Machiavelli

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Niccoló Machiavelli, the founder of modern political science, was born in Florence on May 3, 1469 during the Augustan Age of the Italian Renaissance (also called the Age of Lorenzo, after the Medici ruler Lorenzo the Magnificent).[1] Although both terms describe 15th century Italy, each aspect influenced Machiavelli's role and shaped his views as a public servant and as a political scientist.

Beginning with the effect of the Italian Renaissance, it is important to note that Machiavelli's family was a part of the *popolo grasso*,[2] a phrase which characterized the merchant families of the time. Although a lawyer who struggled for money, his father Bernardo took great interest in his son's education.[3] Bernardo introduced Niccoló to humanist ideas, Roman ideals, Greek works, and republican beliefs; that is, Machiavelli participated in the Florentine Renaissance and familiarized himself with art, music, philosophy, and science, because of the urgings of his father.

Clearly, the Florentine Renaissance affected Machiavelli's future to some degree; however, living under Medici rule proved a greater influence. Although Lorenzo d'Medici lessened the strain between the five Italian factions,[4] Machiavelli's family disliked the banking family's heir to the throne. Many scholars speculate Lorenzo's oligarchic rule was the reason for the opposition.[5] The Machiavelli family was not alone in its dislike of Lorenzo and the d'Medici family, for Florence expelled the Medici family in 1494, only two years following Lorenzo's death.

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[1] Gauss 1952: 9-10

[2] The *popolo grasso* was composed of wealthy and influential professionals and guild members who controlled trade and civic administration. The *popolo grasso* eventually developed its own aristocracy as the nouveau riche became established and the old feudal nobility died out or became impoverished.

[3] Atkinson 1976: 4

[4] Those five factions were the Kingdom of Naples, Milan, Venice, Florence, and Rome and the Papal States.

[5] Atkinson 1976: 4

Scholars know very little, if anything, about Machiavelli's life from his childhood until 1498, when the "free people" of Florence elected him Secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence.[6] This position allowed him oversight in both foreign and military affairs. In essence, Machiavelli was a civil servant in charge of policy implementation, a modern-day "White House chief of staff and ambassador-at large."[7] In addition to day-to-day activities, his duties included staffing and supervising foreign missions, training militias, and negotiating treaties.

After 18 years, the Medici family regained their throne when the French army invaded Florence. Soon after, Machiavelli's name appeared on a conspiracy list against the newly-reinstated ruling family. After a brief imprisonment, Machiavelli moved in to exile in the Italian countryside. During his exile in the country, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as an attempt to regain his position or, at the least, to gain some favor with the reigning Medici Lorenzo II, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Although many scholars doubt it, some argue that Lorenzo accepted Machiavelli's advice and saw (and used) *The Prince* as a handbook on gaining and keeping power. In its simplest form, *The Prince* recommended a unified, strong Italy.[8] Christian Gauss's introduction to *The Prince* states,

> *The Prince* does not give us the whole of Machiavelli's political thinking. It treated the most acute problem of Italy, its inferiority in political organization and military strength to nearby states like Spain and France and was addressed to princes like the Medici, to whom it was dedicated.[9]

The Prince was later published between 1531-1532, five years following Machiavelli's death in 1527. Prior to his death, Machiavelli wrote *The Discourses*, which responds to Livy's *First Decade*, and a commissioned work entitled *The History of Florence*.[10]

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli serves as both a teacher and, as mentioned earlier, an advisor. Although many believed him an equal of Satan himself, William R. Thayer's "Machiavelli's Prince" asserts, "Machiavelli is still to be reckoned with." [11] Also, regarded as a "physician without feeling for a disease," he wrote unsystematically and from mere experience.[12] One school of academics argues that Machiavelli wrote to "expose tyrants" rather than to create them, so that

[6] Atkinson 1976: 3
[7] Ledeen 1999: ix
[8] As a side note, it was not until the late nineteenth century that Italy actually became a unified state. Until that point, it was merely a collection of independent kingdoms, republics, and city-states.
[9] Gauss 1952: 12
[10] Atkinson 1976: 24
[11] Thayer 1892: 476
[12] Thayer 1892: 478

