negative connotations that had accompanied it during the intellectual hegemony of civil philosophy. Endowed with its own reason, the state attained a respectable status. It was ultimately the reason of force, the force of those who had been capable of founding and consolidating states, a reason perhaps less splendid than the reason of politics, but certainly more powerful.

Both the language of politics and that of reason of state were the product of many hands, though some philosophers or political writers left a stronger mark than others. In discussing their works, my main concern has been to ascertain how they contributed to the formation of the notion of politics, or, conversely, how they sustained the rise of the language of reason of state.

Brunetto Latini, for instance, emerges as a central character in the story, as the writer who condensed in a general definition the notion of politics that had emerged from the tradition of political virtues and the Roman "civil wisdom." His pupil Dante expanded the concept of politics as the art of ruling in justice into the art of founding and preserving right political constitutions, thereby summarizing one of the main innovations produced by the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Politics*.

Baldus of Ubaldis distinguishes himself as one of the main exponents of the notion of politics as art of the city. By assimilating politics to "civil discipline", the science of justice, he continued the Roman tradition of civil philosophy and paved the way for the humanist identification of politics and legislation.

Coluccio Salutati, in spite of his intellectual and ideological uncertainties, emerges as the author of the humanist manifesto of politics as the highest expression of human rationality which alone can create the conditions within which men can enjoy civil happiness. Later Humanists like Leon Battista Alberti and Poggio Bracciolini perceptively observed the increasing prominence of the art of the state and the gradual obsolescence of the language of politics.

Machiavelli's *Prince*, to cite the most illustrious example, is a work on the art of the state, not on politics, as he understood the word. Still,

if we consider the whole body of his political works, Machiavelli appears to be one of the most robust defenders of the notion of politics as art of the republic, and not the spiritual father of the idea of politics as reason of state, as he is almost universally credited to have been. Francesco Guicciardini, another illustrious character in the story, advocated the necessity of integrating the art of the republic with the art of the state – as his friend Machiavelli did – but also championed a conventional interpretation of the art of the state. Much more than Machiavelli, he may be regarded as the symbol of a transitional epoch: throughout his life he remained attached to the ideals of civility, and yet was the creator of the concept of reason of state.

Donato Giannotti was not the abstract imitator of classical doctrines that he has been labeled, but a thinker who tried to prove that the art of the republic can successfully compete with the art of the state on the very grounds of stability and order where the art of the state had attained its most brilliant triumphs. He embarked on the revision of the art of the state having in view a specific political project. Trajano Boccalini, to cite the last example, was not just the ironic satirist of the political life of the counter-reformation, but also one of the first writers who acknowledged, albeit reluctantly, that politics had assumed the meaning of reason of state, and who understood the ideological and political implications of this process.

When the transition was completed, the language of civil philosophy had ceased to be the conventional language of politics. It had become a sort of language of nostalgia or utopia – a language apt to dream about republics of the past or to long for a republic to come. At the same time, the language of the art of the state attained, step by step, a predominant position. It became an important component of the advice-for-princes books and assumed the respectable name of reason of state. “Reason of state” later became the synonym of political prudence itself. It was, however, a prudence separated from justice and the law, unlike the old notion of politics. The concept of politics that emerged from the experience of the city-republics was the intellectual daughter of Law and Ethics; the politics of the age of the principalities and tyrannies repudiated the connection with them both.

I hope that the story that I have tried to reconstruct helps us understand an important phase of modern political thought. I also hope that the study of the past might help to elaborate a theory that permits us to understand politics better and to prefigure a

conception of politics to which it is worth committing ourselves. In the "Epilogue," I venture to offer some suggestions for a possible alternative to current theories of politics. Those who are only interested in the story may disregard the "Epilogue"; those who are interested in the theory may disregard the story. My personal preference is for a theory rooted in history.