

# EARLY MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT: FROM CIVIL REASON TO REASON OF STATE

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AMIRA ALOUI

The present paper will be addressing the political philosophy of *Raison d'État* that started to emerge in the early modern era, marking a transition, or rather a shift from the Ciceronian political heritage of the republics and the city-states. The concept Reason of State became the key word in the political literature of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries continental Europe. The idea of the state, its origin, and forms started to become recurrent in political theorists leading to the emergence of an extensive body of political literature on the state, its reason, its secrets or what is known at the age as *arcana imperii*. With Reason of State, a new political philosophy started to take shape, one that is radically different from previous dictum, centring on the preservation of the state – the state of the prince rather than the people – erasing the latter's agency and leading to the parallel formation of the early modern subject, the legal or contractual subject.

## REASON OF STATE AND MODERN POLITICS

The shift to Reason of State is probably due to absolutism and absolutist monarchy that were prevalent in the continent. It is, thus, no surprise that the state and *étatisme* as such have become central to the politics of early modern Europe. A new political language, hence, started to emerge. Quentin Skinner in the first volume of *The Foundations of Early Modern Political Thought* signals a shift in his analysis of early modern politics from history to historical semantics to argue for the rise of *étatisme* in early modern Europe:

The clearest sign that a society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is, I take it, that a new vocabulary comes to be generated, in terms of which the concept is then articulated and discussed. So I treat it as a decisive confirmation of my central thesis that by the end of the sixteenth century, at least in England or France, we find the words "State" and l'État beginning to be used for the first time in their modern sense.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), x.

As Skinner shows, in the previous citation, *étatisme* and the art of politics or the state became part of the collective (political) consciousness of early moderns.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to start by demystifying the term despite its nuanced nature. The theory can be defined in very simple terms. The locution was first used by the Italian Giovanni Botero in *Della Ragion di Stato*, who played a key role in rethinking *étatisme* and its reason:

State is a stable ruler over a people and Reason of State is the knowledge of the means by which such a dominion may be founded, preserved and extended. Yet, although in the widest sense the term includes all these, it is concerned most nearly with extension than with foundation; for Reason of State assumes a ruler and a State (the one as artificer, the other as his material) whereas they are not assumed – indeed they are preceded – by foundation entirely and in part by extension.<sup>3</sup>

The definition provided by Botero is to some extent the broadest and most accepted, or in other words, the most neutral definition provided by contemporaries. Many early modern theorists in the continent wrote on Reason of State, including Machiavelli,<sup>4</sup> Jean Bodin,<sup>5</sup> Francesco Guicciardini,<sup>6</sup> Michel de Montaigne,<sup>7</sup> Justus Lipsius,<sup>8</sup> George Buchanan,<sup>9</sup> making the discourse all the more hybrid and the philosophy more mosaic-like. Each offered a different conception of the theory.

Reason of State can be defined as the means which rulers seek to employ so as to ensure the preservation of the state – in most cases tyranny – which is, in turn, the high-

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<sup>2</sup> I talk further about the transition from Ciceronianism and civil reason to Reason of State and the art of politics in my paper: "The Rotten State of Denmark: The Discourse of Reason of State in Shakespeare's Hamlet," *Polish Journal of English Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 7–19, [http://pjes.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PJES\\_7-1\\_1\\_Amira\\_Aloui.pdf](http://pjes.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PJES_7-1_1_Amira_Aloui.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State and The Greatness of Cities*, trans. Pamela Joan Waley and Daniel Philip Waley, introd. Robert Peterson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Book, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, trans. J. M. Tooley (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Guicciardini, *The Maxims of Francesco Guicciardini*, trans. Emma Martin (New York: Forgotten Books, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. Michael Andrew Screech (London: Penguin Classics, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Lipsius Justus, *Politica: Six Books of Politics or Political Instruction*, trans. Jan Waszink (Drenthe: Royal Van Gorcum, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> George Buchanan, *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos; A Dialogue Concerning the Rights of the Crown in Scotland*, trans. Robert Macfarlan (Colorado: Portage Publications, 2016).

est of all goods. Preservation is, hence, a key word. In Reason of State philosophy, the state is mostly that of the prince and not of the people.