"republican patriots" like himself could guard against them.[13] Other Machiavellian scholars contend that Machiavelli simply saw the need for a unified Italy during times of turbulence and foreign intervention.[14]

Regardless of the intention, *The Prince* is very much rooted in the rise and fall of the ancient states (e.g. Rome and Athens) Scholars argue that it argues the doctrine of *raison d'etat*, or reason of the state, which advocates subordination of individuals to the needs of the state.[15] *Raison d'etat* seeks salvation of the state rather than of the soul. It places the survival of the state as its foremost goal. In essence, *The Prince* is practical, often historically-based, rhetoric on gaining and keeping power, and thus on increasing stability.[16]

Many classical political scholars asked, "How 'ought' man live?" And, much like these other scholars, Machiavelli answered, "by virtue." However, Machiavelli's 'virtue' does not necessarily correspond to the 'virtues' of earlier philosophers. He defined virtue as gaining and keeping power by mastering a mixture of 'classical virtue' and 'classical vice' (e.g. if saving the power of the state (or of yourself) requires killing one's opposition, then the virtuous prince must do it). A prince needs such virtuous qualities as prowess, audaciousness, and caution. Simply stated, Machiavelli's virtue consists of doing whatever it takes to gain and maintain power. This implies, as later discussed, learning to selectively not be good, because if rulers are constantly good, they lose. Not only does a clear line exist between politics and morality, but justice and humility both lack existence in *The Prince*. To further explain, while morality does exist, it must remain outside the scope of politics. The idea is that politicians need their own standards. Thus, Machiavelli ignores the "ought" of previous political thinkers. He examines what is, not what should be. Therefore, political scholars herald Machiavelli as the first modern theorist and often as the first political scientist.[17]

Many ideas characterize Machiavellian politics: fair or foul means to meet ends, importance of stability, collective self-interest of the nation, and self-aggrandizement of the ruler and the state. Minimally, if an act gains a prince some additional power, it is a good act. If an act loses a prince some power, it is a bad act. Machiavelli argues that this pragmatic method is the only acceptable criteria for judging politicians (e.g. how well the politician gains, maintains, and expands power). To its very core, *The Prince* is a realist piece. The handbook argues that experience should guide, because reason may deceive. Machiavelli's advice to Lorenzo included eliminating his enemies and "enamoring himself to the weakest in society."[18]

[13] Viroli 1998: 149
[14] Mansfeld 1996: 178
[15] Mansfeld 1996: 288
[16] Viroli 1998: 73
[17] Viroli 1998: 8-9
[18] Machiavelli 1952: 65

1 The Message of *The Prince*

Perhaps, no better way exists in examining the theses of *The Prince* than to break it down by chapter. Thus, the remainder of this treatise seeks to analyze Machiavelli through extensive chapter evaluations.

Beginning with Chapter I, Machiavelli introduces two types of government: republics and monarchies.[19] While ignoring republics, *The Prince* focuses on two types of monarchies: hereditary and newly acquired. Chapter II discusses the difficulty of sustaining power in a newly acquired state while Chapter III delves into the notion of stability and the acquisition of territories. Machiavelli states,

> But when dominions are acquired in a province differing in language, laws and customs, the difficulties to be overcome are great, and it requires good fortune as well as great industry to retain them; one of the best and most certain means of doing so would be for the new ruler to take up his residence there. [20]

The benefit of doing this is twofold: alleviation of problems before they escalate and lessening the chance of external encroachment. Another reference to stability in this chapter advises, "One ought never to allow a disorder to take place in order to avoid war, for war is not thereby avoided, but only deferred to your disadvantage."[21] Chapter IV reinforces the ideas of Chapter III with historical examples.

Chapter V continues the discussion on occupying a newly-acquired territory. Machiavelli claims that "despoiling them, living there, and/or creating a government friendly to you but under their own laws" are a ruler's options in governing a former republic.[22] Chapter VI contends that imitation is key to success. Machiavelli also argues that imitation and virtue are inseparable.

