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Maquiavelo y Erasmo: El destino opuesto de dos nombres. Un estudio de la interrelación entre pensamiento, reputación y posteridad

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RESUMEN:

Los nombres de Erasmo y Maquiavelo son normalmente asociados a diferentes posiciones filosóficas y morales. Sin embargo, podemos encontrar analogías sorprendentes en la obra de ambos autores. Este artículo analiza la naturaleza de esas analogías. Los dos comparten la certeza de que el poder político necesariamente se basa en la opinión pública y por ello recalcan la necesidad de mantener una fachada virtuosa para alcanzarlo o mantenerlo. Coinciden en su análisis del carácter de las masas, que constituyen, la verdadera fuente del poder, y muestran al mismo tiempo una parecida indignación moral cuando se enfrentan a la superficialidad y la mutabilidad de la moral pública

Palabras claves: Erasmo, Maquiavelo, poder politico

Machiavelli and Erasmus: The divergent fate of two names. An inquiry into the interrelation between thinking, reputation and posterity

ABSTRACT:

The names of Erasmus and Machiavelli are associated nowadays to different ideas and opposing philosophical and moral. However, we can find astonishing analogies in the work of both authors. This article analyzes the origin and the nature of those analogies. Together share the certitude that political power always rests on public opinion, and therefore they emphasize in their work the necessity of cultivating a façade of virtue to gain or maintain that power. They also agree in the analysis of the character of the crowd, from which power necessarily flows. Both feel the same kind of moral indignation when facing the shallowness and the mutability of public moral

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1- Introduction

It will not be easy to find two names in the history of thinking that stir up as divergent feelings as those of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Niccolò Machiavelli. They are associated in popular literature and textbooks to opposing ideas and antithetical philosophical standpoints. Erasmus is the epitome of humanism in the Western civilization. His name is linked to the explosion of knowledge that took place during the European Renaissance, which commonly – and inaccurately – appears as a flow of fresh air into the rancid intellectual sphere created by the medieval Scholasticism. Erasmus was venerated by some enlightened thinkers like Montesquieu, Voltaire or Rousseau as precursor in the fight for the emancipation of human reason[1].

Machiavelli stands in the popular mind for the opposite. The only reason he is concerned with are the *ragione di stato* (reasons of state). And these reasons can just thrive rolling over individuals and individuality. It is not just the old pragmatism that affirms that the end justifies the means, but the certitude that the only valuable end is power, that all other ends are subordinated to it, and that all possible means are legitimate to attain it. Machiavellian, the adjective Machiavelli involuntarily donated to posterity, is a cocktail of vices that mixes amorality, malignity and cynicism.

This common association of names and ideas is based, in most cases, on overgeneralizations, misperceptions and sometimes also prejudices about the work of both authors. Still, it astonishes, indeed, how many tangential points the political thinking of Erasmus and Machiavelli offers despite the opposite fate of their two names. This article will inquire into the origin of and cast some light on those broadly spread overgeneralizations, misperceptions and prejudices.

The parallelism between Machiavelli and Erasmus is especially evident in two of their most famous books: Erasmus' *Institutio Principis Christiani* (The Education of the Christian Prince, 1516)

1 Cf. Dolan, John P.: 'The Theology of Erasmus and Christocentric Piety, introduction to Erasmus' *Handbook of the Militant Christian* (Enchiridion Militis Christiani), Notre Dame, Fides Publishers, 1962, p. 13

and the notorious treatise Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532). Both works were written as a guideline for the monarchical ruler, and both were also thought as a present for a particular prince. Machiavelli dedicated his work to Lorenzo II (di Piero) de Medicis, apparently as a last attempt to regain an influential position in the Florentine diplomacy.[2] Erasmus presented his handbook to the prince Charles of Burgundy. In fact, *Il Principe* and the *Institutio* are examples of a very old literary genre: the *speculum principis* (Mirror to the Prince). During the European Renaissance, many authors still offered this kind of manuals to those who protected and supported them. Apart from the two mentioned writings, probably the most relevant examples of this genre are Baldesar Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (Il Libro del Cortegiano, written between 1508 and 1518, but first published in 1928), and the essay that the Spanish thinker Baltasar Gracián dedicated to his protector, the Duke of Nochera, called *El Político* (1640). The character and content of those books were very heterogeneous. In them, we can find practical advice about a plethora of subjects that had to do with affairs of state, from the courtesan etiquette to the art of war. They were a compendium of political, religious and public relations matters.

Common to all them is the description of a social function linked to a person. Thus, the authors created an archetype, which gives us substantial information about the social and political structure of the Renaissance and also about the way political administration was managed at that time.[3] Castiglione's courtier is an archetype; Erasmus and Machiavelli's Princes are archetypes, too; as Gracián's politician is. An archetype is the attribution of some ideal personality features to an individual. To highlight the political virtues this individual needs to possess and the mistakes he has to avoid, the authors commonly use numerous and classic examples of the ancient world, or also refer to well-known contemporary figures.

