



*The Power of Necessity: Reason of State in the Spanish Monarchy, ca. 1590-1650*

L.F. Kattenberg

# The power of necessity

## Reason of state in the Spanish monarchy, ca. 1590-1650

*Lisa Kattenberg*  
*Promotiedatum: 04/07/2018*

By the end of the sixteenth century, nowhere was the need for theory and justifications of state management greater than in the Spanish empire, extended over three continents and constantly experiencing the strains of war and rebellion. Yet nowhere was its implementation more problematic than in this Catholic monarchy, steeped in ideals of justice, divine justifications of power and kingship, and messianic rhetoric that tied its fate closely to the cause of the Faith. This dissertation studies late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century reason of state in the Spanish monarchy, that is a pragmatic way of thinking and writing about preserving a ruler's personal power and his ability to protect his dominion from internal and external threats. The core dilemma that reason of state revolves around is the conflict between traditional political principles of moral and religious conscious, and the practical needs of the moment. In reason-of-state discourse, this tension between moral and religious principles and political pragmatism was constantly present – in the writings on political theory, but also as it entered the political arena.

Although Spanish reason of state as a body of literature has received some attention from historians of political thought, no attempt has been made to systematically trace how it functioned in action. This has been a missed opportunity, for not only was reason of state as a discourse closely entwined with political practice, many individual reason-of-state authors also had active careers in royal service, in the course of which they produced source material which intellectual historians have hitherto left untouched. Uniting published sources with a broad range of archival material, this dissertation explores reason of state in a number of theoretical and practical contexts in the Spanish monarchy of the first half of the seventeenth century. It asks how individuals negotiated the tension between principle and pragmatism in both theory and practice, and how in this process they made use of history. History was closely connected to reason of state through political prudence, which was seen as a key requirement in the art of stable and efficient rule. Authors agreed that a ruler acquired prudence through experience, which included personal experience and especially knowledge of history. Many individuals who thought about history and politics also encountered the tension between principle and pragmatism in concrete circumstances in the course of their service to the Spanish king.

The appeal of necessity was a central concept in the Spanish monarchy's reason of state. According to Justus Lipsius's *Six Books of Politics*, a key influence in Spanish political discourse, necessity created by unusual circumstances could temporarily suspend moral or religious laws, as long as it was directed towards the common good rather than the pursuit of personal glory. I contend that in practice, thinkers and agents used the act of organizing information – drawn from classical and recent history, their own experience and analyses of current circumstances – to rhetorically present the condition of necessity. This was encouraged by contemporary practices of managing the large quantities of historical examples by breaking down histories into quotes, commonplaces and anecdotes, and organizing them in compilations and commonplace books. Since there existed no unambiguous set of conditions to determine when necessity had arrived, individuals had the liberty to demonstrate its presence by presenting certain circumstances, based on selected bits of information from the present and the past.

The first historian to identify reason of state as a political doctrine was Friedrich Meinecke, who has defined the so-called ideology of 'Machiavellism' as a proper divide between morality and politics, and has traced the fixed set of reason-of-state characteristics through four centuries of political philosophy. The Spanish Baroque version of reason of state as a 'doctrine', with special attention for the receptions of Machiavelli in Spain, has been addressed by Antonio Maravall and José Fernández-Santamaría. Meinecke's groundwork was first substantially challenged by Maurizio Viroli who, building on the recent developments in contextualism, approached politics and reason of state as languages rather than as a set of clear-cut ideas. Comparing Italian political discourse from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Viroli described a revolution in the language of politics in the late sixteenth century, in which the idea of politics transformed from a 'noble art' to the practical craft of reason of state. This deconstruction of reason of state as an ideology has progressed ever since, in work by historians such as Peter Burke, Harro Höpfl and Conal Condren.

