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Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Its Modern Interpretations

*The Prince* is a famous philosophical work by Italian diplomat and politician Niccolò Machiavelli. The word “prince” here means the monarch or any equivalent title of one who holds supreme, sovereign power. *The Prince* focuses on political theories and serves as a guide for not only the “prince” but a leader in general. It proposes different methods that princes could use to achieve their ambitions and goals and whether such the process is justified or immoral.

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* after his imprisonment and torture by the Medici, an experience similar to Boethius and his writing of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the first medieval philosophical work that moved me. In aspects like politics and ethics, *The Prince* is known to be in sharp contradiction with the Catholic and scholastic philosophy that prevailed at the time.

The first few chapters establish the book’s outline. Then, the following chapters focus on a variety of practical, diplomatic means for a prince to attain power. The bulk of the book focuses on the qualities and ethics of the prince himself. For example, Machiavelli argues that some personal virtues such as generosity and benevolence that are good in normal circumstances may not be appropriate for a prince. In fact, they may cause harm to the prince’s power. On the contrary, the prince may be able to take advantage of vicious acts such as cruel and harsh punishments that may actually be helpful in certain ways for the stability of the society.

In Chapter 17, Machiavelli proposes the question of whether it is better to be more feared or more loved. He first admits that a prince should want to be considered compassionate rather than ruthless. At the same time, the prince should also want to avoid misusing such compassion. Machiavelli uses Cesare Borgia as an example. Cesare brought Romagna back to peace and prosperity, although he was considered ruthless. Machiavelli then makes a contrast with the people of Florence, who are reluctant to be titled ruthless and rather leave Pistoia destroyed. In comparison to them, Cesare’s ruthlessness can be well ignored, as compassion is emphasized and featured enough in terms of producing the good for the people as a whole.

Therefore, Machiavelli argues that a prince should not worry about being ruthless if that keeps his subjects united and loyal. Machiavelli then cites a classic: In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Dido claims that difficult circumstances and the newness of her reign compel these actions to guard her territory on all sides. Machiavelli uses her claim to show that a new prince will inevitably possess ruthlessness, but he has to be cautious of the degree of ruthlessness, keeping it at a moderate level in order to avoid excess trust or distrust.

Machiavelli uses hypophora - posing a rhetorical question and then answering it - to start the discourse on the specific details of the do’s and don’ts: “Is it better to be loved than feared, or to be feared than loved? The answer is that a prince would like to be both. But since it is difficult to reconcile these two, it is much safer to be feared than loved - if the one must cede to the other”(XVII, 34). Such a statement that it is better to be feared than loved is one of the essential themes of *The Prince*. Machiavelli agrees that under normal circumstances, people are willing to submit and offer loyalty to the prince. However, Machiavelli defines men as naturally “ungrateful, fickle, dissembling, hypocritical, cowardly, and greedy”(XVII, 40). As the stakes change, people are much more likely to turn against the prince whom they love than the prince whom they fear.

In an ideal state, the prince should be loved and feared at the same time, but such an equilibrium is so difficult to achieve that it remains perfectly ideal and practically unreal. “For love is supported by a bond of obligation which, since men are evil, they break on any occasion when it is useful for them to do so; but fear is supported by a dread of retribution which can always be counted on”(XVII, 54). Machiavelli argues that, due to the evil qualities that men inherently possess, it is easy to break a bond of love when the situation arises. However, fear is supported “by a dread of retribution.”(XVII, 57) The fear of punishment is always effective regardless of the situation. Machiavelli also adds that when a prince makes his people fear him, he should avoid hatred, which can cause the prince to fall from power. To avoid hatred, he must keep away from his people’s properties and make sure all the executions are justified.

The prince’s ultimate goal is to govern the country. People’s loyalty and disobedience lay the foundation of such a goal. Machiavelli plays around with these cause-and-effect relationships. It is safer to be feared than loved. Therefore, fear is more reliable than love. Fear prevents riots and brings stability, which love cannot achieve. Therefore, to be feared is better than to be loved. The logic here is that the ends justify the means. Machiavelli concludes that cruelty is more reliable than benevolence, not for its own sake but for the benefit of the state as a whole.

