

RES POPULI CLUB

STRATEGY

ACTION 1. THE FORMULA OF LIBERTY. COMMON PREJUDICES THAT WE WILL HAVE TO FACE AND PROPOSALS AND ARGUMENTS TO OVERCOME THEM. COMMENTS ON TEXTS OF MACHIAVELLI

By Felipe Ureta Redshaw
Membership Officer of the Res Populi Club of Spain

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<p>Action 1: Promote the formula of liberty in each country as a new way of organization for villages, cities, regions and the state, as well as for private associations.</p>

Common prejudices:

1. Executive power must be exercised by one person and for several years. That person must appoint and dismiss his or her collaborators.
2. The heads of the parties must propose candidates for public office and these, once elected, must answer to them.
3. The people must only elect the members of the legislative assembly, they must not elect the head of the executive or his collaborators, nor the judges.
4. The people do not understand the issues debated by their representatives because they are very complex, and they must not vote on laws.

Our proposals and arguments:

1. Executive power must be exercised by different people and only for one year (annual rotation). Each position must be exercised by two or more persons (collegiality) and in a predetermined order (cursus honorum). These persons must be elected by the people.
2. Candidates for public office must stand for election in their own name (non-partisan elections) and once elected must answer only to the people.
3. The people must elect the members of the legislative assembly, the holders of executive office and judges separately (separation of powers). In addition, the parties to a dispute must choose by common agreement the judge or judges who will decide their case.
4. The people have a full understanding of the issues discussed by their representatives and must vote on laws (direct democracy).

Comments on texts of Machiavelli:

Text: Discourses on Livy (1517), Book 1, Chapter 58, *The multitude is wiser and more constant than a prince* (Book 1, Chapter 58), excerpts:

“I conclude therefore, **contrary to the common opinion which says that the people, when it is sovereign, is changeable and ungrateful**, affirming that **there are no more of these defects in it than there are in particular princes**: and to accuse the people and the princes together can be the truth; but to except the princes would be a deception: **for a people that commands and is well organized will be stable, prudent, grateful, and not otherwise than a prince, or even better than a prince**, although he be esteemed wise.”

“I say that a people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince: and not without reason is the voice of the people like that of God, for a universal opinion is seen gets marvellous results in its forecasts, so that it would seem that by some hidden virtue, evil or good is foreseen.”

“As to the judging of things, it is rarely seen that when they hear two speakers who hold opposite views, if they are of equal virtue, they do not take up the better opinion, and they are capable of seeing the truth in what they hear.”

“It will also be seen that in the election of their magistrates, they make by far a better selection than a prince, for a people will never be persuaded that it is better to bring to that dignity a man of infamous and corrupt habits: to which a prince may be persuaded easily and in a thousand ways.”

“In addition to this, it will be seen that the cities where the people is sovereign, make the greatest progress in the shortest time and much greater than those who have always been under a prince, as Rome did after the driving out of the kings, and Athens did after they were free of Pisistratus. Which cannot arise except from the fact that governments of the people are better than those of princes.”

Comments:

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) is considered the father of modern political science. He is better known for *The Prince* (1513) than for his *Discourses on Livy* (1517). In *The Prince* he describes the evil means or procedures used by princes to conquer and maintain power, and justifies them. In his *Discourses on Livy* he defends liberty and reveals himself as a passionate republican. Scholars have discussed how to reconcile the two books. Some see contradiction, others do not. I believe that there is no contradiction: Machiavelli was a republican at heart, but he was a realist and pragmatist and he accommodated himself to the principate.

One of Machiavelli's great achievements was his binary classification of the forms of government, taken from the Romans. At the beginning of *The Prince*, he says: “All states, all powers, that have held and hold rule over men have been and are either republics or principates”. This classification inspires us. Either liberty or servitude: that is the question. The Romans were clear about this, which is why they were fierce enemies of monarchy - at least during the republic; unfortunately, when the republic went into crisis, most of them abandoned their principles, submitted to a prince and never regained their liberty again. The Greek ternary classification (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) is confusing. On the one hand, it justifies monarchy, which is the antithesis of liberty, and aristocracy, which is the liberty of a few, by putting them on the same level as democracy, which is the liberty of all. The distinction between a good and a bad form (monarchy/tyranny, aristocracy/oligarchy) contributes to this justification. As for democracy, the authors do not agree on the names: for Aristotle, democracy is the bad form versus πολιτεία (politeia), which is the good form; for Polybius, democracy is the good form versus ochlocracy, which is the bad form. If we compare the ternary classification with the binary one, monarchy corresponds to the principate, and aristocracy and democracy correspond to the republic, which means that in reality aristocracy and democracy are not two different forms, but two variants of the same form. On the other hand, the theory of the cyclical succession of forms of government (monarchy/tyranny, aristocracy/oligarchy, democracy/ochlocracy and back to the starting point) is rarely fulfilled in reality. In contemporary times, the most frequent evolution has been from a hereditary principate (monarchy) to an elective principate (modern republic) and from any of these to a principate by force (dictatorship), three variants of the same form.

Today it is common to think that Machiavelli's binary classification is outdated, but this is not the case: the parliamentary system of government, whether in a monarchy (e.g. Britain) or a republic (e.g. Germany), is a principate; the presidential one (e.g. United States), because of its separation of powers, is a mixture of principate and republic; the semi-presidential one (e.g. France), as a variant of the parliamentary, is also a principate; the directorial one (e.g. Switzerland) is a collective principate. In the private sphere, associations are all principates under simplified forms of parliamentary or presidential government. Where are the republics in the sense Machiavelli gave to this term, i.e. the classical republics? They have disappeared. People no longer believe in them. A classical republic is the government of the people, not the government of an elected prince ("est igitur res publica res populi", writes Cicero in his dialogue *On the Republic*).

