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Machiavelli in a Western Democracy: *Is *The Prince* Relevant in the 21st Century?*

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For most people familiar with the name, Machiavelli conjures an image of ruthlessness and cold calculation. The dictums of *The Prince*, Machiavelli's most well-known work, are seen as lessons to dictators and criminals seeking to gain and maintain power. Merriam-Webster defines Machiavellian as "principles of conduct...marked by cunning, duplicity, or bad faith."¹ Machiavellian politics was more vividly described by Harvey Mansfield in the introduction to his translation of *The Prince* where he wrote, "The essence of this politics is that 'you can get away with murder': that no divine sanction, or degradation of soul, or twinge of conscience will come to punish you."²

This understanding colors the image of *The Prince* as only applicable to the cruel and underhanded wielding power. Some of this is true to Machiavelli's intentions. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a gift to Lorenzo de' Medici after the Medici family seized dictatorial power by overthrowing the Florentine Republic.³ It was a guide to maintaining autocratic power despite Machiavelli's preference for republican government, as indicated by his writing *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*.⁴

Popular culture has also played a significant part in this conception of *The Prince*. The one-man play and adapted movie *A Bronx Tale* discusses *The Prince* through the lens of a mafia leader. In the movie version, the character Sonny is a mob boss who describes the life of a gangster to a young boy through lessons he learned reading Machiavelli, saying:

"The people in this neighborhood that see me every day, that are on my side, they feel safe because they know I'm close. That gives them more reason to love me. But the people that want to do otherwise, they think twice. That gives them more reason to fear me."⁵

He further elaborates on fear, love, being hated, and being needed:

“It’s nice to be both [feared and loved], but it’s very difficult. But if I had my choice, I would rather be feared. Fear lasts longer than love. ... It’s fear that keeps [my men] loyal to me. But the trick is not to be hated. That’s why I treat my men good but not too good. I give them too much, then they don’t need me. I give them just enough where they need me, but they don’t hate me.”⁶

Modern Relevance

Given its original intent and the popular culture’s adoption of Machiavelli as a criminal’s guide, policymakers who read this book must ask if *The Prince* a good manual for policymakers and what aspects may or may not apply to modern times? Despite what has been presented, I posit *The Prince* is still a good manual for policymakers and most of what is presented in *The Prince* is enduring. Broadly, *The Prince* is about human interaction. The specific situation described or tactic chosen – murder, for instance – may not apply to a modern western democracy operating under the rule of law, but the human interaction that he highlights remains relevant.

Power Transitions

Machiavelli’s discussion of principalities is one of the areas less relevant to the present day. The specific types of principalities are largely relics of the Princely State Order and the changes of principality described are representative of the more class driven and volatile political environment Machiavelli faced during the Renaissance. For example, the idea of a hereditary principality is largely a relic of the past. Even in the United Kingdom, with its long history of hereditary rule, the monarchy’s authority is delegated to the Prime Minister, prime minister’s cabinet, and the legislative bodies.

Much of Machiavelli's discussion of principalities dealt with transitions from one type of principality to another. This too is less relevant in today's western society based upon the way he described those transitions. Unless the governmental transition comes from revolution or dissolving the previous government, power transition in today's western democracies are generally very ordered, especially in the United States. Under an established republican constitutional order, transitions of power are linked to popular decisions of the citizenry. Recalling the hereditary example, even the most cynical political observer must conclude politicians still require the support of at least a plurality of voters in the election in order to govern, even if the politician's last name is Kennedy or Bush. This is not to say these sections of *The Prince* will remain irrelevant in a less stable political climate, as Europe has seen through national-socialism and communism during the 20th century. There is precedent for this type of governmental overthrow, but The West has not seen such a transition for over 20 years.

However, if we observe these chapters through the lens of human interaction, there are some lessons that are applicable in public policy today. The predominant takeaway from the sections that deal with power transitions is that the leader must understand the perspective and motivation of the population observing the power change.

As previously mentioned, much of Machiavelli's explanation of principalities discussed changing leadership and government. When Machiavelli described mixed principalities, he wrote:

“But the difficulties reside in the new principality. First, if it is not altogether new but like an added member (so that taken as a whole it can be called almost mixed), its instability arises in the first place from a natural difficulty that exists in all new principalities. This is that men

willing to change their lords in belief that they will fare better: this belief makes them take up arms against him, in which they are deceived because they see later by experience that they have done worse.”⁷

The dynamic Machiavelli described is not different from that faced by a political party that has unseated an incumbent party. The new governing party continues to face opposition from those who are unseated, and those who supported the new party have high expectations for changes that will improve their lives. Without satisfying the desires of either side, the leader will make enemies of his opposition and his former supporters.

