

Machiavellian Lessons in The Prince: A Contemporary Perspective

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Introduction:

The enduring allure of Niccolò Machiavelli's "The Prince" lies not merely in its historical significance but in the perennial questions it poses about the nature of political power and leadership. This seminal work, penned in the 16th century, also continues to resonate in the history of political philosophy. In this essay, I will progress through Machiavelli's complex teachings, drawing on the wisdom of classical and biblical thought to explore their relevance in the tumultuous landscape of contemporary politics.

Machiavelli's "The Prince" delves into the realm of political realism, advocating for a pragmatic approach to governance where the preservation of power takes precedence, even if it demands morally ambiguous actions. Central to this philosophy is Machiavelli's assertion that "it is better to be feared than loved," setting the stage for a profound analysis of the intricacies of power.

I. Machiavellian Teaching on Political Realism:

Machiavelli's "The Prince" emphasizes the importance of political realism and the pragmatic pursuit of power and stability in the realm of governance. One crucial aspect of Machiavellian thought is his view that a ruler should prioritize the preservation of their rule, even if it requires morally ambiguous actions. For instance, Machiavelli argues that a ruler should be willing to use both virtue and vice as necessary tools to maintain power and order. This concept is evident in his famous statement that "it is better to be feared than loved."

Passages:

Passage 1: In Chapter XVII of "The Prince," Machiavelli writes, "Hence it is that all armed prophets have conquered, and the unarmed ones have been destroyed." This statement underscores the significance of military strength and the willingness to use force to secure and maintain power. Here, Machiavelli advocates for the pragmatic use of power, even if it involves coercion and violence.

Passage 2: In Chapter XVIII, Machiavelli discusses the importance of avoiding hatred and contempt from the populace. He states, "For injuries ought to be done all at one time, so that, being tasted less, they offend less; benefits ought to be given little by little, so that the flavor of them may last longer." This passage highlights Machiavelli's practical approach to governance, emphasizing the careful management of public sentiment to maintain power.

Passage 3: Chapter VI contains Machiavelli's famous advice that "the ends justify the means." He argues that a ruler should be prepared to use any means necessary, including deception, to achieve their goals. This reflects his belief in the primacy of power and stability, even if it means sacrificing traditional moral values.

II. Classical Perspective: Aristotle's Virtue Ethics:

To understand Machiavelli's teaching from a classical perspective, we can turn to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Aristotle believed in the cultivation of moral virtues, such as courage, honesty, and justice, as the means to achieve eudaimonia, or human flourishing. In contrast to

Machiavelli, Aristotle would argue that virtuous rulers should prioritize moral values over pragmatic considerations.

Aristotle's emphasis on virtue can be illustrated by his concept of the "golden mean," which suggests that virtuous behavior lies between extremes. For example, a virtuous leader should strike a balance between being too tyrannical and too lenient, seeking ethical governance that promotes the well-being of the citizens.

III. Biblical Perspective: The Ethics of Leadership:

Examining a biblical perspective, we find principles that often align with Aristotle's emphasis on moral virtue. The Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, provides guidance on ethical leadership. For example, Proverbs 29:2 states, "When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan." This verse suggests that ethical leadership is essential for the well-being of a society, emphasizing the importance of virtuous governance. Additionally, the Bible contains numerous teachings on justice, compassion, and humility, all of which emphasize the moral dimension of leadership. Leaders are called to act justly and show compassion to the marginalized and vulnerable.

IV. Applying Machiavellian Teaching to a Contemporary Event:

Drawing parallels from "The Prince" to contemporary events, we find a stark illustration of Machiavellian principles in the rise of authoritarian leaders who employ fear as a potent tool of control. A Contemporary event from my life could be observed in the actions and rhetoric of authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, and Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China.

Vladimir Putin's Calculated Rule in Russia:

Vladimir Putin's tenure as the leader of Russia has been characterized by a Machiavellian approach to governance. He has adeptly wielded fear as a means of consolidating and maintaining power in the contemporary political landscape. Through a combination of aggressive military actions, the suppression of political dissent, and control over state media, Putin has crafted an image of strength and authority. He has successfully portrayed himself as the indispensable guardian of Russian interests in the face of external threats.

An example of this approach can be found in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin employed military force to seize the territory, disregarding international norms and sanctions. This audacious move was driven by a Machiavellian calculation that it would not only bolster his domestic standing but also stoke patriotic fervor and consolidate his rule. The manipulation of fear, both domestically and on the international stage, has been a central element of Putin's leadership strategy.

Xi Jinping's Consolidation of Power in China:

Xi Jinping's leadership in China provides another contemporary example of Machiavellian principles in action. Since assuming power in 2012, Xi has concentrated power within the Communist Party, silenced dissenting voices, and cultivated an image of an unassailable leader. His "anti-corruption" campaign, while ostensibly aimed at rooting out corruption within the party, has also served as a means of purging political rivals and instilling fear among potential challengers.

Moreover, Xi's assertive foreign policy, particularly in the South China Sea, has showcased his willingness to use force and coercion to advance China's interests. This approach aligns with Machiavelli's emphasis on the pragmatic use of power to achieve political objectives.

Conclusion:

Machiavelli's enduring insights, as encapsulated in "The Prince," offer a lens through which we can analyze the actions and strategies of contemporary leaders such as the ones mentioned. The pragmatic pursuit of power and the calculated use of fear as a tool of control, exemplified by leaders like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, serve as keen reminders that Machiavellian principles continue to shape the political landscape in the modern world. These examples demonstrate how Machiavellian teachings find resonance in the actions of contemporary leaders, highlighting the enduring relevance of "The Prince" in our understanding of political power and leadership in the 21st century.