Raison d'état - Notes on a term pertaining to political dynamics

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Invoking *raison d'état* - the *national interest* or the *good of the state* - drives political action. Invoking it as the basis for actions transcends religious-ethical justifications for political decisions and actions, and, at the same time, establishes absolute political autonomy and responsibility. It also manifests a new possibility of political exoneration in ratification of the drive towards political success. In a way, *raison d'état* may be determined for every state and every political order with regard to the goals and manner of political actions; it may, however, additionally serve as a justification and excuse for a political actor to go beyond what is legally admissible - at least in its grey area - and, should the necessity arise, to apply political power outside predetermined conventions and thus, at the same time, give impulses and initiate new policies or directions in politics. Even today, the point that actions are taken *pour raison d'état*, and thus for the good of the whole, sometimes makes it possible, by invoking a higher, superordinate interest, to deal pragmatically, flexibly and extremely dynamically with existential challenges and political problems in a targeted and effective manner.

The term *raison d'état* has thus become a guiding light which provides orientation for politicians pleading the inevitability of political decisions and actions. The complex challenges which confront the state with globalization on the one hand, and the disintegration of states and concomitant weak statehood on the other, could breathe new life into this term and give it new currency as regards the interpretation of its *raison d'être* and the dynamic assertion of interests in the balancing act between dynamic and static politics. Regarding German foreign policy, the compass of German *raison d'état* expanded in parallel with the scope of action available to German society and its government. Initially targeted at gaining freedom of action for the state, it is today faced with the claim - apparently transported via Europe - to participate in the shaping of international order.  

For Herfried Münkler, the term *raison d'état* has long since ceased to be a guiding principle of political theory. This statement is questionable, at least with regard to its absoluteness. Although, for Münkler, recent research has been characterized by a "historicization" of the term, it has remained, even for him, a *leitmotiv* of political action and thus a reality. The term has a special meaning in political theory, as it is not codified either legally or in terms of state theory, and its evaluation, especially the assessment of its application, therefore consistently depends on differing points of view in different situations and different contexts. Political theory configuring social self-perceptions as a way of exploring specific varieties of political theory does not mean that, ultimately, this context was not shaped by political theory itself. Contemporary trends frequently leave have an impact and are discussed against the backdrop of a given era’s point of view, but often also in an interest-focused manner. For this reason, the contextual application or transfer of political concepts to concrete circumstances of political reality always requires appropriate reflection. Hence, the past must be viewed in accordance with its own specific tenets.

The notion of the political cannot be condensed into a reduction of certain factors incapable of supporting the whole, and politics does not readily appear as a predetermined, clearly delimited field. Thus, the concept of *raison d'état* also has an uncertainty attached to it which makes it difficult to configure it uniformly in the social context. The term is the very embodiment of a "political action directive." As a term, *raison d'état* is still powerful, particularly in the discourse on state theory and international law. In the political rulebook it is therefore a timeless decision-making parameter. Nevertheless, in political actions, it has repeatedly been - whether openly or covertly - a fact of *realpolitik*, both in national and, especially, in international transactions. It is therefore surprising that recent state encyclopaedias, and encyclopaedias dealing with political science, no longer deal with this important concept separately.

At the centre of every political theory are terms or concepts which constitute, in a pragmatic sense, instruments of science. As such, these instruments are often subject to differing uses and differing applications viewed from different perspectives with differentiated *foci*. This specifically applies to the term *raison d'état*. It has repeatedly been of central importance, especially to the "prime starting point of modern political theory, the question of the legitimacy of political rule". It is a concept which guides awareness in understanding the state, especially in fluid and dynamic processes pertaining to gains of, and shifts in, power.