Machiavelli argued supporters of the new leadership will never be satisfied and will revolt against the new leadership when that leadership fails to meet their expectations. One can argue less pessimistically that the result depends on the leader, but the core issue deals with expectations. If citizens’ expectations are set appropriately and the leader is able to meet those expectations, he will avoid the backlash Machiavelli described.

Also related to changing power is Machiavelli’s discussion of committing necessary offenses. Though Machiavelli described violent actions, this can be interpreted today as general unpleasant actions required of leaders. Machiavelli wrote:

“Hence it should be noted that in taking hold of a state, he who seizes it should review all the offenses necessary for him to commit and do them all at a stroke, so as not to have to renew them every day and by not renewing them, to secure men and gain them to himself with benefits. Whoever does otherwise, either through timidity or through bad counsel, is always under necessity to hold a knife in his hand;”⁸

When stepping into a new leadership role, changes are often necessary to improve the function of the organization. In business, a new CEO may have to restructure a failing company, replace the current leadership team, and lay off workers to bring the company back to

profitability. In public policy, popular programs may need to be cut or reformed to modernize or preserve the programs for the future. It is natural for people to want to delay these unpleasant actions or introduce them gradually until they achieve the desired results. But as Machiavelli described, that approach brings depression and uncertainty to those being led and eventually leads to resentment of the leadership. If the leader takes the unpleasant action quickly and in full measure, the initial effect will be drastic, but the leader allows more time afterward for people to understand the new structure and eventually accept the leader's decision.

Security and Command Relationships

Machiavelli's treatment of military and political relationships remains extremely relevant and requires little reinterpretation to put his lessons in the appropriate context. Machiavelli argued that a prince should be primarily concerned with military matters, writing:

“Thus a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but that of war and its orders and discipline; for that is the only art which is of concern to one who commands. ...one sees that when princes have thought more of amenities than of arms, they have lost their states.”⁹

He continued by describing different historical leaders and their successes or failures based upon their martial focus. Machiavelli observed the frequent power changes of city-states throughout Italy as well as the French invasion of northern Italy and concluded there is no higher responsibility than ensure the security of the state – in his case the principality. Today, many political leaders intone the primary obligation of national leadership is to protect the citizens. If the people are under threat of arms, they cannot prosper.

In his concern for the military mind of the prince, Machiavelli was also extremely critical of the trend by principalities in Renaissance Italy using mercenaries and auxiliaries (the armies of friendly principalities). This trend was largely born out of a desire by leaders and subjects to focus on art, science, architecture, and other pursuits associated with the Renaissance. While one might make a connection between Machiavelli's treatment of mercenaries then and the modern incarnation of military contractors today – of which today's contractors have a more complicated relationship to the state than did Machiavelli's pure mercenary armies – a more important point of Machiavelli's reasoning is the military's relationship to the prince.

Machiavelli was concerned with mercenaries and auxiliaries because the prince could never be assured of their loyalty. He wrote:

“Mercenary and auxiliary arms are useless and dangerous; and if one keeps his state founded on mercenary arms, one will never be firm or secure; for they are disunited, ambitious, without discipline, unfaithful; bold among friends, among enemies cowardly; no fear of God, no faith with men; ruin is postponed only as long as attack is postponed; and in peace you are despoiled by them, in war by the enemy.”¹⁰

Machiavelli is describing military forces that have no allegiance to the Prince and military commander. They cannot be trained and disciplined by him in such a way that he can feel comfortable with how they will perform in war. Without that relationship, there is no connection between the soldiers and what or whom they are fighting for.

Although US military officers do not take an oath to the president, they swear to “...support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; [and] bear true faith and allegiance to the same;...”¹¹ Connecting the military to the state, just as

Machiavelli required connecting the military to the prince, is key to ensuring a successful command relationship and continuous security.

Leadership, Policy, and Power

Among the more controversial sections of *The Prince* are those that deal with liberality (providing benefits to the people) and parsimony, cruelty and mercy, and whether it is better to be feared or loved. Some of these sections can be taken literally, and others require some thought behind the description. In these sections, modern policymakers will get more value from Machiavelli's critique of those qualities commonly considered good, rather than his advocacy of those considered evil.

Machiavelli began his section on liberality and parsimony by praising liberality, writing, "...I say that it would be good to be held liberal; nonetheless, liberality, when used so that you may be held liberal, hurts you."¹² Machiavelli recognized the problems with a liberal leader and described liberality's logical end. He wrote:

"And so, if one wants to maintain a name for liberality among men, it is necessary not to leave out any kind of lavish display, so that a prince who has done this will always consume all his resources in such deeds. In the end it will be necessary, if he wants to maintain a name for liberality, to burden the people extraordinarily, to be rigorous with taxes, and to do things that can be done to get money. This will begin to make him hated by his subjects and little esteemed by anyone as he becomes poor; so having offended the many and rewarded the few with this liberality of his, he feels every least hardship and runs into risk at every slight danger."

