

WILLIAM J. CONNELL – *ON THE PRINCE*

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Gabriela Tănăsescu: *Dear Professor Connell, you are the author of a new English translation of the most provocative work of early modern political thought – Machiavelli's Il Principe – and also of a new perspective on the significance of this famous work. How did you synthesize the originality of your interpretation and which are the main interpretative directions in Machiavelli's work that you, however, consider related?*

William J. Connell: It is an interesting fact that although Machiavelli's *Prince* is one of the most-read books in all of the world's literature, there has been relatively little research by historians on the composition and meaning of Machiavelli's masterpiece. To be sure, there has been much philological research by literary scholars, beginning mostly in the 1980s, but historians had tended to treat *The Prince* as a means to illustrate other phenomena, rather than focus their attention on the text itself. I wanted to prepare an edition of *The Prince* that was done by an historian for other historians. It would be a book that measured Machiavelli in terms of the political and social context of Florence and Europe in the Renaissance. Since I have devoted decades of archival research to studying the society and politics of Renaissance Florence, I thought I could offer an account of the text and its meanings that was more accurate than those of the political theorists and literary connoisseurs who have prepared all of the other, many editions of *The Prince* that one finds in English. The fact that my edition¹ has by now sold about 30,000 copies, and that it is assigned in a standard way in many university classes, tells me that it has been quite successful. As for my own interpretative direction, I think that Machiavelli wished to write a book that was shocking in an ironic way. He knew that many other people had written books on politics and on the nature of the good prince. He decided to write something that was quite different, that argued that rather than structure the ideal regime about a good prince, one should build from the bottom up. By taking into account the worst in human nature, knowing that princes themselves are often wicked – that they, as he says, “need to know how to be not good” – he nevertheless hoped to show how one could construct a regime and a civil life that were as secure as possible against external and internal threats to its survival.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *In the light of the lucidity that is expressly attributed to you in the interpretation of Machiavellian work, how do you appreciate the current influence of the work which, at 500 years after its appearance, is still in the center of a nuanced debate?*

William J. Connell: Thank you, it is nice to be told that one's interpretation is “lucid”! The question of the current influence of Machiavelli is an interesting one. In the English-speaking world, Machiavelli's name has surpassed even that of Shakespeare in common parlance. *The Prince* is read not only in classrooms, but in the business world, in the military, and in prisons. To tell the truth, this is probably NOT a good thing. I don't know that Machiavelli himself would have liked this. He seems for the last decade of his life to have been trying to suppress *The Prince* – to put a genie back in its bottle, as it were. Too often *The Prince* is used to excuse improper actions or crimes. There are deep moral lessons that can be learned from reading *The Prince*. It is a great text for instruction in how complicated and unclear human action and its motivations can be. But too often *The Prince* is cited as an authority with the simple message, “Ends justify means.”

¹ *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli with *Related Documents*. Translated, Edited and with an Introduction by William J. Connell, New York, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005.

Such a message exists in *The Prince*, but it is presented by Machiavelli in an ironic and difficult way, not in the easy way that the popular media, politicians and business consultants imagine.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *You are dedicated to a type of interpretation which contextualizes Machiavelli's work and presents its multiple levels of meaning. How do you feel the impact of such an interpretation in the specialized scientific communities of the United States?*

William J. Connell: In the English-speaking world there emerged what might be called a "scholarship of context" in the late 1960s that especially involved political theory, literary criticism, and the history of philosophy. It was a scholarship that at the time sought to create a very useful middle ground. Contextualists acknowledged and the relevance of social and economic factors, however they opposed rigid Marxists by acknowledging the importance of language, ideas, politics and religion. Contextualists also disagreed with those idealists who preferred to study great books either as single texts or as belonging to a suprahistorical discussion in which Plato, Augustine and Nietzsche were reading and writing for one another, but not for their times and not for the rest of humanity. So the contextualists have performed a great service. Where problems have arisen, it has been in the inappropriate privileging of certain contexts over others. Language, for instance, over political events. It is rare that the scholars who allege "context" in their work of interpretation really have the contextual experience of a past age that can be gained only by years of immersion in old texts and archives. Instead we often find a modern theory privileging one kind of context battling another modern theory privileging another kind.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *How far do you believe that the analytical interpretations may be associated with the approaches established in the history of ideas?*

William J. Connell: To address this would involve a long essay concerning many modern writers and critics. But let me mention an older, quite interesting methodology to which I find myself often returning. It was developed in the middle of the 20th century by A. O. Lovejoy (the founder of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, of which I am Secretary) that sought to chart how individual ideas have changed and evolved over time. This was not dissimilar to the great *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* project of Otto Brunner. One quick example, relevant in fact to Machiavelli, might be to take the concept and word "virtue." With its root *vir*, the word signified manliness. But over time, in Western civilization, virtue came to signify a quality that is precious (but all too easily spoiled) in a woman. Today, the word has been rendered neuter. So "virtual reality" has the "force" or "feel" of reality, but it is not real. After Lovejoy there were many contextualists who thought that this sort of focus on a single word or term was excessive, and that larger shifts in language and society needed to be studied. I can only agree with them. And yet.... again and again I find that the study of a single term like "virtue" is extraordinarily suggestive. For the historian these are like the sea buoys that tell us the height of tides and alert us to underwater reefs.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *Your personal papers and those that you have edited reflect, moreover, a specialized concern for a political, societal and ideational contextualization of an era and a form of state organization: the Renaissance Florence. Basically such a contextualization recovers aspects of the public sphere and the political and interpersonal relationships, moral values, the collective imaginary, but also those of the individualistic paradigm of the political and artistic thought, the social sphere of its applicability and, in general, the realm of social acceptability and unacceptability of all forms of innovative thinking. How do you synthesize the importance of this type of contextualization for the history of political ideas, in particular, and how relevant consider you this type of contextualization for the contemporary political ideas?*

