No one can approach Machiavelli without having to face a certain number of stereotypes: Machiavelli as the incarnation of evil in politics; a plagiariser, an incoherent and opportunistic author; an inaccurate historian, a poor interpreter of his time and a superficial expert in the art of politics, because he lacked adequate analytical tools for understanding the deep functioning of social organisation. These stereotypes, which began to form almost five centuries ago, have been refashioned accordingly through the ages. Today we observe that economic discourse is being used to express and legitimate politics – as if the economic fatality were the supreme law; it comes as no surprise that we find a major emphasis on Machiavelli’s supposed lack of any genuine insight into economics.

In 1989, the French historian of ideas Michel Senellart offered a positive revaluation of the early modern doctrine of the raison d’État, taking into account the new role devoted to economics. In his short book titled Machiavélisme et Raison d’État, he argues: ‘Economy appears as an intrinsic component of the Raison d’État before becoming an autonomous discipline in the 18th century. Economy appears instead to be totally absent from the thought of Machiavelli, for whom, in a well constituted republic, the State ought to be rich and the citizens ought to be poor (D I.37).’ Strikingly, Senellart illustrates his uncompromising judgement with an example suggesting that Machiavelli had a distinct vision of the relationship between public and private wealth. In a note, he adds: ‘Here again the comparison with Aristotle is tempting: “Impoverishing the subjects is a method that constitutes tyranny”’. The evidence used to support his radical conclusion therefore has another purpose: to suggest the evil intention of an author who allegedly aspires to leave the people in a state of poverty.

This renewed evaluation of the doctrine of raison d’État was based on the lecture On Governmentality that Michel Foucault delivered at the Collège de
France in 1978. It finds itself in agreement with Michael Stolleis’ study on *raison d'état* and public finances in the modern age. Furthermore, it is influenced by Carl Schmitt’s interpretation of political modernity, and specifically the theories on ‘the successive stages of changing central domains’ and ‘the turning toward economics’. Finally, this revaluation meets the criticism that the German jurist addressed in 1926 to *The Doctrine of Raison d'État and Its Place in Modern History* (1924) written by his fellow countryman Friedrich Meinecke.

Meinecke had reduced Machiavelli to Machiellianism and to *raison d'état*. He depicted the author of *Il Principe* as the progenitor of power politics and, eventually, went as far as charging Machiavelli with responsibility for the Nazi regime: by lifting the veil of secrecy and mystery that had long shrouded the practise of power, Machiavelli had spread a poison, and in liberating this esoteric knowledge, more properly reserved to an aristocracy, he made possible a mass Machiavellianism, whose potential the German Third Reich turned into reality in the most horrible way. In agreement with Meinecke, Carl Schmitt reproached Machiavelli for having reduced politics to a technique, by enervating that element of transcendence and mystery that befits authority in the ecclesial model. However, he suggested separating Machiavelli’s modernity from the tradition of *raison d'état*, which is concerned instead with preserving authority. What was at stake then was freeing *raison d'état* from the moral accusation of Machiavellianism, and rediscovering the medieval roots of its ‘logical-juridical’ aspect, neglected by Meinecke.

Reading Meinecke’s book on *The Doctrine of Raison d'État*, which appeared in a French translation in 1973, brought Michel Foucault to a peculiar redefinition of his view of Machiavelli, as if Claude Lefort’s major piece of Machiavellian scholarship, published one year earlier, had been neutralised by Meinecke’s new translation. Foucault’s lesson *On Governmentality* clearly shows this. In his terms, Machiavelli is noteworthy essentially for the counter-discourse that he generated. To *Il Principe*, understood as a treatise on the prince’s ability to preserve his own State through the manipulation of power relationships, this counter-discourse opposes the arts of government. As a genre within the history of political literature, the arts of government represent, according to Foucault, the constructive moment of anti-Machiavellian reaction. The genre therefore leads, through the discourse on the *raison d'état*, to the emancipation of political economy as an autonomous discipline.

5 Schmitt 1926.