Similarities in the political thinking of Machiavelli and Erasmus have already been pointed out briefly at other places.[4] Still, it is necessary to explore the analogies between their works, and of course also the differences, to explain how it could turn

2 Cf. Skinner, Quentin: *Machiavelli*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 25

3 Cf. Tierno Galván, Enrique: *Introduction to Baltasar Gracián's El Político*, Salamanca, Madrid, Ediciones Anaya, 1961, p. 7

4 Cf. Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth: *The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion – Our Social Skin.* Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1993 (1980), p. 184

out, that both names are now used as banners of conflicting weltanschauungen (world views), to understand why one thinker is regarded as benefactor and the other demonized as enemy of humanity.

2- Unparallel Lives

Regarding the material aspects of life, the only thing that both authors had in common was probably the time they lived. Niccolò Machiavelli was part of a noble Florentine dynasty. Several of the Machiavelli Family had held important offices in this traditional Italian state. Niccolò, the offspring of a humble branch of the house, also dedicated all his life to politics, his most intimate passion.[5] In one of the letters he wrote to the Florentine ambassador Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli confessed: "I have to talk about politics, I need either to take a vow of silence or to discuss this".[6] Machiavelli was a diplomat for the Florentine republic, too. All his life he was at the service of Florence and fought for his beloved ideal of a unified Italy. Accused of treachery, he felt into disgrace, was sent to prison and tortured.[7] His life as an author did not give him more reasons for joy. He never saw his main work, *Il Principe*, published, which he dedicated to the Medici family with the hope that they may have acted as architects of the Italian unification. Machiavelli died in his private exile in 1527, deprived of any possibility of participating in the Italian affairs of state.

By contrast, Erasmus of Rotterdam always kept prudently aloof from politics. He never identified himself with any particular nation or state. Erasmus is the incarnation of the cosmopolitism, a genuine Weltbürger (citizen of the world), someone who could have felt at home in any civilized spot of the planet. This character trait may be connected with the fact that he was a bastard child. Erasmus was the illegitimate son of a priest, and this bore a heavy stigma in the 15th century[8].

5 Cf. Viroli, Mauricio: *Niccolò's Smile. A Biography of Machiavelli*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000, p. 6

6 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *Machiavelli and His Friends. Their Personal Correspondence*. Atkinson, James B. and Sices, David (eds), DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1996, p. 225

7 Cf. Atkinson, James B. and Sices, David: *Machiavelli and his Friends. Their Personal Correspondence*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1996, p. 218

8 Cf. Meissinger, Karl A.: *Erasmus von Rotterdam*, Zürich, Nauck, 1948, p 3. According to Meissinger, Erasmus must have suffered all his life from the complex of being a bastard child

Erasmus was a member of the clergy, too. He took the monastic vows and was ordained as a priest in 1492. Erasmus' work was an inspiration for Martin Luther, who even used Erasmus' Latin version of the Bible for his translation into German. For a certain time, as their personal correspondence shows, they even were congenial. However, Erasmus was always very cautious with matters that affected his public life or might have jeopardized his intellectual singularity. It was for this reason that he avoided becoming involved with the Reformation. Erasmus held a similar attitude on other controversial issues of his time.[9] In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, he achieved a fame in his lifetime that is normally reserved for posterity.

3- Erasmus and Machiavelli on political power

Regarding their thinking on political theory, Erasmus and Machiavelli start from the same point. Both seem to be conscious that political power, any kind of power actually, always comes from the anonymous body of citizens. Without the active or passive support of the people, real power does not exist. Power that was obtained by the use of violence or terror is just a mirage, and it will vanish at any time. It will never last.

For that reason, Erasmus recommends the young prince Charles in his *Institutio Principis Christiani* to keep in best terms with his subjects: "A good prince must therefore use every caution to prevent any possibility of losing the affections of his subjects. You may take my word that whoever loses the favor of his people (favor populi) is thereby stripped of a great safeguard."[10] Terror and violence, fear, can just keep the real power of the masses under control for a brief period of time. Fear and hate are inseparable in Erasmus' view, which is the reason why no one can be safe "whom the majority of men want removed."[11] Erasmus also gives details about how to gain this affection of the folks. The attributes, which will help the prince in this endeavor, are precisely those that are least associated with absolute power: "On the other hand, the affections of the populace (benevolentia multitudinis) are won by those characteristics which, in general, are farthest removed

9 Cf. Huizinga, Johan: *Erasmus*. Basel Schwabe, 1951, pp. 182-185

10 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Lester K. Born (trans), New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1968 (1516), p. 209

