

BODIN'S THEORY OF SOVEREIGNTY AND ITS UPDATING

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Abstract. I explore Jean Bodin's theory of sovereignty, focusing on its eschatological dimension and departure from Machiavellian teleology. The analysis highlights how Bodin's concept of absolute power requires the embodiment of a link between God, nature, and the people within the sovereign. This connection is essential for maintaining political and social order, as it aligns with divine law and emphasizes the correlation between law, justice, truth, beauty, and the Spirit. Ultimately, drawing parallels with Plato's philosopher-king, the paper questions the relevance of Bodin's ideas in contemporary society, particularly in the context of potential rifts between elites and the people, and the erosion of traditional values.

Keywords: Jean Bodin, sovereignty, eschatology, Machiavelli, political philosophy

The aim here is to understand why, for Jean Bodin, the sacralisation of so-called *absolute power* is not just a teleological approach, as Machiavelli does in *The Prince*, but also has an eschatological dimension (following Plato's example in his book "Republic") in order to act perfectly both within a form (entelechy), such as the State, and also within the person who embodies it as its head.

In so doing, this person will be able not only to preserve the political order (and social stratification) but also to improve the symbolic order and thus the unity between God, nature, and the people. The person who embodies these three elements must show this by his perfect behaviour, expressing the strong correlation between law and justice, both of which are closely linked to the True or Good and the Beautiful or Spirit.

So, it’s not just a question of seeing the King, for example, as a “Place/Holder of God”, exercising his power “in the name” of God, but as a very incarnation. Even in the tiniest gesture, he shows how the whole charisma of the Spirit acts to energise all those political things that need to be brought together: people, State, and elite. How, for example, following “etiquette” to achieve the perfect symbiosis between the cosmos and the living on earth in God’s way is not just plastic but an aesthetic.

All this will certainly be seen as a kind of ancient way of living *Politeia* (Republic, in Greek) and embodying it; but are we so sure? Is this way of *linking* politics and good behaviour under a transcendental (or divine) gaze, in the knowledge that Caesar and God have separate kingdoms, really lost forever?

1. When “we” first read this extract below (belonging to Book 1, Chap. 8 of *The Six Books of the Republic* (Bodin 1986/1576, 189) Paris, Editions Fayard, 189]) concerning the Bodinian definition of this *link* between absolute power and sovereignty, perhaps we can gain some understanding of the way in which the “symbolic charge” that enables this connection is invested:
2. “(...) If you govern well, you will have everything to your liking: otherwise, you will be demeaned and stripped in such a way that not even this chair in which you are sitting will remain yours. This power is absolute, and sovereign: for it has no other condition than that which the law of God and of nature commands. It is also possible to see kingdoms and principalities devolved by successive right, that such or such a similar form is sometimes preserved: but there is none like that of Carinthia (form of investing the Duke of Carinthia), where even now one sees a marble stone near the holy city Vitus in a meadow: on which climbs a peasant, to whom this office belongs by successive right, having on the right a black cow, on the left a thin mare, and the people all around. He who comes to be duke walks with many lords dressed in red, and the “ensigns” (officers) before him, and all in order, except the duke who is dressed like a poor shepherd,

with a stick; and he who is on the stone cries out in Slavonic (Slavonic): *Who is he, he says, who walks so bravely?* The people replied that it was their Prince; then he asked, Is he a judge? Does he seek the salvation of his country? Is he a man of good character, worthy of honour, a religious man? They answer: He is, and he will be. Then the peasant gives the Duke a small blow, and the peasant remains exempt from public charges, and the Duke climbs on the stone while waving his sword, and speaking to the people promises to be just and in this garb goes to mass, and then takes the ducal garb, and returns to the stone, and receives the tributes and oaths of fidelity (...).”

What is the purpose of this extract? Firstly, to explain for Bodin the very difference between tyranny and monarchy, in the sense that the first word designates absolute power given or taken by a single man who concentrates all decisions without any consent—except that given by his supporters, of course. So, power will be granted to the tyrant as in ancient Greece or Rome, by the people in rebellion against the elites, for example, or when Bonaparte receives power (more than he takes it) before becoming emperor. However, this is totally different from the symbolic (and mystical, as we shall see later) content of the second word, “monarchy”, at least in Bodin’s mind, when he explains that the “Prince” *must* embody in every detail not only the Force but also the *link* between God and human life (soul and body) in every gesture of daily life, even in the most intimate thought (a point echoed by Bossuet in “*De la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même*”). It is therefore a question of perfectly coordinating “Justice and Righteousness” (to use Jean Baechler’s expression) in all behaviour, private and public.

Machiavelli also reflected on this dialectic, similar to that one linking “Fortuna” and “Virtue”. However, Bodin argued that this was insufficient, unless carried out under the guidance of the Spirit of God. From this perspective, Bodin criticises *The Prince*, asserting that true perfection requires the proper alignment of two fundamental elements: justice and righteousness. In the Middle

Ages, this ideal was encapsulated by the famous phrase “Judgment of God”, which determined whether an action was undertaken in accordance with divine justice. If one is just, righteousness in action can achieve perfect osmosis between the true, the beautiful, and the Good—the *harmonic geometry* described in the *Sixth Book*—thus ensuring victory in battle.