Continuing, he states, "But to come to those who have become princes through their own merits and not by fortune, I regard as the greatest."[23] Here, he explores the distinction between virtue and fortune, citing virtuous leaders to emulate. While virtue is prowess, cunning, skill, ability, prudence, and audacity, fortune is simply one's luck or fate. Machiavelli reasons that a ruler must learn to use virtue and vice to his advantage. Simply stated, the idea is doing whatever it takes to get ahead.

[19] For Machiavelli, a republic was any state not ruled by a monarch. This differs in meaning from today, in which a republic is any representative democracy. Thus, to Machiavelli, the United Kingdom is not a republic, but to modern people, it is.
[20] Machiavelli 1952: 36-7
[21] Machiavelli 1952: 42
[22] Machiavelli 1952: 46
[23] Machiavelli 1952: 46

With regard to leaders by fortune, Machiavelli offers Cesare Borgia, known as the Duke of Valentino, as an example. Many scholars argue that Borgia is the hero of *The Prince*, for Machiavelli recounts Borgia's rise and demise and asserts,

> Reviewing thus all the action of the duke, I find nothing to blame, on the contrary, I feel bound, as I have done, to hold him up as an example to be imitated by all who by fortune and with the arms of other have risen to power.[24]

He continues,

> Whoever, therefore, deems it necessary in his new principality to secure himself against enemies, to gain friends, to conquer by force or fraud, to make himself beloved and feared by the people, followed and reverenced by the soldiers, to destroy those who can and may injure him, introduce innovations into old customs, to be severe and kind, magnanimous and liberal, suppress the old militia, create a new one, maintain the friendship of kings and princes in such a way that are glad to benefit him and fear to injure him, such a one can find no better example than the actions of this man.[25]

Although more developed in later chapters, Machiavelli creates what many scholars, including James B. Atkinson, term the myth of power or the myth of the hero. Atkinson asserts, "Hence Machiavelli is really advocating the creation of the myth of power and the creation of a person or character type of a ruler in order that those who are ruled will be awed by the power of the mythic image."[26]

Before continuing the chapter review, a further examination of this myth is necessary. Atkinson claims, "The ideal of creativity is always in the foreground: create the image of power, create stability out of an inchoate mass."[27] In essence, a prince's subjects deem his actions good only because they "appear" good. Returning to the notion of Borgia as "hero," *The Prince* creates the history of a hero for Lorenzo and/or other princes to emulate. Machiavelli supports 'the myth of the hero' with legendary leaders dispersed throughout the handbook to give *The Prince* examples of great leaders and their virtuous acts.

In chapter VIII, the chapter on principalities gained through crimes, Machiavelli warns Lorenzo of actions deemed "too cruel." He explains that if he must act in an overly cruel fashion, to do it all at once rather than dispersing it.

[24] Machiavelli 1952: 57
[25] Machiavelli 1952: 58
[26] Machiavelli 1976: 66
[27] Atkinson 1976: 66

On the other hand, Machiavelli encourages *The Prince* to reward his subjects incrementally. Here, the logic is if you give all at once, then people expect too much. Giving little by little encourages your subjects to remain obligated to you to acquire more.[28] The last piece of advice advocated in this chapter is not to constantly change, that is, to not be a product of an unstable environment.

Briefly, Chapter IX and X discuss the need for the common man to aid *The Prince* Unlike the wealthy who view themselves as equals, the populace "will always and in every possible condition of things have need of his government, and then they will always be faithful to him."[29] In essence, the rich lessen a ruler's authority, while the *popolo* strengthen it. Harvey C. Mansfield's *Machiavelli's Virtue* highlights the "two diverse humors" referenced in this chapter: "the people who desire to not to be commanded or oppressed by the great, and the great, who desire to command and oppress the people."[30] This method of dividing the populace offers an insight into Machiavelli's view of human nature. He continues that a prince needs a courageous quality and power to "impress [his subjects] with fear of the enemy's cruelty."[31]

Machiavelli deviates from the logical layout of the book in Chapter XI for a discussion on ecclesiastical principalities, those given to an individual by God. He mentions very little about these except to speak of their "security and happiness ... upheld by higher causes."[32]

Resuming the discussion of Chapters IX and X, Chapter XII, Machiavelli enlightens the notion that *The Prince* should be self-sufficient in terms arming himself against an attack of any kind. He reinforces this with, "The essential foundations for every state are good laws and good arms." In their simplest form, these "foundations" determine whether a state succeeds or fails.[33] As the over-riding concern of the state is its continued success, these foundations of the state also serve as the purest foundations of his philosophy of *raison d'etat*.

