The Different Faces of the People: On Machiavelli’s Political Topography

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1 The Apparition of the People

The aim of this paper is to extract from Machiavelli’s discussion of the ‘nature’ of the people (popolo) several important theoretical elements, which haunted and continue to haunt modern political thought, and in particular every political theory meant to project the building of a unitary political form (the State) which, as Weber stated, possesses the legitimate monopoly of the legitimate monopoly of violence.1 This attempt is determined by the conviction that Machiavelli’s reflection on the idea of the people does not only create a radical discontinuity with medieval tradition, but also presents a radical alternative to mainstream modern political theory, whose birth can be traced back to the Hobbesian theory of sovereignty.2

I will try to demonstrate that a very relevant part of Machiavelli’s thought is focused on the strategies by which the people reveals itself within a historical framework, determined by a specific conjuncture, and by doing this it contributes to the construction of a new political order, although permanently unstable. As a point of departure, we could say that Machiavelli describes the people as a precarious and changeable union of different singularities, occupying a common space and often sharing the same passions – or, at least, being intertwined by strong emotional ties, even if at times conflictual. Therefore, the people can strengthen its internal connections by the acquisition of a

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1 A previous attempt to examine this issue has been made in Visentin 2012.

2 This interpretation is shared by other scholars, e.g. by Marco Geuna, who writes: ‘Machiavelli succeeds in developing a totally new and peculiar consideration on conflicts, which places him in a position of radical discontinuity with the ancient and medieval tradition of western political thought; but, at the same time, also in a marginal position within the modern political project, from Bodin to Hobbes and onwards, centred on the role of sovereign power and on the neutralisation of conflict’ (Geuna 2012, p. 109; my translation). What Geuna says about Machiavelli’s reflection on conflicts can also be said about his analysis of the nature of the people, which is to be considered an exception within political modernity. On Machiavelli’s solitude in the history of modern political thought see Althusser 1998.
shared imagination and a collective practise, which is expressed through different figures, but never gives birth to an artificial unity. In other words, we can say that Machiavelli’s people – just like the new prince (principe nuovo) – has no substantial reality, since it only exists insofar as it appears on the political scene: it is exactly what it seems to be, and its modality of actions is completely determined by the specific image it assumes while coming into view.3

First I will take into account *The Prince* and the *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*, concluding with a reference to book III of the *Florentine Histories*, whose analysis will allow a more in depth discussion of the conceptual frame previously sketched out; in fact, whereas the ‘faces’ of the people emerging from *The Prince* and the *Discourses* are positive (even with an ambivalent character), the face presented by the *Florentine Histories* is negative (although also ambivalent), and this gives us the opportunity to re-examine the entire topic in a different light.4 Many scholars already noticed that the Machiavellian discussion on the nature of the people has no historical dimension (and certainly not a sociological one), but is eminently a political issue, since the people, as Fabio Frosini recently wrote, occupies a political space which is ‘structurally disputable (and thus not yet decided), homogeneous (and thus egalitarian) and common’.5 In other words, the people owns an identity and a substance only insofar as it presents itself – making itself visible – on the political scene: in strict analogy with the new prince, also the people is what it appears to be – and acts insofar as it appears with a definite figure; we could also say that there is nothing like an idea of the people – or a people like an ideal). To become visible means to have the possibility of occupying a political space, thus producing effects which can influence other political actors – and on the contrary, the possibility to be influenced and modified by them. This emergence of the people, i.e. its becoming visible, can essentially happen in different ways, depending on the historical and political circumstances.

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4 Another relevant topic could be the analysis of the people in arms – or better: the people as army – discussed by Machiavelli in *The Art of War*, where the importance of discipline as a political tool is clearly highlighted.

5 Frosini 2010, p. 104 (my translation).