One of Machiavelli's mistakes was to believe that a prince could be useful to liberty. At the end of *The Prince* he calls for a prince to unify Italy and free it from foreign rule. In his *Proposal for the Reform of the State of Florence* (1522), he tried to convince Cardinal Julius de Medici, the future Pope Clement VII, to establish a republic in Florence. His attempt was unsuccessful. And it was logical: a prince and his followers would never support the cause of liberty: it is contrary to their interests. What is the reason for Machiavelli's mistake? I believe that Machiavelli, despite his faith in the republic, had not completely broken the emotional bond with the principate; that is why he still believed in a redeeming prince.

The principate is firmly rooted in the human psyche. And it is so because it is linked to mankind's gregarious instinct, an instinct that it shares with animals. Every flock must have a leader, a chief who dominates the members of the flock and to whom they submit. In animal societies he is the so-called alpha male; in human societies he is the prince, usually a man. That submission is expressed in the form of veneration of the prince, cult of man or of personality, as it is often referred to today. The prince becomes an idol and is the object of cult. This idolatry is inherent in the principate and is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all forms of principate that have existed and continue to exist.

Another error made by Machiavelli was to justify the fact that the prince must do evil in certain circumstances. The error is not in the statement but in the justification. The statement is absolutely true. But to justify it is to accept the inevitability of the principate and to submit to its perverse logic of domination. And this is the error of Machiavelli. That is why his name has been associated with every malevolent form of exercising power and with the maxim "the end justifies the means", which he never explicitly formulated in those terms. However, in Machiavelli's defence, I must say that at least he had the honesty to look at reality squarely in the eye and publicly acknowledge what others either do not acknowledge or, when they do, do so only in private. The prince must preserve, consolidate and expand his power in the face of his adversaries and cannot tolerate criticism, for all criticism is a threat to his power. That is why he pursues and represses his adversaries and critics by all means. If necessary, he will not hesitate to break the law in order to achieve his ends, and he will do so in the strictest secrecy. If, for any reason, his actions come to the knowledge of the people, he will justify himself by saying that he did it for the good of the people.

Locke addresses this issue in his *Treatise on Civil Government* (chapter 14), but unlike Machiavelli, he covers up reality with false arguments. "The prince, says Locke, can do things, at his discretion, when the law does not prescribe anything, and sometimes even against the law, for the good of the people". This is what is called prerogative. Locke disguises evil by presenting it as something the prince can do for the good of the people. The phrase "when the law prescribes nothing" is misleading, because what we are talking about is doing evil, not doing good when the law prescribes nothing; and the phrase "even against the law", although it alludes more directly to the subject at hand, leaves the possibility that the action contrary to the law is morally good. On these equivocal and false arguments is based

the modern justification of official or state secret. A people is not free if they accept that a prince does evil "for their good" and conceals from them the evil he does "for their good". But people everywhere accept this as normal.

The only way out of the vicious circle of the principate is by cutting by the root the emotional bond with the principate and promoting the classical republic. That is the purpose of the Club. And we must not fall into Machiavelli's error and hope that some prince will help us in our endeavour. No head of government, or party leader, or any other official whose power derives from them, is going to make any of the Club's proposals his own. We will only be able to defend and implement them with the support of the people, that is, of individuals who are not bound by a bond of submission to any prince.

In the texts selected above, Machiavelli defends the superiority of the people over the prince, contradicts the false beliefs of people and refutes the widespread prejudice that the people are ignorant, fickle, manipulable and incapable of governing. The people, he says, are wiser and more consistent than the prince, they make better decisions and choose better candidates. These are incontestable truths that no one has ever expressed with such force and sincerity. And he does so not as a deluded idealist, but as a sceptical realist who knows well the human soul in all its greatness and misery.

The dogma of representative government as a great modern innovation, theorised from the experience of British parliamentary government, feeds the prejudice of the people's inability to legislate. It is not true that in antiquity representation was not known, because in Athens and Rome there are examples of representatives elected by neighbourhoods or cities. Nor is it true that representative government is incompatible with direct democracy, since today countries like the USA and Switzerland combine both systems harmoniously. In other countries, unfortunately, legislative power is monopolised by parliaments or congresses at all levels of government, even at the local level, the closest to the citizens; referendums are absolutely exceptional and when one is called, all the prejudices about the people's inability to decide come out, and it is common to hear that referendums are divisive and harmful to democracy. The modern aversion to direct democracy is not based on rational arguments, but on the contempt for the people, an atavistic feeling of humanity from which it has not yet been liberated, contempt that is expressed in pejorative words such as mob, common people, mass, and the now so recurrent: populism.

What is a sovereign and well-organised people? A free people governed by a constitution that sets out the three requirements of the formula of liberty (annual rotation of executive offices, separation of powers and direct democracy). Machiavelli's claims of the superiority of the people over the prince are only valid if these three requirements are met. If they are not met, the people are not free. This is what Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" says, according to which, in any organisation, however democratic it may be, the leader and his entourage end up dominating the members. This law should be called the "iron law of the principate", because at the head of the oligarchy there is always a man. The domination of the oligarchy occurs precisely because no modern organisation, whether public or private, applies the three requirements of the formula of liberty. It is enough for one organisation to decide to apply these three requirements for Michels' iron law to cease to be valid immediately. The Res Populi Club is the first organisation in centuries to apply the three requirements of the formula of liberty. We have broken the curse. Now we have to make the formula known and hope that other organisations will follow our example.