Particularly in the more recent era, against the backdrop of globalization, the term could be used to analyse and identify the contextual interactions of political theory and practice and the possibilities of influencing them. It is also a matter of the state's ability to evolve, of violent expansions or breakaways, i.e. conquests and secessions, as well as their respective justifications. In this context, disintegration and formation of states are two interdependent processes which are of the utmost importance for the stability of the international system, whose most important political units are still states, despite the increasing relevance of supra-, inter-, and transnational actors. It is precisely the struggle to change or preserve the *status quo* among states and para-states actors which lack the legitimacy of statehood that demonstrates the contradictions in, and interdependencies of, power aspirations in the context of dynamics and stability.

It is a moot point whether the terms *static* and *dynamic* have a predominantly structural, constructivist theoretical base or whether they are primarily rooted in action theory. What needs stating is that this is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of a theoretical concept and its specific context. In any case, an attempt is made in the following to develop a pragmatic approach to the terms in a theoretical context. It is the pragmatic approach that gives the topic its currency and thus its epistemological interest.


**Raison d’État: the Term, Its Meaning and Interpretation**

The term “ragione di stato” was introduced at the beginning of the 17th century as a political buzzword, as the name for a corrupt concept according to which politics should primarily be determined by its uses, and whose interpretation should always be mindful of the attributes of the political-historical situation. In Italian it was not Niccolo Machiavelli who introduced the phrase *ragione di stato*, but Giovanni Butero, although the former’s consequentialism, according to which an action’s value is solely determined by its effect, is, if not indispensable, then at least helpful for actions *pour raison d’état*. The term is still controversial and carries positive or negative connotations, depending on the position and positioning of the person who uses it. It is derived from the Italian *ragione di stato*, which in a literal translation means *raison d’état*, and is today generally understood to mean the primacy of state interests over all others, - or in general, the expression of the state’s claim to be able to defy the law (which it has to protect) should a so-called higher interest require it.

In essence, today’s general understanding of the term is also essentially negative: in the face of *raison d’état* other norms and values, usually considered inviolable, must retreat; it suspends and dispenses, postpones, rescinds, and abrogates; in its name, the power of state unburdens itself from the legal shackles and bonds which usually restrict and check it. However, today’s importance of *raison d’état* for the activities of political actors engage in is assessed in a nuanced fashion: for Münkler it has become one of the least talked about political imperatives of modernity, which requires that political decisions are made in secret, and without disclosure of the critical motives, and thus most effective where least talked about. Helmut Kuhn, on the other hand, attempts to classify it even-handedly and thus preserve, if not rehabilitate it, as a political action concept. He therefore defines the term as a “provision of modern ‘realpolitik’.”

It is associated with the implicit admission that certain deviations from the standard moral or ethical demands made on human beings as individuals are necessary and be legitimate for the state and its activities. For von der Gablenz, *raison d’état* means linking power with reason. In other words, he places the term in a close relationship with a positively connoted word, and at the same time restricts its application and effect. Accordingly, Münkler is right when he states that, just as the authority to break the law means an extension of the sovereign power to act, the rationality of interests restricts and codifies despotism: to protecting the interests of the states governed by them. Pleading *raison d’état* is therefore a vague, but not a limitless argument. Invoking it in the domestic political debate and as a justification - at least to the outside world, vis-à-vis third parties - often also marks the end of the debate and any discussion.

**The Term *raison d’état* and Its Relationship with the Political Actor and the Political Order**

As a term, *raison d’état* has a double meaning: on the one hand, *raison of state* implies that there are universally valid, recommended rules of conduct concerning the advantageous management of a state; on the other hand, each state also boasts a peculiar *raison*, which must be recognized and followed as a policy guideline. Friedrich Meinecke understands the term in the latter sense: “For every state there is an idea of action, an ideal reason of state.” For him the term therefore has something determinate and pre-determined, which, however, is not necessarily clear. Identifying it is the endeavour of every statesman... Meinecke thus stresses the political actor’s special ability. At the same time, right at the beginning of *The Idea of State Reason*, he defines the term as “... the maxim of state action, the law of motion governing the state*, which tells the statesman what he must do to preserve the health and strength of the state, and sets out ways and goals.