11 of Rotterdam, Erasmus: *The Education of a Christian Prince*, p. 173

from tyranny. They are clemency, affability, fairness, courtesy, and kindliness."[12]

Machiavelli, in several chapters of Il Principe, repeats the idea that there is no way to achieve and retain power, but to be strongly backed up by social support, and this regardless of the fashion power was achieved.[13] The most direct way to ensure this social support is to adopt the behaviors that will bring the prince the praise of the people. For Machiavelli knows that public opinion always reduces the perception of individuals to a general – and not very accurate – moral picture: "Princes more than others from their being set so high, are characterized by someone of those qualities which attach either praise or blame."[14] In this regard, princes are not different at all from their subjects, for they have to rely on the opinions of their social environment. According to Machiavelli, princes are even more dependent on those judgments because they are constantly under the scrutiny of the public eye.

Regarding the use of force and violence, Machiavelli expresses the same idea we have found in Erasmus' handbook: No real power can rely only on fear. When the use of force seems unavoidable, then the ruler will have to produce fear without attracting hatred: "Nevertheless a Prince should inspire fear in such a fashion that if he does not win love he may escape hate".[15] Machiavelli is aware, as Erasmus was, that the only way to keep power intact is to keep in good terms with the real source of it: "Against this a Prince best secures himself when he escapes being hated or despised, and keeps in good terms with the people; and this, as I have already shown at length, it is essential he should do. Not to be hated or despised by the body of his subjects, is one of the surest safeguards that a Prince can have against conspiracy."[16] Even more important than to attract the praise of the neighbors, Machiavelli states, is to avoid this hatred that will necessarily lead to ruin: "For as Prince

12 Ibid., p. 209

13 "He who becomes a Prince through the favour of the people should always keep on good terms with them: which it is easy for him to do, since all they ask is not to be oppressed. But he who against the will of the people is made a Prince by the favour of the nobles, must, above all things, seek to conciliate the people, which he readily may by taking them under his protection ... But this is the sum of the matter, that it is essential for a Prince to be on a friendly footing with his people, since, otherwise, he will have no resource in adversity." Machiavelli, Niccolò: *The Prince*, Hill Thompson (trans), New York, The Heritage Press, 1954 (1532), p 82f

14 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *The Prince*, Hill Thompson (trans), New York, The Heritage Press, 1954 (1532), p. 116

15 Ibid., p. 124

16 Ibid., p. 134

cannot escape being hated by someone, they should, in first place, endeavour not to be hated by a class; failing in which, they must do all they can to escape the hatred of that class which is the stronger."[17] Thus, the prince needs a fine sensor to detect, when public opinion is split, which faction might more effectively help him to maintain power if the situation makes it not possible to satisfy all the parties.

One century later, Thomas Hobbes carried in *The Leviathan* (1651) the idea that power always relays on social support to extremes. According to this author, the idea of absolute power will always be an oxymoron, for power, social, individual or political power, directly depends on the esteem of the neighbors, and will disappear when this esteem fades away: "The value, or WORTH of a man, is as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another ... And in other things, so in men, not the seller, but the buyer determines the price. For let a man (as most men do,) rate themselves at the highest value they can; yet their true value is no more than it is esteemed by others."[18]

4- Praise and blame as moral standards

Erasmus and Machiavelli's statements suggest that praise and blame are the actual moral standards of any time. They decide what is regarded as good and what is regarded as evil, and thus, become the only ethical reference of society. Princes have to accept and abide by this ethical reference, as the humblest of their subjects has. This ability to set moral codes, which is the main effect of public opinion according to Walter Lippmann, is the real source of power.[19] For the social function of moral rules is to provide the backbone of any human community. And without this moral structure, as Aristotle suspected, no society would subsist.[20] If the rulers ignored or offended the moral principles of a community, this would necessarily lead to their fate or to the destruction of

17 Ibid., p. 139

18 Hobbes, Thomas: *Leviathan*, Oxford, New York, Oxford Univeraity Press, 1996 (1651), p. 59

19 Cf. Lippmann, Walter: *Public Opinion*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1947, pp. 123-125

20 Cf. Aristotle: 'Politica', in *The Complete works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, Jonathan barnes (trans), Princeton, Princeton Univeraity Press, 1984, 1253a

the community, which, so far power is concerned, has the same effect.

