

Machiavelli

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The Evolution of Politics

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Machiavelli, Niccolo. (1469 – 1527)

Machiavelli was an Italian political philosopher who articulated his political philosophy in the early sixteenth century in his famous political treatise, 'The Prince'. His political philosophy revolves around the idea that the ultimate end of politics is the acquisition and maintenance of power. He described the necessary qualities and methods of a prince or ruler who desires to effectively govern, maintain power, and achieve his goals. His book is an honest yet brutal assessment of gaining and holding onto power without the fetters of conscience or moral guidelines.

The book details how to behave unscrupulously for the acquisition and control of a state. He drew his conclusions partly from historical observation such as the practices of Julius Caesar and his contemporary Cesare Borgia, as well as his experience as a diplomat and politician. The following passage shows how brutal his ideas were and how later movements used them to achieve their goals.¹

He who has annexed them, if he wishes to hold them, has only to bear in mind two considerations: the one, that the family of their former lord is extinguished; the other, that neither their laws nor their taxes are altered, so that in a very short time they will become entirely one body with the old principality.

But when states are acquired in a country differing in language, customs, or laws, there are difficulties, and good fortune and great energy are needed to hold them, and one of the greatest and most real helps would be that he who has acquired them should go and reside there.²

Not only was Machiavelli an astute observer of human nature, he also incorporated possible scenarios that may hinder the smooth rule of the conquered state. He sees these scenarios in black and white due mainly to his rejection of any moral stance or simple parental love. This is emphasised in the following with his anticipated consequences of one's actions.

Upon this, one has to remark that men ought either to be well treated or crushed, because they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries, of more serious ones they cannot; therefore the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge.³

¹ I refer to one instance of this method used in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia where the entire family of the ruling monarch Tsar Nicholas II was murdered.

² MACHIAVELLI, Niccolo, *The Prince*, Project Gutenberg, page 23

³ *Ibid*, page 24

This shows Machiavelli's view that all political interactions lack trust and the goal is to completely crush one's opponents to maintain the power once attained. He even goes as far as warning against empowering another in case they turn and overthrow the one who empowered them.⁴ This lack of trust ensures that the power remains in one's hands, but completely isolates the individual and encourages suspicion and paranoia.

Machiavelli did however, weigh options and lean towards keeping the conquered population friendly. He proposed three scenarios for the acquired states- 1. Ruin them, 2. Reside there in person and 3. Permit them to live under their own laws to keep them friendly.⁵ When a republic with established liberties is acquired, he recommended options 1 or 2.⁶

His brutality of mind is on full display when he cold-heartedly recommended examining the level of injury required in one stroke so that the conquered could not fight back.

Hence it is to be remarked that, in seizing a state, the usurper ought to examine closely into all those injuries which it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them daily; and thus by not unsettling men he will be able to reassure them, and win them to himself by benefits.⁷

Machiavelli recognised the power of the people due to their numbers and that a prince could never feel secure against a hostile population in contrast to a few nobles he has conquered.⁸ In the following, Machiavelli equated good laws with good arms. In other words, he recommends the ability to enforce the laws through force.⁹ He based his political ideal of conflict, preventing conflict and war. Indeed his thinking is highly militant where everyone is out to usurp one's power and standing.¹⁰ His disdain for liberality is evident in his thinking¹¹ yet he recommends every prince pretend to be clement and not cruel.¹²

In the following, Machiavelli gave us an insight into his personal struggle with the opposites and his oscillation between them:

⁴ Ibid, page 30

⁵ Ibid, page 34

⁶ Ibid, page 35

⁷ Ibid, page 51

⁸ Ibid, page 54

⁹ Ibid, page 63

¹⁰ Ibid, page 72

¹¹ Ibid, page 79

¹² Ibid, page 80

Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.¹³

His struggle between the attitudes of kindness and brutality he solved by subterfuge. That is, to pretend to be kind in order to fool the population into subservience.

Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them. And I shall dare to say this also, that to have them and always to observe them is injurious, and that to appear to have them is useful; to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite.¹⁴

It is clear that Machiavelli sided with the will to power and proposed any means to achieve that goal. He was aware of the opposite of love and acceptance but used that as a 'persona'¹⁵ to fool people much the same as our contemporary politicians today. When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, he was not involved in politics as he was expelled by Lorenzo de' Medici¹⁶ and was desperately trying to get back into power. His isolation showed his need for power, control and lack of standing in the community and motivated his ideas and methods to achieve that power. The façade of kindness and religiosity is a mask to conceal his true wishes as he emphasised in the following:

For this reason a prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with the above-named five qualities, that he may appear to him who sees and hears him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious. There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality, inasmuch as men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come in touch with you.¹⁷

Even though his need for power controlled his motivations, he was aware that certain actions would attract opposition such as the violation of

¹³ Ibid, page 81

¹⁴ Ibid, page 85

¹⁵ A 'persona' is a mask worn by performers to denote another character. In psychology it is a form of behavior adopted by a profession, job or other group to identify them belonging to that group. For example, doctors behave in a way that gives confidence and trust to their patients.