This type of syllogism also seems to be linked to that very strong thought of Plato (which seems to be a key reference for Bodin in his book on *The Republic*) when Plato shows *The Republic* and *Politics* that the Monarch must also be the most subtle philosopher in the sense of acting in the right decision. Because *sovereignty* (which is not simply the fact of “deciding on the exceptional situation”, as Carl Schmitt puts it) must personify precisely the link with God (truth and harmony). This is what is at stake: the action decided upon must express in itself that it is God who governs it and not just a human being wishing to substitute himself for God. Hence the difficulties when the Monarch wants to become the latter in Rome or Egypt.

Let’s return to the extract for a moment to clarify what this means. When the “peasant gives a little blow to the Duke”, it seems to suggest that the link with God must be permanent in order to achieve good wealth, health, character, and happiness. And that too in the manner of Aristotle, when he said that the very aim of the city is *Politeia*, not just *Polis*—or how and why to come together as a “City” if we have no pleasure in it.

From this point of view, then, the Duke or King cannot be anything other than God’s real representative (his “lieu/tenant”—a French word which means that his role is also to remain, to keep the link as a sacralised independent space). “If and only if”, nevertheless (to speak as Quine did when he used this formula of Tarski’s) the sovereign does not do this only out of “necessity”; it means that having the final or “absolute” word does not entail the imposition of a tyrannical order or some fantasy, but rather the realisation *sine die* of God’s Law (*Truth and Justice*). What does this mean?

Perhaps this: Bodin speaks of the “three forms of Justice” as he discusses with Plato (in Book Six of *The Republic*, Chap. 6, *The Three Daughters of Themis*)—i.e. “Right, Equity, and Peace”—where the geometric proportions must be seen within every daily event, in every gesture, or in the link between eschatology and teleology, personified in entelechy in every perception and behaviour. To what end? Not just to express a kind of geometry among a thousand, but to significantly imprint these three key figures in every gesture, every behaviour, according to the Law of God and, above all, according to the destiny given by God to the French monarchy.

In a preface presenting some summaries of Bodin’s book on *The Republic* (*Politeia* and not just *Res Publica*), Luc de Goustine writes:

The absoluteness of the “royal monarchy”, according to Bodin, is therefore to be understood in opposition to the “absolutism” that sank under the blows of “republicanism” in ‘89. It is the dimension of his independence from all powers, his detachment from all property and his submission to the transcendent law that makes the prince, unlike the feudal lord and the “tyrannical monarch”, the Christ-like servant-arbiter of the Republic. The philosopher does not hesitate to point to the model of the Hebrew kings, David and Solomon, anointed by the Lord, whose mysticism the Frankish monarchy inherited from the very beginning. At the height of the events of his time, the legitimate king Henry III and his successor Henry of Navarre were challenged to introduce an additional “royalty” into the “monarchy” in order to save the bloodless Republic. (Luc de Goustine. “Preface”, in Bodin 1999, 13)

This is why attending the King’s arrival and participating in his holy presence with the people, at every public event, is so important in order to imbibe that sacred aura that permeates his supposedly perfect behaviour. This is also why people want to see the same sacred behaviour in every gesture of those other people who are with the King. People want to absorb this kind of divine energy to reinforce their own daily behaviour and every thought. It is a kind of psycho-sociological and universal “function” that “people” considered to be the elites must consider to be their duty. And now, in our time, the so-called “stars” have to play this same kind of role to enable a kind of mimicry and thus show the capacity not only to

reproduce all this in their own behaviour but to live with it in order to attain the true “absolute” or geometric harmonic coming from the Law of God.

Nevertheless, at this stage, we must not forget, either, in the words of Montesquieu, that “absolute power corrupts absolutely”—especially if it is not personified by the *independent body*, which is not only, as Bodin said, the mystical link protecting the King, but also the effective demonstration of the reality of independent institutions enabling the three “harmonic items” of justice to function as freely as possible.

But how can we be sure they will also retain their independent way of exercising power? It’s a vicious circle.

This is indeed a permanent problem of the citizen condition, especially if we are not capable of strongly protecting these “harmonic” powers. How can we do this? Certainly, within the democratic system, public opinion—thinking in a Voltairean way—seems to help the *Politeia* to maintain the very path of this *geometric harmony*, which seems to be the Bodinian definition of “absolute power”. But is this enough when we can see both the monopolization of the possibility of speaking and, above all, the search for coherence with the Law being concentrated in only a few hands that want to destroy this geometry as “inessential” or “old-fashioned”?

In other words, we can translate Bodin’s search for perfection into a kind of model for action, allowing four morphological improvements in a civilization based on this type of geometry, even for individual self-esteem that does not believe in God. With this *harmonic proportion* (Book 6, Chap. 6), it is possible both to retain the best results achieved for living happily as humans and citizens, and even to improve them if there are too many disparities. Then, to disperse this effort into equal and independent institutions, and finally, to remove what is not necessary within each type of institution in order to renovate the whole.

But, once again, how is this possible if we’ve lost the tools with which to build this geometry, especially in a situation where we can

actually observe a deep rift between the people and certain elites who no longer believe in this sort of mystical root between people and power, and are simply forcing them to become what they want? But within which geometry, which *matrix* exactly?

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