However, the moral, which we can call *public*, does not seem to satisfy the moralist Erasmus. He does not trust public opinion, and therefore does not accept it as the final moral authority. In several parts of his work, we can find testimonies of this mistrust and animosity against the coarse moral of the crowd. In one of his popular colloquies, he let a humble butcher complain about the flawed moral judgment of the mass:

Popular opinion is much the same with regard to good and evil deeds and the pursuit of happiness. How much disgrace dogs a girl who has fallen from virtue! But to have a lying and disparaging tongue, and a heart corrupted by hatred and envy, is a far more serious fault. Where is a theft, however slight, not punished more severely than adultery? No one willingly keeps company with a person once soiled by thievery; but it is fine thing to be on good terms with one who's involved in adultery. No one would think it proper to bestow his daughter on the public executioner, who carries out the law for a salary, just like the judge himself; yet we do not abhor a marriage with a soldier who so often – against his parents' wishes and sometimes against the law – has taken himself off to a mercenary war and is defiled by many whorings, robberies, sacrileges, murders, and other crimes, commonly committed in the army or in marching to end from war. Him we accept as a son-in-law; him, a man worse than a hangman anywhere, the maiden dotes on. And we even recognize aristocratic rank achieved through some wrongdoing. Whoever steals coin, hangs; those who rob ever so many by graft, monopolies, usury, and a thousand tricks and frauds are esteemed among leading citizens.[21]

In this passage, Erasmus expresses a moral repugnance against the double moral standards that he perceives in public opinion. We can find a very similar idea and a parallel revulsion in one of the letters Machiavelli sent to his friend the Florentine Ambassador Francesco Vettori:

These people are unaware that whoever is considered wise by day will not be considered crazy by night and that whoever is deemed a decent, able man will occasion honor, not blame, whatever he

21 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, Craig R. Thompson (trans), Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1965 (1518), p. 354f

does to refresh his spirit and live happily; instead of being called a sodomite or a lecher, people will say he is well-rounded, easy-going, and a boon companion.[22]

The amoral, cynical, perverse in one word, the Machiavellian Machiavelli stands, again, not far away from the well-reputed humanist. Both selected passages show the same mistrust against the malleability of moral categories and concepts when they are handled by public opinion. Machiavelli gives us an excellent example of Renaissance double speak, as well. For mere words can determine the way people perceive, and thus, morally organize the world around them.

5- The Nature of the Crowd

Both Erasmus and Machiavelli were aware of the social function of public opinion and consequently bestowed the due respect upon it when they were teaching how to gain or keep political power. Yet, at the same time, they cannot hide their contempt of it. In both thinkers we can find the same ambivalence. On the one hand, they consider public opinion the only source of real power. On the other hand, they cannot help showing their animadversion against it.

In *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus ridicules the attitudes and behaviors that one has to take up to just please the "enormous and powerful monster, the mob".[23]

The main characteristic of this powerful monster is, according to Machiavelli, its incapacity to penetrate into the real meaning of actions, situation, or circumstances, to analyze and recognize the actual causes behind the obvious effects: "For the vulgar are always taken by appearances and by results, and the world is made up of the vulgar, the few only finding room when the many have no longer ground to stand on."[24] In spite of the intellectual deficit of the crowd, Machiavelli repeatedly emphasizes the authority of its command: "You know – and anyone who knows how to reason about this world knows it, too – that the people are fickle and

22 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *Machiavelli and His Friends. Their Personal Correspondence*, p. 273

23 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Praise of Folly*, Clarence H, Miller (trans), New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1979 (1512), p. 40

24 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *The Prince*, p. 131

foolish; nevertheless, as fickle and foolish as they are, what ought to be done is frequently what they say to do."[25]

Erasmus agrees with Machiavelli in the low intellectual assessment of the anonymous mass of people that modern pollsters identify with public opinion. Little or no elaboration of ideas at all can be expected from it. They necessarily will remain on the surface of the matter: "The great mass of people are swayed by false opinions and are not different from those in Plato's cave, who took the empty shadows as the real things"[26] The mindlessness of the *vulgus* is not a secret at all. It is rather obvious for everyone with the lowest amount of wit, as Erasmus ironically states in his *Praise of Folly*: "But I myself would be most foolish and a very fitting target for the long and loud laughter of Democritus if I should go on to enumerate the forms of folly and madness among the common people."[27]

Erasmus inquires into the possible reason of the folly of the mass. He defined folly as "being swept along at the whim of emotion".[28] And this is, in his opinion, what determines the intelligence level of the individual: "Thus, the usual distinction between a wiseman and a fool is that the fool is governed by emotion, the wiseman by reason. That is why the Stoics eliminate from their wiseman all emotional perturbations as if they were diseases".[29] Since the crowd (public mind) works exclusively on the basis of emotional processes, it seems to Erasmus intellectually deficient.