Theorists, chiefly, relied on the writings and translations of Tacitus – introducing, therefore, early modern Tacitism. Turbulent political life on the continent explains the rise of Tacitism. Cornelius Tacitus was re-created and re-thought in the political thought of early moderns, associating him with absolutism and tyranny. Ferenc Hörcher argues:

The term Tacitism does not relate to the historical figure of a Roman author with that name, but refers to an early modern, late humanist intellectual “fashion”, which had such a dominant influence, and the name of the concrete author was only used here as a label, as an argument of authority [...] this term referred to that political literature which appeared in the period after the Renaissance, “in which the forbidden name of Machiavelli was replaced by that of Tacitus, who was not at all problematic, but who was regarded acceptable according to contemporary court standards.”<sup>10</sup>

The concept of Reason of State was problematic to some extent. The shift from republicanism and Ciceronian politics and the introduction of the new understanding of politics was controversial. Maurizio Viroli poses the question “which reason is Reason of State?”, and says:

If we go back to the question that I raised at the outset of this paper, namely why political philosophers constructed and put into use the locution ‘ragione di state’, we can answer that they did it because they needed a new concept of reason apt to excuse derogations from moral and civil law imposed by the necessity to preserve or expand states understood as dominions [...] It marked the beginnings of what has been aptly called ‘the politics of the moderns’ as opposed to ‘the politics of the ancients’, that is the view that politics is simply the art of pursuing, securing, expanding power, not, as the ancients and their naive humanist followers seemed (or pretended) to believe, the art of founding and preserving a republic. Whether the transition from the former to the latter conception of politics should be regarded as an intellectual progress or as a decay is a highly contested matter, but it cannot be denied that the transition did indeed take place; and it began when those two words, reason and state were put together.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ferenc Hörcher, “The Renaissance of Political Realism in Early Modern Europe: Giovanni Botero and the Discourse of ‘Reason of State’,” *Krakowskie Studia z Historii Państwa i Prawa* 9, no. 2 (2016): 187–210, <https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/xmlui/handle/item/151311>.

<sup>11</sup> Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics 1250–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Giovanni Botero, a contemporary, prefaces his Reason of State with the following remark:

In Recent years I have been obliged by various circumstances to make journeys, both on my own account and in the service of friends and patrons, and to frequent, more than I should have wished, the courts of kings and great princes, in Italy and beyond the Alps. Among the things that I have observed, I have been greatly astonished to find Reason of State a constant subject of discussion and to hear the opinions of Niccolo Machiavelli and Cornelius Tacitus frequently quoted: the former for his precepts relating to the rule and government of peoples, the latter for his lively description of the arts employed by the Emperor Tiberius in acquiring and retaining the imperial title of Rome.<sup>12</sup>

Reason of State has not been unproblematic to its contemporaries. Its 'immorality' has been denounced by many authors, including Giovanni Botero. However, it had been welcomed as progressive by many theorists, including Francesco Guicciardini and Justus Lipsius, especially for its departure from the ethical aspect of the civil reason of republicanism and the art of the city. Other theorists, including Jean Bodin, note the radical shift of the new political discourse without rejecting. The latter rather point to the inevitability of politics. Richard Tuck notes in this regard the following:

But all that changed decisively during the 1570s: a new kind of humanism became a central and familiar feature of the intellectual landscape. Like all humanisms, this one had its classical texts; in place of Cicero it put the stylistically and morally objectionable figure of *Tacitus* [...] No other Roman writer was such a sceptical and disenchanting commentator on political events. By clearly liberating itself from the model of Cicero, it also disentangled itself from some of the problems which Machiavelli had found.<sup>13</sup>

The new understanding of politics was controversial. To understand the nuances of this controversy, one can turn to the arts, and especially to the drama. Theorists of Reason of State wrote their advice to rulers in the light of the new transition, participating in the political genre advice-for-rulers, also known as mirror-for-princes – a metaphor that has been employed in *Hamlet*.<sup>14</sup> The protagonist produces a play that, he claims, shows the mirror up to Claudius' conscience – an illegitimate ruler, yet the perfect prince according to Reason of State theory. Comparing medicine to political science and examining how

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<sup>12</sup> Botero, *Reason of State*, xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government 1572–1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds., Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2019).

the science of Reason of State started to impose itself in early modern political thought, Peter Burke remarks:

Political behaviour was generally considered to follow rules or principles, so that it could be reduced to maxims or 'aphorisms' (a term associated with the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates and so an extension of the medical metaphor). Like the rise of the reason-of-state genre itself, this work suggests that a serious attempt was being made to put the study of politics on a sound empirical basis by collecting detailed observations in a systematic manner, as was being done in medicine, botany, astronomy, and other disciplines [...]<sup>15</sup>

by doing a quick survey on the dramas written and performed at the time, it would be easy to notice that theatre landed itself on the discussion of Reason of State. The tragedies were devoted to infamous rulers in history, often discussed in the *Annals*. The term Tragedy of the State, hence, would not be an exaggeration.

