

'Merkiavelli' – European Politics in the Real World?

Written by Günter Walzenbach

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GÜNTER WALZENBACH, JAN 3 2014

Over the last 500 years no writer has been more explicit about the nature of real world politics than Niccolò Machiavelli. In his most popularly known work *The Prince* he explores the key strategies necessary to get hold of power, and perhaps more importantly, how to keep it once acquired. For this reason, it may not come as a surprise that several commentators have connected the anniversary of this publication with Angela Merkel's third term in office as Chancellor of the German Federal Republic.

Most prominently, the sociologist Ulrich Beck, went so far as to suggest the term 'Merkiavelli' to depict the ways in which a Christian Democratic politician uses her political talent to fundamentally transform power relations in Europe and the European Union. In his account the political affinity between Machiavelli's *Prince* and Chancellor Merkel emerges due to various opportunities created by the chaos surrounding the global financial crisis and its severe repercussions on the manageability of the Euro. Aiming ultimately for a 'German Europe', the 'Merkiavelli' model hinges on the combination of four key elements: (i) an indeterminate yes and no policy as to the availability of further bailouts for heavily indebted EU member states; (ii) a deliberate exercise of hesitation on the part of the German government with the purpose to use economic power as a form of coercion; (iii) the selective application of neo-liberal or social-democratic policy principles depending on whether the Chancellor acts at home or abroad; and (iv) a focused attempt to extend the German stability culture and austerity policy via a fiscal compact to the whole of the EU.

In the world of Machiavelli, proceeding in this way would constitute a natural reflex by political actors to arising opportunities. The resulting pressures and conditions for reform are a mere necessity to maintain their status and influence. It is imperative for any form of political leadership to showcase responsiveness in cases of emergency or during challenging times. Ideally, the exercise of authority comes with appreciation and affection by others, although it must not hesitate to use fear and coercion if need be. Above all, in this classic interpretation, political life is a question of general 'fortune' (or fortuna) and the 'virtuosity' (or virtù) of an individual actor to master any particular circumstances.

Yet, as with Machiavelli's thought in general, the case of Merkel's European policy could have worrying consequences since her identified method violates (not just in Ulrich Beck's view) the basic normative principles along which a European society might eventually develop. On the other hand, the rich thought that the author of *The Prince* exposed offers several directions of thinking and, hence, room for competing interpretations. This, by the way, was also the insight offered by leading experts on the Italian theoretician at last year's annual meeting of the *Italian Political Science Association* (SISP).

Frequently, the demands for far-reaching economic reforms within Southern Europe as part of the implementation process of financial rescue packages are seen as credible only if accompanied by a greater concentration of power among the net contributors. But can it be that mere procrastination forms the basis of Merkel's power? Germany provides for about a third of the financial resources spent on the rescue of the single currency. It furthermore contributes a substantial 10 billion Euros to the annual EU budget of about 135 billion Euros. Despite this, it remains doubtful whether the Federal Government is skilful enough to translate economic prowess into immediate political influence. Responsibilities of EU policy-making within the ministerial bureaucracy are dispersed, and Merkel's immediate support structure, the Chancellery, does hold a mere co-ordination role for EU matters. Indeed, the

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legalistic German negotiation style, turf battles between individual ministries and a neglect of lobbying activity vis-à-vis Commission officials form clear obstacles to one-sided power politics.

What matters more in Machiavellian thought is the 'hereditary principle'. If one is to understand political change, one has to look into the starting point of political agency. In the case of Merkel and the Euro, the Maastricht Treaty and the European policy of Helmut Kohl did set the scene for what followed. The Treaty on Economic and Monetary Union, like any other piece of legislation, was made by governments acting under 'necessity', and specified upper limits for official government debt at 60 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the members of the Eurozone. With Greece, Italy, France and Spain regularly overshooting these goalposts by huge margins (300-500 per cent) in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Chancellor Merkel found herself in a constellation where 'fortune' forced her to act. Rather than doing 'what should be done' – the further mutualisation of debt through Eurobonds – she chose 'what is (typically) done' by leaving long term solutions to separate EU decision-making processes. These then privileged framework solutions, either of an intergovernmental nature or of a peculiar contractual form between the crisis countries and the Commission.

However, if Merkel's political instincts were truly guided by Machiavelli, she clearly mishandled the rescue efforts for the single currency. Her art of delegation was not flawless, as the backlash from austerity primarily was targeted at her person. Arguably, the dirty job was left in the hands of her long-serving Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, devising emergency responses within the Euro-Group. In contrast to advice the Florentine would have given, he remained in his post while repeating that there is no contradiction between fiscal consolidation and economic growth. In multi-level systems like the EU, thus, it seems close to impossible to proceed along the calculus suggested in *The Prince* mainly due to the complex delegation patterns we find there. In addition, the bitter medicine prescribed by Merkel's second in command, was hardly of his making alone or a question of his Swabian personality. The calls for increasing competitiveness, a more flexible labour market or the adjustment of pension systems and the reduction of structural deficits, have been made by protagonists in Northern European countries and by International Economic Organizations as well.

Above all, Machiavelli's prime concern is with the practice of politics. In his view political analysis needs to look into the actual reasons for particular actions. Otherwise successful lesson-drawing will not be possible. As a key element, any political leader needs to be aware of 'the passions of the moment'. At an early stage of the Eurocrisis Merkel and her entourage become aware of the risks of a Brussels majority in favour of a transfer union, potentially forming under French leadership. Hence, the prioritisation of a counter-model with the European Stabilisation Mechanism (ESM) at its heart and a door kept wide open for a long-term project centred on Fiscal Union. Here German policy positions may have understood better than Machiavelli himself the real dangers of bringing about reform and new guiding principles in times of great uncertainty. The Italian theorist reverted to ideas such as 'necessity', 'fortune' and 'virtue'; whereas contemporary political science would stress that the resulting political conflicts are unlikely to be settled in the absence of working institutional arrangements. For this reason, association of states (as 'Republics') need modern governance arrangements that offer flexibility and adaptability while simultaneously enabling purposeful policy making.

With the benefit of hindsight, one more general factor is worth mentioning in reflecting on the 'Merkiavelli' model. Recent studies in the tradition of the Florentine indicate that behavioural patterns of political leaders are easily susceptible to his teachings regardless of particular political leanings or ideological persuasions. Yet, the distinct institutional environment of the European Union formed over decades around democratic deliberation, group consensus and networked communication makes it next to impossible to have the hidden agendas characteristic for autocratic leaders. In this sense, Machiavelli has achieved one of his prime intentions: the manual for worldly power is publicly available and for everyone to see.

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