In Chapter XV, often referred to as the theoretical core of the book, Machiavelli's realism fully materializes. Here, he claims to understand human nature and seeks the effectual, rather than the imaginary, truth. Machiavelli argues that ruling is not universal. You can be a successful ruler, be good or be bad, as long as you learn to use both to your advantage.[34] Michael A. Ledeen's research clarifies this central chapter with:

> If you think that people are basically good and, left to their own devices, will create loving communities and good governments, you've

[28] Machiavelli 1952: 62
[29] Machiavelli 1952: 66
[30] Mansfeld 1996: 186
[31] Machiavelli 1952: 68
[32] Machiavelli 1952: 69
[33] Machiavelli 1952: 72
[34] Gauss 1952: 84

> learned nothing from him. Machiavelli's world is populated by people more inclined to do evil than good, whose instincts are distinctly anti-social. These are your followers, bosses, colleagues, and employees, and, above all, your competitors and enemies. The only way to dominate your foes and get your friends and allies to work together is to use power effectively.[35]

Once again, the idea of utilizing one's vices, if necessary, emerges.

Chapters XVI and XVII discuss the question of the generous versus the parsimonious. Machiavelli asserts that *The Prince* should not be too generous. While *The Prince* must tax to give, Machiavelli argues that *The Prince* must also avoid a reputation of taking greatly from his subjects. A second disadvantage to generosity is that the subjects begin to expect it. Thus, when a ruler depletes the funds, his subjects find a reason to not love him.[36] With regard to compassion versus ruthlessness, Machiavelli returns to the story of Cesare Borgia, a man who many considered ruthless. However, Machiavelli contends that Borgia's "ruthlessness" brought peace, loyalty, and unity to Romagna.[37] According to Machiavelli's rules, this makes Cesare a virtuous ruler. Machiavelli states,

> Still a prince should make himself feared in such a way that if he does not gain love, he at any rate avoids hatred; for fear and the absence of hatred may go well together, and will always attained by one who abstains from interfering with the property of his citizens and subjects or with their women.[38]

Therefore, a prince must strive for the love and fear of his subjects, but if he must choose between the two, fear should be the goal.

Other pertinent chapters include Chapter XVIII and Chapter XIX. Chapter XVIII states that princes should learn to live by laws like men and by force like beasts. This chapter contains the analogy of the fox and the lion. Machiavelli's compares, "Since the lion is powerless against the snares and the fox is powerless against wolves, one must be a fox to recognize the snares and a lion to frighten away the wolves."[39] Hence, a prince must be compassionate but knowledgeable of its antithesis. Chapter XIX returns to the idea of not being hated. Machiavelli writes, "Well ordered states and wise princes have studied diligently not to drive the nobles to desperation, and to satisfy the populace."[40] Obviously, he recognizes the importance of hostile subjects.

[35] Ledeen 1999: 186
[36] Machiavelli 1952: 87
[37] Romagna is the region of Italy just north of the Papal States.
[38] Machiavelli 1952: 90
[39] Machiavelli 1952: 92
[40] Machiavelli 1952: 97

Chapter XXIII refers to the type of counsel a prince should seek or, in this case, not seek. He warns Lorenzo against flattery and advises a prince to "give full authority to wise men to speak the truth to him."[41] Once again, however, he revisits the idea of the "wicked" man and concludes that *The Prince* ultimately assumes full control over such "truths." His final thoughts, found in Chapters XXIV and XXV, stress the importance of a prince of fortune growing up in his principality for assurance of stability and emphasizes that might makes right, in other words, the strongest makes the rules.[42] He closes Chapter XV with:

> I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman, and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that she lets herself be overcome by the bold rather than by those who proceed coldly.[43]

Those with strength or Machiavellian virtue shape culture and history.

