

WAS MACHIAVELLI'S POLITICAL THOUGHT TRULY "MACHIAVELLIAN"?

By Parnell, January 2008;

Machiavelli was a man of astonishing and striking contrasts. With his most renowned work "*The Prince*" he establishes an easy to read, lucid handbook for any ruler to maintain power – at all costs – over his territory. On the other hand, His "*Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*"^[1] outlines his deep rooted admiration for Republicanism, but more specifically that of the Ancient Roman Republic. From the Florentine Republic to the American one, Machiavelli's contribution to political philosophy has spanned half a millennia, and his emphasis on civic duty and responsibility is a tradition that lives on in all western democracies. The standard definition of Machiavellian carries with it much baggage. Whether Machiavelli's political thought is truly Machiavellian is something scholars have argued – and continue to argue until this very day.

The premise of the question is from the start a troublesome one. There is a wealth of scholarly opinions concerning the true nature of his beliefs, and the intended purpose of "*The Prince*". Mary G. Dietz wrote in the American political science review in 1986 that "*No political thinker was more aware of how crafty assault by deceit could serve as a substitute for brute assault by violence than Niccolo Machiavelli*"^[2] Her analysis of the Prince was that it was a finely tuned work of political deceit; the ultimate objective being the overthrow of the Medici regime in the hope that it would undertake the measures proposed by Machiavelli, which would result in an uprising in Florence getting rid of their tyranny once and for all. It is a view shared by some of the greater minds of the early modern period, at least to some extent. Baruch Spinoza and Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that it was a cautionary warning of what tyrants could and would do, and that Machiavelli wrote it as a work of satirical genius.^[3] Benedetto Croce saw him as an anguished humanist; he lamented the flaws in man that made the course of action outlined in the Prince politically unavoidable in order to live in a secure state. For Croce, Machiavelli was the man who finally divorced ethics and politics.^[4] There may be some credence to that view; Machiavelli does not claim the ends justify the means (he was not a philosopher as such) but that the ends excuse the means so long as the outcome is just.^[5] On the other hand, Keith Hancock amongst others viewed him as a cold, completely politically neutral scientist. In their view he undertook an entirely objective study of politic science. Like any good scientist would do, he announced his findings to the world upon completion.^[6] There are many more interpretations of "The Prince" besides this.

In order to objectively answer the question, first the nature of Machiavelli's political doctrine needs to be established. One of the definitions of the term 'Machiavellian' given by dictionary.com is "*characterized by subtle or unscrupulous cunning, deception, expediency, or dishonesty: He resorted to Machiavellian tactics in order to get ahead.*"^[7] Few men in the course of human history have been remembered so infamously. For what was by and large a dedicated servant of the Florentine Republic when it was in existence, and an extoller of the virtues of Roman Republicanism in his "*Discourses*", he has been labelled as a mastermind of deceit and dictatorship for

most of the last five hundred years. References in Elizabethan literature to the term 'murderous Machiavel' number around the four hundred mark for example.[8] It seems like Machiavelli suffered from some glaring inconsistencies. On the one hand he extols the virtues of Republican government in "*The Discourses*" while on the other he offers advice to despots in "*The Prince*". Looking at the timeline would help gain an understanding of the context. In February 1513 he was tortured and imprisoned by the Spanish backed Medici regime. However he wrote the Prince in 1513.[9] It is perfectly understandable that he would have felt a grievance with the regime that claimed his beloved republic and caused him (no doubt) considerable physical pain. This would seem to reinforce Dietz's opinion that it was a work of subtle assault. However, in a letter found in 1810 Machiavelli stated that he wrote "*The Prince*" in order to endear himself to Florence's ruling family. In light of this, the argument that the methods and ideas mentioned in "*The Prince*" were justifications to act tyrannically in times of national crisis gained favour.[10] It seemed that Machiavelli was willing to promote 'Machiavellian' behaviour, when the occasion demanded it.

The view that Machiavelli's political doctrine was Machiavellian is evident by his famous statement; "*The answer is, of course, that it would be best to be both loved and feared. But since the two rarely come together, anyone compelled to choose will find greater security in being feared than in being loved.*"[11] Leo Strauss argues this is because to be loved depends on others (Its out of your hands) but to be feared depends on you (You control your own fate)[12] This is mirrored by other opinions he held, such as that expressed in the Discourses; "*I believe it to be a most true thing that it rarely or never happens that men of little fortune come to high rank without force and without fraud, unless that rank to which others have come is not obtained either by gift or by heredity.*"[13] These ideas of Machiavelli re-assert the notion that political advancement and ethical behaviour are completely different entities. In effect, he expresses what has always been thought, but never truly verbalised.