Here, the strategic importance of the term takes comes into its own. The true statesman must therefore intervene here in order to comply with the law of motion governing the state. For Meinecke, the concept of *raison d’état* is closely related to that of political powers as “... that force which, in the coexistence of states, takes the reason of state beyond the limits of law and custom”. He justifies the necessity of this link with the fact that the state must assert its supposed right and existential need, because no one else will provide it, because there is no adjudicating and mediating power over states. Accordingly, it is not about the normativity of a moral or legal edict, as Carl Schmitt, the “most brilliant right-wing conservative thinker of the Weimar Republic” and one of the most controversial, influential and most important German teachers of constitutional law of the 20th century, who burned for the state, stressed in his criticism of Meinecke, read by Quritsch as a “merciless shellacking” - but solely about the question: Who takes the decisions?

But, who takes decisions and how are decisions taken? For Bergstraesser, the question concerning the implementation and the consequence of political will and decision-making is one of the central analytical problems of academic thinking about politics. For Immanuel Kant, the state is “... the unification of a multitude of people under the law”. Hence, any spatial reference, the state as a spatial entity, plays no role for Kant. With him, the idea of legal ties is dominant. Jakob Burckhardt postulates that the state is the bulwark of the law. The political order culminates in the state as a political entity. The law is thus also referred to as politics cast in norms. The law accordingly follows the political conditions, and the power dynamics determine the legal foundations. Power is therefore an indispensable and central factor in connection with the concept of a state.

This factor has a decisive influence on the coexistence of people. Ferdinand Tönnies pointed out the contrast between systems of coexistence which are based on the concordance of the will, i.e. harmony, and are shaped by custom and religion, and those based on coincident free will, on convention, and which engender security through political legislation and ideational and conscious validation as well as justification through public opinion. Hence, the systems of human coexistence are political structures. And, according to Max Weber, all political structures are enforced structures. For him, the state is the community which, within a certain area, claims the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Kuhn takes up this argument by equating force with power; for him, the state is a structure based on force. However, he modifies the term ‘force’ to the extent that politically concentrated power is neither purely spiritual power nor brute force, but a mixture of both, in which he wants to give predominance to the former.

For Weber, the monopoly on the legitimate use of force is the decisive characteristic of the state - “there is no other way of defining it”. In the final analysis he therefore endows the state with total power over the highest legally protected interests. Max Weber invests the state with “legitmate power” over life, death, and freedom. For him, the political actor implements and executes measures and therefore, by necessity, requires a means of enforcement. And politics employs the specific means of force, backed up by violence. At the same time, however, violence is the decisive means for politics. In Weber’s work, the state is defined by physical violence, the state’s ultimate means, which is also specific to it, and power is always sustained by the chance of imposing one’s will on others.
With Weber, this will culminates in the concept of *state reason* as an "end in itself of preserving (or transforming) the internal and external distribution of force*. Meinecke also identified the problem that the uses of power have to constrain the individual despotism exhibited by the holders of power. Deviating from Weber, *reason of state* is, for Meinecke, "the maxim of state action, the state's law of motion [...] which tells the statesman what he must do to keep the state healthy and strong". In this formulation, the term *reason of state* acquires an existential meaning for the state. "The reason of state becomes ... a profound and substantial concept of state necessity*. This is also the reason for the link between political action and the structure of the state.

In political science, the concept of the state helps to mark out the presently predominant type of political unit as a politically integrated society in a clearly defined geographical area, subject to a single institutional political rule. The concept of the state thus serves to denotate a political regime and its territorially and historically defined forms. In this respect, the term expresses the dualistic connection of a legal-political construct. The question remains how the two terms relate to each other and how they interrelate. They do not necessarily form an inseparable or, least of all, a congruent unit. "The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political", as Carl Schmitt stresses the importance of his reflections on the nature of the political at the beginning of the main part of his treatise. Accordingly, it was clear to him that the political is always based on, and supports, the state.