¹⁶ MACHIAVELLI, Niccolò, *The Prince*, Project Gutenberg, page 4

¹⁷ Ibid, page 86

property and women's rights that would attract hatred.¹⁸ Indeed, he recognised that the people's hatred would create fear and suspicion in him.¹⁹ This shows that Machiavelli was dealing with scenarios more imagined than real. His proposed political behaviour was tailored to avoid the uncomfortable emotion of fear yet maintain leadership control. This is why he proposed the divisive tactic of adopting a façade of kindness and religiosity hiding his real intention of oppression and control.

Other methods proposed by Machiavelli to secure a state are the disarming of the people, distract towns (groups) by factions and division, engineer enmity between groups and build or destroy fortresses depending on the circumstances.²⁰ He did however, warn against disarming the people as it may offend the trust of the subjects and breed hatred towards the leader. Another tactic he proposed was the purposeful softening and feminising of men²¹, which we can recognize in our politics today.²² This method ensures that the men are not tough, militant, and willing to risk their life and fight against oppression. In the following, Machiavelli outlines the danger of giving favours to others as they too are looking for power and control.

And since the matter demands it, I must not fail to warn a prince, who by means of secret favours has acquired a new state, that he must well consider the reasons which induced those to favour him who did so; and if it be not a natural affection towards him, but only discontent with their government, then he will only keep them friendly with great trouble and difficulty, for it will be impossible to satisfy them.²³

Another tactic proposed by Machiavelli is to ingratiate oneself to the population through great enterprises.²⁴ This by its nature is the construction of civilisation. We have no further to look than the Pyramids of Egypt; the temples, arenas, aqueducts, roads and statues of ancient Greece and Rome; the cathedrals of the middle ages; the bridges, train lines, roads, tunnels of the post industrial revolution era and so on. In the following passage Machiavelli described the chance occurrence of fortune having slightly more influence than its opposite free will.

Sometimes pondering over this, I am in some degree inclined to their opinion. Nevertheless, not to extinguish our free will, I hold it to be true

¹⁸ Ibid, page 87

¹⁹ Ibid, page 89

²⁰ Ibid, page 97

²¹ Ibid, page 98

²² I refer to the gender confusion instigated by our contemporary western political leaders as a way of softening and feminizing men in particular.

²³ MACHIAVELLI, Niccolo, The Prince, Project Gutenberg, page 101

²⁴ Ibid, page 103

that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less.²⁵

This division of opposites into conscious free will and fortune described as feminine shows that Machiavelli had an idea of the conscious and unconscious nature of humanity. That is, the interplay between will and the chance occurrences of lady luck. He also understood that cooperation between these opposites is necessary for success and that an adventurous masculine spirit is the only way to relate to his idea of a woman. What his idea of a woman lacked was a relationship to conscience and their moral guidelines.

I conclude, therefore that, fortune being changeful and mankind steadfast in their ways, so long as the two are in agreement men are successful, but unsuccessful when they fall out. For my part I consider that it is better to be adventurous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to beat and ill- use her; and it is seen that she allows herself to be mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go to work more coldly. She is, therefore, always, womanlike, a lover of young men, because they are less cautious, more violent, and with more audacity command her.²⁶

It is difficult to determine if Machiavelli's brutal will to power was innate and came directly from his own personality, external circumstances or somewhere in between these opposites. We do know that after ousting from politics, he desired to get back when Medici came to power in Florence. As a historian he drew conclusions from previous leaders and their methods of conquer for maintaining power. Some say the book 'The Prince' is a straightforward description of political reality, others a manual or how-to book for tyrants. Nevertheless, we can see some of his ideas adopted in most political scenarios and we should be aware that his ideas are more prevalent in politics than not.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid, page 114

²⁶ Ibid, page 116

²⁷ Politicians may adopt Machiavelli's ideas but as I have shown in 'The Idea of Power' the will to power is an instinct based on and abstracted from the will to survive. Therefore the will to power is an instinctive form of adaptation to environmental and sociological circumstances.