Erasmus' contempt for the vulgus is not only intellectual, but also moral. The crowd is not just dumb, but also evil, as he stated in the more serious *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*: "The world has never advanced in goodness to the point where common opinion does not still give its approval to what is basically evil ... Indeed, a man ought to be suspicious of anything that pleases the majority".[30] Strongly influenced by Plato's thinking, Erasmus links the idea of virtue with the idea of knowledge. The evil, both individual and collective evil, is always a form of ignorance. This is also the

25 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *Machiavelli and His Friends. Their Personal Correspondence*, p. 382

26 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Education of a Christian Prince*, p. 148

27 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Praise of Folly*, p. 45

28 Ibid., p. 28

29 Ibid., p. 45

30 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *Handbook of the Militant Christian* (Enchiridion Militis Christiani), John P. Dolan (trans), Notre Dame, Fides Publishers, 1962 (1503), p. 121

reason, according to him, why the *opinio popularis* is closer to the vice than to the virtue.[31]

6- The Importance of the Façade

If power flows from public opinion, if the foundation of power resides in the plain an anonymous crowd, the logical consequence is that everyone interested in getting power has to be very careful with the image offered in public, when you are exposed to the stares and judgments of those who might rule on your reputation. For an "excellent reputation" remains, in Erasmus' opinion, "the surest road".[32] The value of the monarchical ruler, as Hobbes put it, depends on the public esteem he enjoys. And the level of public esteem is also the level of our capacity of action, that is, of our power. To achieve and maintain the high esteem in the public opinion, the Prince, like any other man or woman, has to adopt its moral standards. Not our conscience will bestow esteem and honor on us, and thus the power to act, but the opinions of the others. For that reason, Erasmus emphasizes that it may not be enough to be virtuous if the world around us does not perceive our virtue: "It is not enough for the prince to be clear of all crime; he should be untainted by any suspicion or appearance of crime."[33]

Erasmus, humanist, clergyman, and man of the world, grasps the worth of the façade for statesmen. Of course, he also states that it is necessary to actually posses those virtues that public opinion sanctions. Still, he is aware of the uselessness of the possession of such virtues without public acknowledgement.

The awareness of the significance of the appearance is, according to Noelle-Neumann, the most interesting analogy between both authors.[34] Machiavelli also highlights the necessity of creating a virtuous façade to reach and keep the power:

A Prince should therefore be very careful that nothing ever escapes his lips which is not replete with the five qualities above

31 "Plato in his Republic points out that no man can defend virtue unless he has trained his mind in opinions regarding the true nature of good and evil ... virtue is nothing other than the knowledge of things that are to be sought after or of things that are to be avoided" Ibid., p. 120f

32 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Education of a Christian Prince*, p. 190

33 Ibid., p. 232

34 Cf. Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth: *The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*. Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1993 (1980), p. 184

named, so that to see and hear him, one would think him the embodiment of mercy, good faith, integrity, humanity, and religion. And there is no virtue which it is more necessary for him to seem to possess than this last.[35]

Still, Machiavelli goes a step further. He is more audacious – or perhaps simply more naïve – than Erasmus, for he totally disconnects the spheres of moral, true moral, and power. To thrive in public life, just the appearance of virtue is necessary, for this is the only thing public opinion might pronounce a judgment upon: "because men in general judge rather by the eye than by the hand, for every one can see, but few can touch. Every one sees what you seem, but few know what you are, and these few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the State to back them up".[36]

The moral lowness of the average man and woman justifies, according to Machiavelli, that the behavior of the ruler does not follow in secret the rules dictated by public opinion:

And for this reason a prudent Prince neither can nor ought to keep his word when to keep it is hurtful to him and the causes which led him to pledge it are removed. If all men were good, this would not be good advice, but since they are dishonest and do not keep faith with you, you, in return, need not keep faith with them; and no prince was ever at a loss for plausible reasons to cloak a breach of faith.[37]

Political pragmatism is sometimes incompatible with the exigencies of the *true* moral. Therefore, Machiavelli recommends the prince be able to detach himself from any moral principle when he deems it necessary. For the capacity of public opinion to recognize and pay tribute to a truly moral behavior is always limited: "And here it is to be noted that hatred is incurred as well on account of good actions as of bad; for which reason, as I have already said, a Prince who would maintain his authority is often compelled to be other than good. For when the class, be it people, the soldiers, or the nobles, on whom you judge it necessary to rely for your support, is corrupt, you must adapt yourself to its humours, and satisfy these, in which case virtuous conduct will

35 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *The Prince*, p. 130

36 Ibidem.

37 Ibid., p.128

only prejudice you."[38] This moral disposition – or rather lack of any moral disposition – will give the ruler the necessary flexibility to adapt to the demands of public opinion, as stated by Machiavelli in *Il Principe*:

It is not essential then, that a Prince should have all the good qualities which I have enumerated above, but it is most essential that he should seem to have them; I will even venture to affirm that if he has and invariably practises them all, they are hurtful, whereas the appearance of having them is useful. Thus, it is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, religious, and upright, and also to be so, but the mind should remain so balanced that were it needful not to be so, you should be able and know how to change to the contrary.[39]

Machiavelli became aware of the mutable character of publicopinion. It seems to him obvious that any kind of power flows from it, and that the origin of this power is its capacity to act as moral tribunal. Still, the moral standards of public opinion are not stable. Machiavelli learned form history that public moral values, what people hold as morally right and morally wrong, vary form time to time and from place to place. They are in a constant process of change. To keep loyal to particular moral values is considered by Machiavelli a political weakness. It would lead the ruler to a dead end when public opinion changed.