#### TACITISM AND THE NEW HUMANISM

As I have mentioned above, early modern politics relied on the translations of ancients, including Tacitus Cornelius. An extensive body of political literature started to emerge, negotiating contemporary politics, based on Roman history, especially the history of the republics and city states.<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Tacitus became the protagonist of early modern political philosophy, hence the emergence of early modern Tacitism.

Pre-reason of State politics was understood as the art of *preserving* the state without eclipsing the pursuit of virtues, justice, and equity. The Ciceronian tradition, or in other words, the Christian humanist discourse can be merely defined as 'ruling' or governing "*selon raison et selon justice*."<sup>17</sup> It relies on a repertoire of maxims that ensure liberty and the freedom of the subjects, as they have always been in the city republics. The rise of Tacitism, however, marked a shift from the Ciceronian traditional framework that started waning with the earlier Elizabethan republicanism and ended with Jacobean politics.

Similarly to Reason of State, Tacitism and the argument of absolute authority were controversial. On the one hand, theorists like Francesco Guicciardini encourage the ex-

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Burke, "Tacitism, Scepticism, and Reason of State," in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 477–98.

<sup>16</sup> I talk about Tacitism in more details in my paper entitled "Free, equal lords of the triumphed world': Cornelius Tacitus and George Buchanan in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall*," *The ESSE Messenger* 30–2 (Winter 2021): 18–27.

<sup>17</sup> Proverbial reference to ruling or governing *according to reason and justice*.

treme brutality of the new political theory: “If you want to know what the thoughts of tyrants are, read in Cornelius Tacitus the last conversations of the dying Augustus with Tiberius” and that Tacitus “teaches those who live under tyrants how to live and act prudently; just as he teaches tyrants ways to secure their tyranny.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, theorists like Giovanni Botero rejected it as radical:

Among the things that I have observed, I have been greatly astonished to find reason of state a constant subject of discussion and to hear the opinions of Niccolò Machiavelli and Cornelius Tacitus frequently quoted: the former for his precepts relating to the rule and governments of peoples, the latter for his live description of the arts employed by the Emperor Tiberius in acquiring and retaining the imperial title of Rome [...] I was amazed that so impious an author and so wicked a tyrant should be held in such esteem that they are thought to provide ideal examples of the methods by which states be governed and administered; and I was moved to indignation rather amazement to find that this barbarous mode of government had won such acceptance.<sup>19</sup>

#### THE CONTRACTUAL SUBJECT: SUBJECT FORMATION/EROSION

After examining Reason of State and Tacitism separately, I would like to examine the legal subject of the early modern state. The emergence or formation of the subject is parallel to that of the modern state, being its correlate. The two are not aetiological, that is, the subject and its formation are not a “product”, a construct, of a certain con/text. Rather, the modern subject (and its formation) is a correlate of the emergence of *étatisme*, or the modern state and vice versa, that can be traced back to the early modern political thought with the city republics and the politico-philosophical discourse of *Raison d’État*,<sup>20</sup> to which subjectivity is central. The understanding of the subject has been “reconstructed” along with the emergence and the radical transformation of early modern politics, and particularly the emergence and equally the formation of the modern state.

<sup>18</sup> Guicciardini, *Maxims*, 44, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Botero, *Reason of State*, xiii.

<sup>20</sup> I am not claiming that the political and philosophical thought of the state started only in the early modern era. It can be traced to the texts of the ancients (Aristotle, Cornelius Tacitus, Livy, and others) as I will be showing later in this part. However, my concern is to address the early modern discourse of the state, which led to the conception of the modern state, similarly to the concept of the subject that started to emerge with that, *viz.* dependently, of the modern state. An analysis of the subject cannot be achieved independently from that of the state, its big Other in Lacanian parlance.