Even though these historians since Viroli have consistently highlighted the practical and shifting nature of reason of state, no attempt has been made to explore if and how reason of state was present in negotiations, deliberations and decision-making in concrete political situations. Is it possible to capture this slippery rhetoric in its use in political practice? Condren's emphasis on how its seventeenth-century practitioners viewed reason of state fundamentally in casuistic terms seems crucial in this regard. Central to casuistic reasoning was the axiom that there are occasions when any given ethical rule or prohibition loses its authority in the face of higher or different requirements. This casuistry was signalled by evoking the abnormality of circumstance: normally we should do x, but in extraordinary circumstances, it is permissible, or necessary, to do y. It suits what reason of state was ultimately about: to allow statesmen to say and do things in real politics which would normally conflict with moral conscience, or enable individuals to reason their way out of dilemmas where every solution entails violating the principles of equity.

To do justice to its full range, we need to examine how reason of state in the Spanish monarchy originated in response to the pressing conflict between principles of conscience and the demands of realism in a complex political situation, and examine its use in the realm of actual politics. This can be done, I contend, by investigating the use of reason of state by individuals who not only reflected on politics and history, but also acted as soldiers, diplomats, informants and counsellors within the transnational government structures of the monarchy. This method does, however, provoke some fundamental questions. Does sufficient documentation exist to study these activities in the first place, and are these sources of such a nature that we can actually determine the individuals' views and actions? A second objection may arise from the question of whether these people are worth studying at all. Fernández-Santamaría, for one, called the reason-of-state writings of the Spanish Baroque 'inconsequential, repetitious, and in general mediocre', so why study thinkers who have hardly left a mark on the development of the history of political thought?

The historical and political writers who fill this dissertation could hardly be called sublime in the sense that their works played an important role in the developments in political philosophy of the early modern period as did those of Machiavelli, Grotius or Hobbes. They certainly have not made it into the canon of early modern political philosophy. Yet working and thinking within the structure of the Habsburg monarchy during tumultuous times, thinker-agents such as Virgilio Malvezzi did attempt to position their 'state' in space and time, reflecting on its history, nature and future preservation. A focus on thinker-agents also does justice to the context of the composite monarchy. Ideas and discourse crossed borders with ease, and like its economic, social and cultural history, the history of political thought of the Spanish monarchy

was not confined to national boundaries. These individuals were well read and engaged with reason of state as authors in different genres, approaching statecraft from different perspectives as they moved between the different realms and networks within the constellation of the monarchy. Moreover, they were able to reflect on and manipulate political ideas in their various capacities as agents within the structures of power. Thus, thinkers-agents are a vital link between theory and practice in the history of political thought.

As to the questions regarding source material, this dissertation hopes to demonstrate the value of documents proceeding from political practice in exploring questions relating to political thought. This research draws partly on thinker-agents' writings on history and the art of state, comprising their reflections on reconciling politics and morality, historical examples and causality, Providence and contingency, and legitimate yet expedient political behaviour. But especially in documents such as memoranda, letters, reports and individual votes in *consultas* from the royal councils we can trace how thinker-agents both drew on personal experience and referred to ancient history during the course of their professional lives. The boundaries between politics, morality and faith were constantly negotiated in the practice of their activities, as concepts from the language of reason of state were problematized and stretched through the implementation of the discourse.

This dissertation also draws on recent observations about information management and commonplace mentality, most notably by Ann Moss and Ann Blair, as a useful way to examine reason of state and the casuistry involved in its reasoning. Techniques of sorting, selecting and organizing information were, in fact, at the heart of reason of state, as extracted pieces of history and information were selected and organized to convey new meanings, and above all, create necessity. I argue that individual thinkers and agents in the Spanish monarchy in their writing and rhetoric used a combination of scholarly methods of organizing (historical) information with modes of moral casuistry to present or manipulate circumstances that would add up to a situation of necessity, which could override elements of moral law. This allowed them to unite politics and principle in theory, and especially in the practice of the political arena. A diplomatic agent reporting back to his superior could explain why he had needed to take a certain unorthodox decision through the selecting and ordering of 'bits' of information about the present state of affairs, historical precedents and commonplace experience. Information management is thus closely connected to the essential point of 'moderate' reason of state, with circumstances defining necessity, and necessity temporarily suspending moral law. In the absence of a fixed set of elements that determine it, necessity depends on the information given and on the way it is ordered. Bypassing morality, information legitimates power.