It does not take much critical examination to discover that Machiavelli was a realist. For example, he was concerned with people who don't look at men as they are but in their idealized state. In his view republican reformers like Savonarola or Soderini caused the ruin of Florence because they replaced what should be for what is.[14] However, the traditional definition of the term 'Machiavellian' claims that any means that are available are legitimate in order to get ahead in the political pack. There are so many interpretations and scholarly opinions on the true nature of his work that it seems improbable that his political doctrine can be unveiled by a curious student. What can be challenged is the notion that the definition of Machiavellian, and the ideas Machiavelli espoused are concurrent.

In "*The Prince*" it is fair to suggest that Machiavelli divorced ethics and politics.[15] He saw what happened to Savonarola who acted and ruled from a Christian basis. Humility and meekness and other Christian principles were in Machiavelli's view a poor guide to rule.[16] Speaking in "*The Discourses*", Machiavelli talks about how working for the common good creates a better society. Compare with "*The contrary happens when there is a Prince, where much of the time what he does for himself harms the City, and what is done for the City harms him. So that soon there arises a Tyranny over a free society, the least evil which results to that City is for it not to progress further, nor to grow further in power or wealth, but most of the times it*

rather happens that it turns backward”[17] This is contradicted by the virtues that define rule which are noted in chapter fifteen of the Prince. Machiavelli takes a stern view of this. At the start of the chapter he details a list of good and bad traits that characterises rulers; “it will be found that something which looks like virtue, if followed, would be his ruin; whilst something else, which looks like vice, yet followed brings him security and prosperity.”[18] Machiavelli makes the point that if a sound society can be built from conquest and cruelty, then it must not be evaded.[19] Essentially, when times are good you can afford to be virtuous, when times are bad cruelty is a political necessity.[20] In a letter to Francesco Vettori Machiavelli stated that he loved his city more than his own soul. His fundamental allegiance to Florence perhaps outweighing his closer felt Republican allegiances.[21] Machiavelli disliked rulers taking moderate positions, as mentioned in “*The Discourses*”; “But men take up certain middle paths which are most harmful, for they do not know how to be entirely good or entirely bad”[22] Strong rule in the interests of the state would become a basis of power for tyrants and dictators such as Benito Mussolini, Franco and Jozef Stalin in centuries to come.

The standard dictionary definition of Machiavellian does not do Machiavelli the justice he deserves. In many ways he believes that the measures he put forward in “*The Prince*” were only desirable in the interests of civil stability. He hated oppression that was not in the interests of the people.[23] It is not by accident that Swizz scholars look on Machiavelli as a peace loving man who enjoyed public order and stability. This is after all a nation that has enjoyed a very long period of peace and arms its citizens in much the same way that Machiavelli had advised in the sixteenth century.[24]

Is Machiavelli’s political thought Machiavellian? Probably not. Machiavelli was the original pragmatist; he advocated some unorthodox methods to bring about stability in a region that was quickly being eaten up by the more established nation states of her time (France and Spain) He did not advocate using *any means possible* for the sake of power itself, but for the sake of *furthering the well-being of society*. Blaming Machiavelli for the advent of great tyrants of the 20th century is about as innocuous as blaming Jesus for the Spanish Inquisition.

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-The Discourses - http://www.constitution.org/mac/disclivy_.htm

[1] For the remainder of this essay this work will be referred to as 'The Discourses'

[2] Mary G. Dietz, *Trapping The Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception*, *The American Political Science Review* (1986). p. 778 JSTOR.

[3] Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: essays in the history of ideas*. (1979, London) p.26.

[4] Ibid, p. 29

[5] Patrick Curry and Oscar Zarate, *Machiavelli for beginners*. (Cambridge, 1995) p. 93

[6] Berlin, p. 29/30.

[7]<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Machiavellian> (10 January, 2008. 19:26)

[8] Berlin, p. 35.

[9] Michael White, *Machiavelli, a man misunderstood* (2005, Britain) Appendix.

[10] Jo Eldridge Carney, *Renaissance and Reformation, 1500-1620, a Biographical Dictionary*. (Greenwood Press, 2001) p. 240

[11] Niccollo Machiavelli, *The Prince* Chapter 17. External link provided in bibliography.

[12] Leo Strauss, *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago, 1987) p. 300.

[13] Machiavelli, *Discourses* II, 13. External link provided in bibliography.

[14] Berlin, p. 42

[15] Ibid, p. 44

[16] Ibid, p. 47.

[17] *Discourses*, II 2

[18] *The Prince*, Chapter 15.

[19] Berlin, p. 51

[20] Ibid, p. 51/52.

[21] Ibid, p. 54

[22] *Discourses*, I 26

[23] Strauss, pp. 314/315.

[24] Berlin, p. 29.

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