William J. Connell: One of the chief problems of contextualization, as I argued in an essay on Machiavelli's concept of the state as something that needs to grow – to grow or else to die – is that the process of studying and learning the context can become so overwhelming that the historian loses sight of what is original in a given writer or text. In the case of Machiavelli, the discovery by certain modern scholars that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries other Florentines were using a vocabulary similar to the Florentine Secretary's, combined with their desire to explain (but, really, "to excuse") the harsh lessons of *The Prince*, has led them ignore what is most provocative in his writings. He has been portrayed as one link in a long chain of republican theorists, rather than as an eruptive voice that really changed the way the world thought about government. I suppose that is why, not content to ride the waves, I have always tried to keep my eyes on those sea-buoys.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *Previous years have you worked with Romanian researchers of Machiavelli's work. Where can be located their concerns among the international concerns of profile?*

William J. Connell: This (in April 2014) is now the third time I have visited Romania. By now I have a good number of scholarly friendships in this country, and I am also a corresponding editor on the boards of two Romanian journals including this one. I also remember that in 1998 the *Journal of the History of Ideas* sponsored a conference in Bucharest on "Culture and the Politics of Identity in Modern Romania." Although I did not attend that conference I remember the long discussions that went into planning it. The connection with Romania is something of which I am quite proud, and I hope it will continue, especially now that two books of mine have been published here². With older Romanian scholars I have had long, interesting discussions of the Cold War and of the Ceaușescu period. And I have met many younger Romanian scholars in Italy and in France

² William J. Connell, Giles Constable, *Sacrilégiu și răscumpărare în Florența renașcentistă. Cazul lui Antonio Rinaldeschi*, translation by Teodora Cărăușu, preface by Gheorghe Lencan Stoica, Jassy, Institutul European, 2011.

William J. Connell, *Machiavelli și Renașterea italiană. Studii*, translation by Gabriela Tănăsescu, Lorena Stuparu and Ioana Drăgulin, edition by Gabriela Tănăsescu, preface by Gheorghe Lencan Stoica, Jassy, Institutul European, 2014.

who are making great contributions. There is energy in Romania, and an eagerness to interact on an international scale, that is quite impressive. I find that some of the most impressive scholarly work being done by Romanians involves – not surprisingly – questions of ethnic identity and of the relations between single countries and larger international organizations (EU, NATO, United Nations). Significant traditions of textual and archival scholarship and of narrative history that had been recognized around the world – as exemplified in that truly great scholar, Nicolae Iorga – were largely interrupted in the decades after World War II. I have often wished to know more about the role played by Andrei Oțetea. Oțetea was a historian who, before World War II, had done significant work on Renaissance Florence, and especially on Machiavelli's friend, Francesco Guicciardini. After the war he seems to have become something like the “face” of the historical profession in Romania.

It is perhaps not entirely relevant, but, although “Connell” is an Irish name, an elderly aunt who lives in Chicago recently explained to me that in the nineteenth century one of my great grandfathers was an ethnic German who was born in this part of the world – in southern Bessarabia, in a town called Sărata that was then in Russia. In 1900 he emigrated to the United States and then Canada, but his brothers remained and they became citizens of Romania after World War I. Their families emigrated to Germany in 1945 when that territory became part of the Soviet Union. Sărata is now in Ukraine, although these days one wonders if it may become part of what Vladimir Putin has taken to calling “Novorussia”... In any event, I hope someday to visit this town that was once a part of Greater Romania.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *What expectations have you from the international symposium held in Romania these days?*

William J. Connell: The international symposium on Machiavelli that is being held in Bucharest and Sinaia³ offers an excellent opportunity for scholars from two continents and (perhaps) 10 countries to discuss their research on a long list of important topics related to Machiavelli. I am, for instance, curious to hear what Professor Baldini of Turin will say about the interpretation of Machiavelli that was made by Mussolini and at the time (1924) was actually endorsed and republished by none other than Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was then being promoted by the Theosophist movement as its “World Teacher.” How strange! This is of special interest to me because my own edition of *The Prince* publishes in an appendix my translation of Mussolini's very interesting essay on Machiavelli.

Machiavelli remains of genuine interest worldwide, and there are still significant interpretations that can be developed and significant discoveries that can be made concerning his texts and their reception in subsequent centuries. In recent decades I have seen many Spanish-speaking scholars, in Spain and in Latin

³ The International Conference “The Exercise of Power 500 Years after *The Prince* was Written”, Bucharest-Sinaia, April 10-11, 2014, organized by Lumina The University of South-East Europe in collaboration with The University of Bucharest, under the patronage of the Italian Embassy in Romania.

America, use their publications on Machiavelli as a way of engaging the larger world of international scholarship. One would like to see the same thing happen for Romanian scholars, and indeed it is already happening. If there were to be one single initiative that would make a big difference in this area, let me recommend the translation of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* into the Romanian language. This is a text that has a long and distinguished history that teaches the reader as much about Roman history as it does about government and politics, and that shows Machiavelli to have been a far deeper thinker than the writer of a somewhat nasty handbook for tyrants that one finds in centuries of mistaken caricature.

Gabriela Tănăsescu: *Accept my cordial thanks for the kindness to answer to my questions.*