When one observes the current debate over government spending and entitlements, this writing is incredibly prescient. This passage could just as well have been an editorial in *National*

Review magazine or a speech at a Tea Party rally. The frustration of many people today regarding the conduct of government is, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, eventually you run out of other people's money. That is the very phenomenon Machiavelli described.

Machiavelli began his section on cruelty and mercy similarly to the previous section. He acknowledged that it is better to be merciful and not cruel, but he saw the pitfalls of mercy as greater than the pitfalls of cruelty, writing:

“A prince, therefore, so as to keep his subjects united and faithful, should not care about infamy of cruelty, because with very few examples he will be more merciful than those who for the sake of too much mercy allow disorders to continue, from which come killings or robberies; for these customarily hurt a whole community, but the executions that come from the prince hurt one particular person.”¹³

Setting aside the specific recommendation of executions, Machiavelli is describing standards of conduct in an ordered society. If leaders or policymakers forgive lawlessness, they are tacitly approving it. This forgiveness begets more lawlessness, as Thomas Sowell noted of US legal reforms from the 1960s, which deemphasized punishment and focused on rehabilitation, when compared to US legal reforms of the 1990s, which dealt harsher punishments for crime.¹⁴

The treatment of cruelty and mercy in *The Prince* leads to the famous discussion of whether it is better for a prince to be feared or loved. Here too, Machiavelli began by acknowledging the ideal is to be both feared and loved, but it is difficult to be both. He wrote of his preference for being feared with a bleak description of humanity:

“...it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two. For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood

property, lives, and children...when your need for them is far away; but when it is close to you, they revolt. ... And men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself fear; for love is held by a chain of obligation, which because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes you.”¹⁵

Here Machiavelli exposes a truth of leadership. It is not as much a matter of being feared or loved, but of being liked or respected, and it is accurately illustrated in the earlier quote from *A Bronx Tale*. Those who “like” their superior may be happy to perform easy tasks, but when the task requires hardship they will likely to be unwilling to perform the task – or they will perform it with less zeal. This is true in any relationship of authority. In a more benign example, there is a saying among school teachers – “never smile before Thanksgiving.” This illustrates that the teacher must set an example of orderly conduct for the students before having a more relaxed classroom learning environment.

Conclusion

To cast *The Prince* aside for its descriptions of arcane governing structures, descriptions of violence, and advice for leaders to treat their populations with cruelty, is to cast aside valuable insight into the human condition. To use the cliché, it judges the book by its cover. People’s reactions to change, command relationships in leadership, and expectations set by leadership are all human interactions that Machiavelli observed plainly in the 16th century and are largely the same today. Those insights are valuable beyond criminals and dictators. They are lessons policymakers should know and understand in the context of the politics and society today.

¹ Merriam-Webster. "Machiavellian - Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary." Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/machiavellian> (accessed November 3, 2012).

² Machiavelli, Niccolò. Translation by Mansfield, Harvey C.. The Prince. 2nd ed. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Page vii.

³ Ibid. Page xxx.

⁴ Machiavelli, Niccolò. Edited by Crick, Bernard R.. The Discourses. Reprinted with a new chronology and updated ed. London, Eng.: Penguin Books, 2003.

⁵ A Bronx Tale. Film. Directed by Robert De Niro. Washington DC: Universal Studios, 1993.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Machiavelli, Niccolò. Translation by Mansfield, Harvey C.. The Prince. 2nd ed. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pages 7-8.

⁸ Ibid. Page 38.

⁹ Ibid. Page 58.

¹⁰ Ibid. Page 48.

¹¹ Oath of Office. 5 U.S.C. §3331 "U.S. Office of Personnel Management." US Office of Personnel Management. http://www.opm.gov/constitution_initiative/oath.asp (accessed November 3, 2012).

¹² Machiavelli, Niccolò. Translation by Mansfield, Harvey C.. The Prince. 2nd ed. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pages 62-63.

¹³ Ibid. Pages 65-66.

¹⁴ Sowell, Thomas. "Part V: Intellectuals and The Law." In *Intellectuals and Society*. Rev. and enl. ed. New York, NY: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2011. Pages 282-294.

¹⁵ Machiavelli, Niccolò. Translation by Mansfield, Harvey C.. The Prince. 2nd ed. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Page 66.