**Raison d'état and the Relationship between Power and the Law**

The term *reason of state* is therefore also not to be considered in isolation. It is intricately linked to the concepts of *power* and *law*. It is precisely these terms which are of particular importance for the term *reason of state*, because they are its points of reference between which it is located without a clear definition of how close it is to the one or the other coordinate. *Power* and *law* are central concepts of politics. The terms, however, are not identical or even congruent. Carl Schmitt even considers them "absolutely incompatible". Nevertheless, *power* and *law* occur in manifold and reciprocal, if often strained, relationships with each other. Sometimes they are diametrically opposed. Drawing on Max Weber, Hättich regards *power* as the possibility of influencing political rule or the political order. As Bossard notes, *power* is essential to the foundation establishing order, but it always carries in it the seeds of degeneration and destructive application.

Arnold Brecht also pointed out that the word *power* allows for extremely different interpretations: that the term certainly always designates the possibility of enforcing one's own will, but that it does not clearly express by what means and for which purposes this possibility is sought and used. With this, Brecht again illustrated the tension between *power* and *law*. Helmut Kuhn resolves the apparent contradiction between *power* and *law*, with the state defining for itself the law governing the exercise of power, by constituting the statehood of a community, which results from assuming the task of realising the law.

Kuhn thereby undoubtedly presumes the good faith and good will of the political actors; or at least their effective supervision by the state community. However, for Weber, in political reality, *power* is not necessarily bound to the law. For him, too, it is about the availability and the possibilities of implementing power. For Weber, the success of applied politics ultimately depends on the power relations and not on ethical law. For him, therefore, *power* is the indispensable means of politics, and the pursuit of power one of its driving forces. For Weber, *power* therefore develops impulse-giving dynamism. For him, politics is always about interests in the distribution, maintenance or realignment of power. In this respect, Weber defines *power* as a flexible element between statics and dynamics. He notes that the power of political entities carries within it a specific dynamic.

**On the Political Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli**

Friedrich Meinecke begins his investigation of the essence of *raison d'état* with Machiavelli, the first man "... with whom the history of the idea of state reason begins in the modern occident..."; for Meinecke, however, it is a question of substance not slogan, which is absent from the Machiavelli's work, who also refrained from paring down his thoughts on state reason so as to fit a single *shibboleth*. Machiavelli, who was aware of the concept but not the term, replaced the theology-based construct of the Middle Ages with the 'ethics' of state self-preservation. Machiavelli did not develop a theoretical foundation for his approach; his originality lies in his direct manner of thinking, of isolating technical questions of politics and of separating them from conventional theological and moral interdependencies, as well as in the methodically practised narrowing of the focus on technical problems of politics.

Machiavelli is of the opinion that the precept stating that no measures necessary to save the mother country should be left neglected is to be respected and emulated; the mother country must be rescued whatever the circumstances, because it would always be appropriately defended, irrespective of whether the means are shameful or laudable. In his teachings, Machiavelli does not orientate himself along the categories of *is* and *should*, of *good* and *evil*, each one of which was a given at the time. For him, these points of reference for political action are not essential, defining parameters of action providing compulsory orientation; however, they continue to be helpful for him as factors in the overall assessment of the political situation and for individual behaviour resulting from it.

Tilman Mayer has stated that what is new about Machiavelli's approach is the fact that both *good* and *evil* must be known, but that it is up to the people which they opt for. He therefore separates political action from its theoretical orientation towards religious and moral goals. The term *raison d'état* therefore in concurrent conflict with religion and morality. It finds itself in this situation because the justification of political action is no longer based on religious/ethical reasons, but - completely detached from this - on political necessities and vital interests of the state. In this, Machiavelli breaks with the previous doctrine. *Honestum*, integrity, no longer enjoys its traditional priority.