As already stated, Erasmus seems to loathe the opinion of the populace (opinio popularis) and to despise those who act following its irrational dictates. He cannot understand why reasonable beings measure the own value on the basis of the judgment that others may pass on them: "Besides, what could be more stupid than to judge yourself by other's opinions of you? You know how changeable people are. They give you honor one minute and take it away the next."[40] Erasmus follows the standard set by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this book, Aristotle describes the magnificent man. The main feature of this ideal model is the fortitude of character to gain awareness of the own personal value regardless of what other may think or say about him.[41]

38 Ibid., p. 141

39 Ibid., p.129

40 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *Handbook of the Militant Christian*, p. 153

41 Cf. Aristotle: "Nichomachean Ethics", in *The Complete works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, Jonathan Barnes (ed.), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984, 1123b

The embodiment of this ideal in the classic world is the figure of Socrates, who even died before giving up his principles. Also for Erasmus, Socrates represents the best reference when he tried to explain his ideal of ethical excellence: "One of these asked Socrates how he could find a short cut to the most honorable reputation. 'By showing yourself to be what you long to be thought,' was the answer."[42] And this ethic excellence is based on the capacity of the individual to become morally autarchic, that is, to rise above the moral judgments of the social environment.

Erasmus finds especially irritating, as Plato did, that an essentially irrational force might shape the life of rational individuals and the moral standards of society. In his colloquies, he expresses this thought unambiguously: "Why cite the public, the worst possible authority on conduct? Why tell me of custom, the mistress of every vice?"[43] The custom appears here as spontaneous manifestation of public opinion. Any public opinion, at any time and in any society, generates a corpus of conventions that give cohesion to the group. Still, these conventions have nothing to do with goodness, according to Erasmus. Convention is rather responsible, in his opinion, for most of the evil in the world.[44] This ambivalence is characteristic of Erasmus' thinking when it comes to political power. He realizes that the ruler has to adopt the moral standards that public opinion dictates although he has serious doubts about the moral quality of the changing moral codes of time. In his *Institution Principis Christiani*, Erasmus states in this regard: "Just so should the true prince be removed from the sullied opinions and desires of the common folk. The one thing which he should consider base, vile, and unbecoming to him is to share the opinions of the common people who never are interested in anything worth while."[45] In spite of this deep conviction, Erasmus objectively teaches Charles of Burgundy in the same book that his future power will be founded on opinion, as David Hume[46] put it, and gives him advise on the subject of how to gain the favor of his subjects. Perhaps there is no logical contradiction between this advice and the contempt of public opinion. Erasmus was in fact

42 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, p. 457

43 Ibid., p. 221

44 Cf. Ibid., p. 215

45 Rotterdam, Erasmus of: The Education of a Christian Prince, p. 150

46 Cf. Hume, David: "Essays Moral, Political and Literary", in *The Philosophical Works* (vol.3), Aalen, Scientia-Verlag, 1964 (1739), p.110

aware of the power of the crowd, but undoubtedly he loathed its nature.

7- Public Affairs and Political Power during the Renaissance

It would be exaggerated to state that Erasmus and Machiavelli, each one with his singular character, discovered public relations. Edward L. Bernays, who is considered the father of this modern discipline, affirms that even in the dawn of civilization, in cultures like Sumeria, Babylonia, Syria, or Persia, the rulers were aware of the necessity of public relations.[47] In ancient Greece, the sophists fulfilled the function of PR consultants, indeed. They taught the native Athenians the art of Rhetoric, which was the first systematic attempt to explain how persuasive communication works. They also wrote speeches and helped manage the public image of those citizens who were interested in participating in the administration and government of the *polis*. Furthermore, they charged huge fees for their services, similar to some modern PR agencies.

Machiavelli and Erasmus agreed with the sophists in two important points. First, they were familiar with the malleability of language to manipulate the perception of the reality. Then, they were also aware of the relativity of public moral values that apply at a particular time or in a particular society.

