Keith David Howard. *The Reception of Machiavelli in Early Modern Spain*

The Reception of Machiavelli in Early Modern Spain by Keith David Howard

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The Reception of Machiavelli in Early Modern Spain traces how several Spanish authors of the period adopted Machiavellian discourse in their political treatises. It builds upon and corrects previous work by José Antonio Maravall, Robert Bireley, and J. A. Fernández-Santamaría on the subject. Howard aims to demonstrate that, while most authors of the time presented themselves as anti-Machiavellian, they adopted key aspects of Machiavellian discourse as they elaborated their own imperial Catholic political world view. Howard’s objective is satisfactorily accomplished through a very close reading of an ample selection of texts pertaining to the Spanish reason-of-state tradition.

Howard shows how this tradition employed a mischaracterization of Machiavelli as a rhetorical tool to ostensibly distance itself from the Florentine, especially after his works were prohibited in Spain in 1583. In earlier instances, such as Furió Ceriol and Balthazar de Ayala, Machiavelli’s ideas, vocabulary of contingency, and historical examples were already applied, without acknowledgment, to Phillip II’s imperial project. From the prohibition on, the authors in this tradition, following Pedro de Ribadeneyra (who in turn elaborated on a notion taken from Giovanni Botero), would distinguish between
a good, Christian reason of state and a bad, Machiavellian one. Howard shows that, for the most part, these authors attacked a straw figure of Machiavelli, while appropriating fundamental Machiavellian ideas and categories.

Their treatment of the king’s truthfulness provides a good example of this procedure. The authors usually began by rebutting a deformed, cartoon-like version of Machiavelli, only to finally concede to the real Machiavellian doctrine about the prince’s need for dissimulation in certain situations — i.e., when the preservation of the state demands such conduct. In general, the authors heeded Machiavelli’s call for moral flexibility in the service of the common good. In this respect, Howard notes that, in contrast to medieval political literature, which considered the king’s reward mainly as pertaining to the afterlife, the Spanish reason-of-state tradition took account of the king’s earthly rewards, such as the conservation of his power and the amplification of his state.

Several other Machiavellian themes continually emerge in this tradition. Machiavelli’s reorganization of the traditional princely virtues and vices, his rethinking of the traditional Aristotelian dichotomy between king and tyrant, and his doctrine on the avoidance of hatred, to state but a few examples, are all echoed in the Spanish political treatises of the time, even as authors boasted of their abhorrence toward the Florentine’s purported atheistic, immoral, or diabolical doctrine. The final chapter deals with Juan Pablo Martí Rizo’s rereading of *The Prince*. Unlike other authors, Rizo closely read *The Prince* and also appears to have had a good direct knowledge of the *Discourses on Livy*. In his *Norte de principes* (1626), he attempts to make several Machiavellian themes acceptable to a Catholic readership. In so doing, he continues the tradition of using Machiavelli to support a militant, imperial view of Christianity that, following the ancient Roman example, accepted to a degree the use of institutionalized religion for political purposes.

Howard makes a masterly use of the primary sources when comparing key passages of the anti-Machiavellian works with the corresponding Machiavellian texts in great detail. He also displays a full linguistic proficiency in his analyses and explanations of Spanish terms and phrases that are crucial for a nuanced interpretation. Thus his claims have proper textual support throughout. Overall, Howard succeeds in establishing an exemplary methodology and framework for making more accurate observations regarding Machiavelli’s influence in other aspects of Spanish Renaissance culture as well.

His selection of authors is ample enough and covers not only well-studied figures in Spanish Renaissance thought, such as Ginés de Sepúlveda and Ribadeneyra, but also lesser-known authors such as Gracian de la Madre de Dios, Juan de Santa María, Fernando Alvia de Castro, Jerónimo de Zeballos, Pedro Barbosa Homem, and Juan Blázquez Mayoralgo. Together they provide a sample of political thought in the Spanish dominions of the time, not only in peninsular Spain, but also in important centers of the Spanish empire, such as the Netherlands, Portugal, and Mexico. The extension of this approach to other authors of political treatises in early modern Spain, such as Juan de Mariana, should produce very interesting results in a future edition of this remarkable work.

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