This dissertation consists of four chapters. The first studies the vernacular translations of Lipsius' Latin *Politica* by the Italian Ercole Cato and the Spanish Don Bernardino de Mendoza in the contexts of their lives and oeuvres, tracing the layers of their creation and the implications for the *Politica's* ideological content and readership. It argues that in their translations, Cato and Mendoza explored ways to square Lipsius' thought with the Christian-Ciceronian framework endorsed by Catholic orthodoxy. They found distinct ways to manipulate authorship and the way ideas were presented to the reader and contributed to a transnational 'Catholic' reason of state. Cato made a calculated use of examples, both from classical antiquity and from recent events, such as the Dutch rebellion against Spain. Moreover, this chapter shows how in transforming the *Politica*, the translators experimented with organizing knowledge and (historical) information, and its potential for making Lipsian reason of state explicit, and legitimizing amoral political behavior. Thus, the makeovers of the *Politica* provide deeper insight into the dynamics of history, information and legitimacy within the discourse of reason of state.

With their adaptations of one of its most influential works, Cato and Mendoza both intervened in the transnational discourse of 'Catholic' reason of state of Counter-Reformation Europe.

The second chapter explores ideals and practices of turning classical histories into political lessons for the present, focusing on a number of individuals who translated the histories of Tacitus into Spanish, while they also served their king as soldiers, counsellors and informants. Baltasar Álamos de Barrientos, Carlos Coloma, Manuel Sueyro and Fernando Alvía de Castro all testified about the practical value of Tacitus in the present, based on the universal truth of his analyses and the similarity of the times, yet they struggled with the internal contradictions within the endless lists of wisdoms, not to mention with the fact that their author had produced the texts many centuries ago, in a different, pagan world. Still, the counsel of historical experience was tirelessly advocated in reason-of-state discourse, and I show that the call was answered in practice as the Tacitists in various capacities engaged with the problem of the Dutch Revolt. I argue that although they were well aware of change, they had no scruples in using anachronism and historical analogies, or using the ancients as rhetorical tools to express their ideas and further their political aims. Memorials and pieces of counsel were written from the perspective of events from recent history and could effortlessly be placed alongside Tacitean phrases. Yet the ancient past was also a safe space that could be used to criticize present policies or express warnings, without infringing on the domain of Providence.

The third chapter addresses questions of history and necessity based on the oeuvre and actions of Virgilio Malvezzi, a Bolognese historian who had a high-flying career in the service of Philip IV and the Count-Duke of Olivares. Malvezzi left a wealth of material through which these views can be explored, ranging from political histories of the Spanish monarchy and biographies of Roman and biblical kings, to sheets full of reading and writing notes, and extensive correspondence with many of the great soldiers, artists and statesmen of his time. Following Malvezzi to the Low Countries and his small-scale diplomacy with French nobles conspiring against the King of France, I show how in his letters he reflected on necessity. Through the ordering of information, he reported circumstances in such a way that they legitimized the application of unorthodox strategies such as dissimulation and pretence. As we can observe in the emergence of one of his published historical works from an early manuscript draft, the practice of ordering historical particulars and aphorism-like observations was also present in Malvezzi's writing techniques. It shows how the method of ordering could also be at the base of a chronological narrative and how extenuating necessity could then be used in the context of an apologetic political history.