However, there are also noticeable differences. The sophists, with candid arrogance, thought that they were able to control and to manipulate opinion with the skillful use of words. Gorgias even asserted that speech had a kind of magic power and compared its effects on the soul to the "power of drugs over the nature of bodies".[48] He claimed to be able, just with the aid of language, to control the will and thoughts of men and women. Machiavelli and Erasmus realized that this is merely a chimera. For, since power always flows from public opinion, the surest way to reach power is not to change public opinion, but to adapt to it; not to change the applying moral values, but to adopt them.

47 Cf. Bernays, Edward L.: *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1961 (1922). P. 21f

48 Gorgias: 'Encomium of Helen', in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, Patrizia Bizzel and Bruce Herzberg (eds), George E. Kennedy (trans), Boston, New York, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001 (ca. 414 BC), p. 46

This idea is not new either. Plato, in his argument against the sophist, reproached them their arrogance, which he thought came from their ignorance. Plato realized that it is a sheer illusion to believe that power might allow you to control public opinion. Reversing Gorgia's conviction, Plato concluded that it is not just impossible to control the people (*demos*) by means of words, but that those who want to achieve political power will always end up indulging the demands and expectation of public opinion.[49] Never will power be reached without the support of people. And never will the social body give power to those who opposed its core values.

At the time of Plato, the Athenian political system was a direct democracy. In this kind of political system, it seems logical to believe that political power flows directly from the people (the Athenian demos). Also in modern representative democracies, power comes from the very same source, which is the reason why Edward L. Bernays stated that the role of public relations in this social model should be "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses."[50] Not so obvious appears the idea that, also in monarchies and other forms of totalitarian or despotic government, power flows from the same plain people, as Machiavelli and Erasmus sensed.

Machiavelli even hints in *Il Principe* that military power, the use of state violence against their own subjects, though useful in certain situations, will always remain a substitute of real power. Five hundred years later, and with the traumatic experience of World War II behind her, Hannah Arendt maintains that the concepts of power and violence are practically antonyms.[51] For violence always appears when real power is missing. Without the support of a particular social body, there cannot be power. And supported just by violence, no regime can last.

In both authors Erasmus and Machiavelli, we can find Michel Foucault's philosophy of discourse in an embryonic state. Foucault conceives the discourse as a set of "reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types" that fixes and orders the use of language, canalizes and shapes

49 Cf. Plato: 'Gorgias', in *The collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns (eds), W. D. Woodhead (trans), New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 265

50 Cf. Bernays, Edward L: *Propaganda*, New York, H. Liveright, 1928, p. 9

51 Cf. Arendt, Hannah: *On Violence*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969, p. 56

thinking, and sets itself up as standard of any form of knowledge.[52] According to Michel Foucault, all manifest discourse, or any discursive formation, is defined by an "already-said", which also contains the "repressive presence of what it does not say".[53] Such systems basically determine the use and meaning of language. And the major function of language, as Aristotle observed for the first time, is to allow us „to have any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust".[54] Language, that is, the ability to interact through the use of arbitrarily created symbols, is the distinguishing feature of the human species, and further the reason why human life and society are organized on the basis of moral categories.

Discourse, through its authority over language, establishes the standards of what is right and what is wrong, also what is regarded as morally correct and morally false. The discourse provides us with the linguistic formulas to express it, as well. There are discursive formations, specific manifestations of discourse, at any time and in any given society. We can find such particular manifestations of discourse in the different groups, social circles, areas of knowledge, or institutions which belong to the same culture. Every discursive formation generates its own power structures, for discourse is, according to Foucault, the only source of power: "But basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implanted without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse".[55] Discourse creates truth, a certain truth, the certitude of what is right and wrong at any given time, and only in this truth power can rest: "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth."[56] Thus, not those who hold power will be able to determine the discourse. Power would rather come to those who are able to decipher and articulate the truth of discourse. Michel Foucault suggests that in every cell of human coexistence, a particular form of discourse will spontaneously arise. This idea has, for him, the unappealable nature of an axiom. And this form of discourse is what determines the knowledge,

52 Foucault, Michel: *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, A. M. Sheridan Smith (trans), New York, Pantheon Books, , 1972, p. 22

53 Ibid., 25

54 Aristotle: *Politics*, 1253a

55 Foucault, Michel: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1927-1977*, Colin Gordon (ed and trans), New York, Pantheon, 1980, p. 93

56 Ibidem..

the beliefs and values that every individual holds and that are the compass for its behavior. The effectiveness of the power that flows from discourse comes from the fact that every plain member of the human community is, at the same time, "exercising and undergoing this power".[57]

The discourse exerts its power, first of all, over the individual, but in the long run it also shapes the nature, character, functions and competencies of human institutions or even the contents of disciplines of knowledge. Institutions, such as the Church or the Law, and the dogmas of scientific knowledge at any given time are just the face of the inner order, or "normalization" in Foucault's vocabulary, created by the discourse.[58]

Both Machiavelli and Erasmus sensed this invisible engine of history that Foucault called discourse. In their guidelines for the ideal princedom, they identify it with the people, the crowd, the popular or the public opinion. But despite this lack of precision in the terms, we find the same practical wisdom. The virtues that the prince must appear to possess are those that are sanctioned by discourse, and the linguistic formulas that the prince must use are dictated by discourse, as well. Regardless of the face that it presented at a given time, this social force is the only solid foundation of power. Yet, since the ideas of Machiavelli and Erasmus can also be found in similar treatises of the Renaissance, we can deduce that they are a manifestation of discourse, too.