Chapter XXVI is the most highly debated chapter of *The Prince* It is one of two chapters in the handbook solely dedicated to Lorenzo's present Italy. Although many scholars refer to this chapter as mere rhetoric, Leo Strauss argues, "The last chapter presents a problem not because it is a call to liberate Italy but because it is silent about the difficulties in the way."[44] With regard to the Moses reference, Strauss continues, "In this dark way, Machiavelli, the new sibyl, prophesies that Lorenzo will not conquer and liberate Italy," because Moses dies before attaining his goal.[45] In this chapter, Machiavelli sets forth that liberation is necessary for the common good. Strauss defends this point by renouncing the notion that Machiavelli upheld his country and denounced man. He concludes, "The core of his being was his thought about man, about the condition of man and about human affairs."[46] Chapter XXVI, the final chapter, is an obvious deviation from the previous 25 chapters, but Strauss argues that Machiavelli merely answers the questions left unanswered in *The Discourses*.[47]

Much debate exists regarding whether or not Machiavelli was a republican, someone who supported the power of the people over that of the monarch. This leads to a discussion of the differences between *The Prince*, a defender of principalities, and *The Discourses*, an advocate of republics. Many, including Harvey Mansfield, argue that the Borgia examples recognize that "constitutional government is possible but only after an unconstitutional beginning."[48] In essence, Machiavelli believes that when the time is ripe, a good prince renounces his

[41] Machiavelli 1952: 117
[42] Machiavelli 1952: 118
[43] Machiavelli 1952: 123
[44] Strauss 1957: 21
[45] Strauss 1957: 29
[46] Strauss 1957: 36
[47] Strauss 1957: 38
[48] Mansfeld 1996: 187

power. As a way of maintaining control, as a way of being virtuous in the Machiavellian sense, *The Prince* allows his principality to become a republic. Machiavellian scholars argue that *The Discourses* is much more idealistic than *The Prince*, often because it is written to two men who should be princes as opposed to an actual prince.[49] Each work speaks of the common good but each theorizes very different methods of obtaining this good. In essence, *The Discourses* is hopeful while *The Prince*, as seen with Strauss' interpretation of the last chapter, lacks hope of a successful liberation.[50]

2 Machiavelli in Today's World

Placing Machiavelli within a modern context proves quite difficult considering the debate of his intentions. While many equate him with a Hitler or a Stalin, others claim that *The Prince* contained a "hidden meaning." Thayer addresses this idea with,

> One class of Machiavelli's opponents deemed it sufficient to assert that he was a wicked man, who took a malicious pleasure in propagating wicked doctrines, while others insinuated that he wrote what he thought would please the particular Medici to whom he dedicated *The Prince* in order to secure favors and an appointment for himself. A staunch republican at heart, he had written his book to expose tyrants so that republicans could guard against them.[51]

Thayer believed that Machiavelli was none of the above but simply writing from experience. Regardless of which interpretation holds truth, Machiavelli remains a principal political thinker whose works continue to touch modern-day problems. In my opinion, Karl Rove is a present-day Machiavellian of sorts: a man with ambiguous ideas that affects our leader, who in turn affects the world.

[49] Mansfeld 1996: 59
[50] Strauss 1957: 29
[51] Thayer 1892: 479

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Questions

1. Was the comparison between Machiavelli and Karl Rove accurate?
2. Would Machiavelli had approved of Hitler and Stalin as leaders?
3. How did the political situation in Italy at the time influence *The Prince*?
4. Should rulers be held to a different standard than ordinary citizens?
5. What would Machiavelli say about both Gulf War II and the subsequent holding of Iraq by America?
6. Would it be fair to say that Machiavelli advocated a ruler holding power at any cost?
7. Today, being called Machiavellian is not a compliment. Why is this?
8. Does Gladders, the author, agree with Machiavelli's theses?
9. Do you agree with Machiavelli's theses?