The fourth chapter discusses the various rounds of debates and reflections on whether and how to conclude peace or truce with the Dutch rebels during the second half of the Eighty Years' War by agents and statesmen from various parts of the Spanish monarchy. What solutions were conceivable when attempts to preserve Spanish dominion over the Low Countries ran contrary to the demands of the Catholic faith and the preservation of the rest of the monarchy? Could special circumstances allow for special measures or concessions that might deviate from the princely obligations towards religion and reputation? Agents and counsellors were at the centre of a constant cycle of collecting and assessing information, often on the basis of experience of the war in which they themselves had played an active part. They projected likely future courses, searching for the utmost expedience within the boundaries of royal conscience and obligations. I show that as each decade of the *Guerra de Flandes* added to its own history, and the rounds of negotiations turned into precedents for fresh ones, pragmatic arguments and solutions were often inspired by experience. This 'mother of prudence' according to political theory, became in the practice of the debates a crucial and ubiquitous term, which covered all sorts of memory and wisdom acquired from various pasts. Together with a notion of extenuating

necessity, experience was essentially an opponent of conscience, but all needed to be united in ending the 'interminable' war.

The cases brought together in this dissertation show the value of focusing on thinker-agents as a method for studying political discourse. Despite exhortations of scholars following Quentin Skinner to extend their research to thinkers other than the traditional canon of political philosophers, historians of political thought still tend to focus on a relatively limited body of intellectual innovators. This dissertation concludes that the expressions of thinker-agents can be equally fruitful for the study of early modern political discourse. Moreover, the friction between conscience and pragmatic politics was a European phenomenon, tied to the challenges of modernizing states. In the Spanish monarchy, this can be observed as through a magnifying glass. In comparison with other states, Spanish dominion was both more extended and complicated, and also more grounded in and entangled with the demands of morality and religion. The early modern Spanish monarchy pioneered on an unprecedented scale the solving of the political-moral dilemmas of the age.

Another conclusion concerns the extent to which reason of state signaled a process of modernization. For Friedrich Meinecke reason of state was an abstract logic, 'the State's First Law of Motion', which progressed through modern history. The forces of the state were abstract and unconcerned with religion, and connected Machiavelli to Hegel and Ranke, since 'action prompted by *raison d'état* has helped to prepare the way for modern Historicism.' Does the reason of state we have seen in this dissertation relate in any way to these 'modern' forces of secularization and nascent historicism? The conflict between Catholic conscience and the practical needs of the monarchy was at the heart of the Spanish monarchy's reason of state, and in the early seventeenth century, the very notion of politics without Christian morality simply did not make sense. But from this tension between conscience and pragmatism sprang an intellectual creativity which illustrates the flexibility with which individuals drew on discourses of historical scholarship, case morality, and politics. This dissertation, then, suggests that there is no need to look for a clean break between a traditional view of politics and a secular or 'modern' reason of state. Reason of state could function within a Catholic monarchy. In fact, it was highly suitable for an empire of unprecedented scale, forced to adapt to the changing times.

Historians of scholarship and historical thought have similarly searched for the early modern origins of modern historicism. According to them, modernization marked by a process in which sophisticated developments in humanist methods of scrutiny of the classics gradually undermined the program of *imitatio*, and at some point in the seventeenth century we encounter 'the intellectual crossroads' to modernity. The early-seventeenth-century thinker-agents in the Spanish monarchy who engaged with reason-of-state discourse were aware of the distance between their 'modern' present and the past, but at the same time they all remained firmly located within the paradigm of the commonplace system and cyclical history. Individuals used classical texts in their political writings and documents of counsel to construct analogies and strategic anachronisms, or they used the ancients as rhetorical tool. The awareness of difference and distance between the present and ancient times did not necessarily have to be accompanied by a 'modern' idea of linear historical development and an open future: it sustained the notion of a universe ruled by Providence, while simultaneously enabling pragmatic political thought. In reason of state as it has here been presented in its various contexts within the early-seventeenth-century Spanish monarchy, elements appear both of what others have called 'modern' as well as 'traditional'. Both in theory and in practice, thinker-agents were creative in their manipulation of circumstances and presenting the condition of necessity. What they needed was a discourse that suited the times, in which their monarch ruled a global empire on which the sun never set.