8- Conclusions

Our journey through the work of both authors offers us the information we need to answer the question that set off this article: Why do Erasmus and Machiavelli have today, despite the astonishing parallelism in their thinking, such divergent reputations?

The first answer to this question is that Machiavelli reduces in his infamous treatise the moral sphere to a matter of public affairs. He ignores *the moral* to just focus on the *morals*. *Il Principe* deals with the social and political functions of the set of moral rules any given society generates. Machiavelli realizes that those unwritten moral laws legitimize political power, but he is at the

57 Ibid., p. 98

58 Cf. Ibid., p. 106f

same time aware of their mutable nature. Erasmus also recognizes the phenomenon of an exclusively public moral, and realizes its value as support of political power. Still, his thinking constantly seeks to transcend the inherent temporality of custom and morals and to reveal knowledge of an immutable and *true* moral.

It would be precipitate, though, to assume that Machiavelli gave up the idea of transcendent moral principles, with authority beyond time and space. There are some less known passages of his notorious book that might cast light on this matter. In chapter XV of *Il Principe*, Machiavelli makes following honest and also humble declaration of principles, very remarkable given his terrible reputation:

And since I know that many have written on this subject, I fear it may be thought presumptuous in me to write of it also; the more so, because in my treatment of it I depart from the views that others have taken. But since it is my object to write what shall be useful to whosoever understands it, it seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them... And the manner in which we live, and that in which we ought to live, are things so wide asunder, that he who quits the one to betake himself to the other is more likely to destroy than to save himself.[59]

The statement is especially relevant because it sets, in fact, an epistemological declaration of principles. Machiavelli realizes that it is necessary to drastically separate the reflection on how human being and human society are in fact from the ethical speculation about how they should be. In humanities and social sciences, this confusion of normative ideal and anthropological reality occurs with special intensity and frequency. Social scientists speak of the "homo oeconomicus", political scientists of the "rational voter", and philosophers of the "*herrschaftsfreien* Diskurs".[60] Deviations from the ideal of the responsible and intellectually self-sufficient citizen and from the ethical common places in force have always been, as stated by Walter Lippmann, "about as welcome as a small boy with a drum".[61] *Il Principe* was first published five years after Machiavelli's death. Even the Medici family, for whom the book was written as a gift, and who were not more scrupulous in

59 Machiavelli, Niccolò: *The Prince*, p. 115

60 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen: *Strukturwandel der Oeffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1962, p.112ff

61 Lippmann, Walter: *Public Opinion*, p. 256

their methods of government than any other Italian Renaissance Dynasty, sensed that the author had gone too far and rejected it.

Despite all the dissonances that the mere names arouse today, there are many common points in the thinking of Erasmus and Machiavelli. Both are the perfect embodiment of a thinker of the Renaissance, strongly influenced by the ancient world. Both Erasmus and Machiavelli share the same certitude about the nature of power and the character of the crowd. Both feel the same kind of moral indignation when facing the shallowness, the duplicity, and the mutability of public moral. Yet, in spite of their indignation, they are aware that any sovereign will have to live and to deal with it. For this reason, Erasmus and Machiavelli recommend the prince adopt in public the moral values sanctioned by public opinion.

The main difference between Erasmus and Machiavelli, and this is the second answer to our starting question, is not in their thinking, but in the way they deal with knowledge. In his *Institutio Principis Christiani*, even though he is writing practical advice for the monarchical ruler, Erasmus always keeps reflecting on the nature of moral truth. Machiavelli, in his guideline for the Medici Family, totally ignores values and social or moral conveniences and just focuses on how the archetypical prince should deal with worldly affairs.

Erasmus' books had a huge success. Hundreds of editions of all his books and numerous translations were published in Erasmus' lifetime, most of them stolen, a glaring contrast to the fate of Machiavelli's work. Although he had at the end of his life some troubles with the church hierarchy and some of his books were once included by Pope Paul IV in the notorious *index*, the black list of forbidden readings, Erasmus' name very soon attained a halo of lay sanctity and entered the Olympus of immortal human wisdom. *Il Principe* has been, on the contrary, a usual presence in practically all the book bonfires our Western civilization has witnessed.