As I have shown earlier, Botero defines the state as “a stable ruler over people”, a “dominion”<sup>21</sup> to be preserved and/or extended. Reason of State, in this regard, is concerned with its own preservation, over or in contrast to, as in Ciceronian civil reason, the interests of the people, its subjects, and the common good. It departs from an understanding of the state as a *res populi*; the re/public of and for the people, the state as a social contract, i.e. a consensus that serves the interests of the people and the *vox populi*. Civil reason and similar theories of the *avant la lettre* étatismes have been eclipsed, or rather, the “moral” foundations forming the essence of the social contract have been finally regarded as unrealistic, paving the way to Hobbes’s state as *the Leviathan*.<sup>22</sup>

Politics is no longer understood as the “art” of preserving a decent political life for its subjects through justice and equity. Politics becomes the science of uniquely preserving the state by any means, the state *of* the prince. It is no longer seen as the “science” of preserving or protecting a community of “men” living together in justice, that is reason in the sense of *recta ratio in agibulum and ratio civilis*:

Since the 13th century, when a recognizable language of politics re-emerged, 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. Politics was the exercise of reason in counselling, deliberating and legislating to preserve a community of men living together in justice – reason in the sense of *recta ratio in agibulum and ratio civilis* [...] Politics teaches how to rule the inhabitants of a kingdom and a city (ville) and a people and a commune, both in times of peace and war, according to reason and justice.<sup>23</sup>

The state, therefore, becomes or can be defined as a dominion over people, as essentially and by definition oppressive, violent, and seeking to maintain its preservation through force – material or other. Reason of state philosophy articulated the idea that the state originates in violence. Guicciardini, in a Hobbesian logic, argues:

Since the majority of men are either not very good or not very wise, one must rely more on severity than on kindness. Whoever thinks otherwise is mistaken. Surely, anyone who can skillfully mix and blend the one with the other would produce the sweetest possible accord and harmony. But heaven endows few with such talents; perhaps no one. [...] Polemical power cannot be wielded according to the dictates of good con-

<sup>21</sup> Botero, *Reason of State*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651).

<sup>23</sup> Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State*, 68.

science. If you consider its origin, you will always find it in violence – except in the case of republics within their territories, but not beyond. Not even the emperor is exempt from this rule; nor are the priests, whose violence is double, since they assault us with both temporal and spiritual arms.<sup>24</sup>

This is how subjects are perceived in the philosophy of reason of state. They are conquered enemies rather than a community of people formed for the common good of each 'individual'. Guicciardini and other reason of state theorists including Bodin and Lipsius go further by arguing that subjects should submit to the power of *étatisme*, to the ruler, and even to tyrants. Ben Jonson's play *Sejanus His Fall* provides an example, examining the question whether subjects should rebel against a tyrant or obey one. Guicciardini replies to the same question by saying:

Waste no time with revolutions that do not remove the causes of your complaints but that simply change the faces of those in charge. For you will still remain dissatisfied. To take an example: what good does it do to rid the Medici of Ser Giovanni da Poppi, if he is replaced by ser Bernardino da San Miniato, a man of the same quality and calibre.

And,

If you live under a tyrant, it is better to be his friend only to a certain extent rather than be completely intimate with him. In this way, if you are a respected citizen, you will profit from his power – sometimes even more than do those closer to him. And if he should fall, you may still hope to save yourself.<sup>25</sup>

Reason of state, hence, is that of preservation, rule, and control, not of subjects. George Buchanan's understanding of the law can be regarded as a dissenting voice to contemporary political theory. Buchanan denounces reason of state altogether and introduces instead a naturalistic approach to law and espouses a radical theory of popular sovereignty. In his *De jure regni apud Scotos*, Buchanan sketches his theory of popular sovereignty and rule arguing that no person/subject in the state, including princes, should be above the law, which people through their representatives, enact:

B. – The law then is paramount to the king, and serves to direct and moderate his passions and actions.

M. – That is a concession already made.

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<sup>24</sup> Guicciardini, *Maxims*, 53–4.

<sup>25</sup> Guicciardini, *Maxims*, 54, 66.



B. – Is not then the voice of the people and of the law the same?

M. – The same.

B. – Which is the more powerful, the people or the law?

M. – The whole people, I imagine.

B. – Why do you entertain that idea?

M. – Because the people is the parent, or at least the author of the law, and has the power of its enactment or repeal at pleasure.<sup>26</sup>

With the formation of the modern state and emergence of the reason of state philosophy, the political subject becomes erased. An account of subjectivity is not possible without an analysis of *étatisme*. The formation of the two goes hand in hand. The notion of agency and erosion of the subject is central to the analysis of Reason of State. Reason of State centres on the subject – by erasing it, pushing it back to the margin for its own preservation. The early modern subject protested against its own erosion; Bolingbroke in *Richard II* protests: “What would you have me do? I am a subject, / And I challenge law.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Buchanan, *De Jure*, 67–8.

<sup>27</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 2.3.137–38.