Machiavelli elaborates on the debate between love and fear from a medieval politician’s perspective. “But even in the developed world, plenty of leaders still rely on fear, and many people continue to put up with it”(Snook). I agree with Snook’s comment in his business review article. In fact, I am able to find plenty of connections to some contemporary issues. And Machiavelli’s assertion that to be feared is more reliable than to be loved still applies to modern society.

When I read Chapter 17, the first thought that flashes through my mind that relates to modern society is gun violence, given that the Brooklyn subway station mass shooting event just took place a few days earlier. On April 12th, “[a] madman disguised as a construction worker turned a Brooklyn subway car into a bloodbath during the early-morning rush Tuesday, setting off smoke bombs before opening fire and wounding 29”(Marino). Reading Machiavelli’s *The Prince* after reading the newspaper articles, I find an interesting association between the concept of love and fear and citizens’ reactions to a horrible event such as a mass shooting.

“Yet even though they are estimated to be the cause of less than 1 percent of all gun fatalities, mass shootings carry a toll that surpasses their numbers, undermining our collective sense of well-being and public safety. The fear always lurks, the next Big One always just around the corner”(Manjoo). Whenever a mass shooting takes place, it puts people in danger and renders people fear. Although the prince does not directly inflict such fear, nor is it any form of punishment from the prince, it shows the stability that fear is able to sustain.

Citizens who happen to live near the shooting incident may demand an immediate change in gun policies, looser or stricter. However, the prince, in this case, the governor, is reluctant to make actual changes to gun policies. In my opinion, this fits well with Machiavelli’s point of view. First, if the prince decides to tighten gun policies and issue stricter gun regulations, the gun market will shrink in scale. This is a behavior of lending a hand on his people’s property, stepping into gun dealers’ businesses, and lowering their profit. This is a behavior that Machiavelli warns the prince not to do. Instead, the prince should keep away from his people’s properties. Otherwise, he is likely to fall at any moment. Plus, such a policy change favors his people, which, according to Machiavelli, may not have a positive effect. People may be satisfied at first, but they will become greedy in the long term, bringing instability to the society and the prince’s power.

Second, if the prince decides to change gun policies and loosen the regulations on gun ownership, not only may his people be upset, but it will create much more fear and danger to people than the proper level the prince can handle. The former will result in hatred, while the latter will make people turn against the prince, both leading to the downfall of the prince.

“Nonetheless, a common and frequently articulated view is that despite extensive discussion about mass shootings, they have little influence on policymaking”(Luca). Indeed, according to Michael Luca, Deepak Malhotra, and Christopher Poliquin’s research on *The impact of mass shootings on gun policy* in the Journal of Public Economics, our governors do not make any changes overall. “We find no significant effect of mass shootings on laws enacted when there is a Democrat-controlled legislature, nor do we find a significant effect of mass shootings on the enactment of laws that tighten gun restrictions”(Luca).

Another example of Machiavelli’s love-or-fear theory is the mask mandate. “The Democratic governor said the mandate, first announced Dec. 10, has been ‘a critical tool’ in driving COVID-19 numbers down”(Associated Press). New York City has issued the mask mandate since 2021 in an effort to lower the number of COVID cases. Just like the Cesare example that Machiavelli uses, the mask mandate is also done fearfully but for the goodwill of the society. In fear of punishments such as fines, no admittance, etc., people wear masks and show proof of vaccination for restaurants or other indoor activities. Therefore, society on a larger scale reports fewer COVID positive cases, and the prince is able to bring stability through such an act.

Nevertheless, it is not always the fear that forces people to wear masks. There are exceptions like the subway. The prince does not require people to wear a mask. Nor does he require them to show proof of vaccination. Most people still choose to wear masks. On the one hand, they do wear masks because they want to protect themselves and others members of society, out of love for society. On the other hand, they wear masks because they have seen how the prince’s mask mandate makes progress in bringing good to society, and they are willing to support him by wearing masks in the subway voluntarily.

Overall, as Machiavelli suggests, ideally, a proper combination of love and fear will work perfectly for the prince’s ruling of his people. In most cases, to be feared is more reliable than to be loved. However, the prince cannot discard benevolence once and for all. He has to be cautious in showing cruelty in order to avoid hatred and the downfall of his power.

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