Machiavelli institutes a completely new analysis of political behaviour in that his doctrine of politics is no longer in the tradition of a continuation of ethics, but communicates power-related knowledge which is characterised by its usefulness. Through his handbook for success and the techniques of power he supplants the orientation towards a good life, as it was characteristic of classical philosophy, with teachings whose 'new deities' are power and success. Success thus becomes a new absolute that brooks no competition.

At the same time, however, Machiavelli's teachings also mean that the appeal to *raison d'état* assigns absolute autonomy to the political actor, but also absolute responsibility concerning his political conduct. Any excuplation for religious/ethical reasons is no longer permissible. A new point of reference is therefore needed to give legitimacy to political action and to provide personal exoneration. Machiavelli, whose thinking stands for the immediate analysis of reality, produces a new awareness that there is an intrinsic connection between atrocities, feral lust for power, cruelty, treachery, and treason as side effects of power politics and that all this is an inseparable part of the nature of the political power struggle. Machiavelli succeeds in clearly separating the question of the real nature of political events from the problems relating to the legitimacy of state actions.
Machiavelli is also not prepared to regard results merely as partly fortunate or partly unfortunate, as is Burckhardt’s general view of life.\(^8\) Machiavelli adheres to different standards; what is critical for him is what is feasible and achievable under given circumstances. For Machiavelli, power is an organizing and constructive principle.\(^7\) Machiavelli considers politics in categories of power and detaches the question of power-political realities from the problems of theology and natural law; in politics he is interested in the simple connection between cause and effect.\(^8\) Above all, he conducts his investigation against the backdrop of his own political experience, political intelligence and his insight into history;\(^9\) his method is inductive, rhetorical and empirical.\(^10\)

Machiavelli thus drafted a set of rules concerning the workings of power which correspond to and reflect certain social conditions whatever the age.\(^11\) Machiavelli’s model of politics is thus not a simple theory of action and implementation dictating political decisions, but points the users towards possibilities of action, ultimately, however, it leaves the decision to them. This is a completely new and innovative approach. In his alternative way of thinking, Machiavelli abstracts questions to such a degree that they can be decided, and he endeavours, through differentiation, to provide guidance for decisions.\(^12\) Success and/or failure are therefore inevitably linked to the decisions taken by the political actors who stand and fall with their decisions. Machiavelli’s theory leaves it to the political actor to establish order in a crisis with strong-arm tactics and, if feasible, convert a dictatorship into a republic.\(^13\) And pursuant to the cycle theory, dictatorship and republic have a recurring function, which cannot ultimately bring to a halt the course of events.\(^14\)

The political actor is free to decide - depending on the political constellations and power relations on which s/he may have a controlling influence - by activating parties on the basis of considerations of his/her own interest. For Machiavelli, political directives derived from, perennially valid ethical norms are not useful if they are unrelated to a certain context; they may even prove dangerous for those who are guided by them.\(^15\) Machiavelli’s goal is always the preservation, the stabilisation and possibly even the expansion of the polity.\(^16\) Hans von Hentig - to whom Münkler\(^17\) also refers - has stated that Machiavelli’s advice does not, in fact, exceed the limits of what is conceded to modern states for their preservation.\(^18\)

**Conclusion**

The term *raison d’état* is a term pertaining to political dynamics and is the result of practical politics. It is in the nature of politics that it cannot do without this term - either directly or indirectly - as an instrument of reapolitical in political dynamics. The notion of statehood is in constant flux, and a state based on the rule of law must always, precisely because it is based on the rule of law, also exert its authority.\(^19\) Therefore, it is worthwhile to keep paying attention to the term *raison d’état* also from the point of view of political theory and to keep track of it in the context in which it actually appears.

**Remarks:**

25. ibid., p.328.
27. Petraschek: Staatsräson, l.c., p.70.
31. ibid., p.19.
32. ibid., p.21.
91) Mayer, Gründung oder die Lehre des Bösen, l.c., p.43.
92) Ottmann: Geschichte des politischen Denkens, l.c., p.18.
93) ibid., p.52.
94) ibid.