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The Influence of Machiavelli upon the History of Political Theories

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Abstract

There is no doubt that *The Prince* is doubtless the most extensively read of Machiavelli's works, the *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy* perhaps most honestly expresses Machiavelli's personal political beliefs and commitments, in particular, his republican sympathies. The *Discourses* positively illustrates upon the same basin of language and concepts that fed *The Prince*, but the former discourse leads us to describe conclusions quite different from many scholars have said conflicting to the latter. In particular, across the two works, Machiavelli consistently and clearly distinguishes between a negligible and a full conception of "political" or "civil" order, and thus constructs a hierarchy of ends within his general account of communal life. Machiavelli is not a new name in the sphere of political arena. Though he is considered one of the cunning masters of political scenario yet he holds great respect in world. During his career as a secretary and diplomat in the Florentine republic, Machiavelli came to acquire vast experience of the inner workings of French government, which became his model for the "secure" (but not free) polity. Although Machiavelli makes relatively little comment about the French monarchy in *The Prince*, he devotes a great deal of attention to France in the *Discourses*.

Keywords: Discourse, republic, disarmament, communal, liberty, Western

Introduction

According to Machiavelli, even the most excellent monarchy, in Machiavelli's view, lacks definite significant qualities that are endemic to properly constituted republican government and that make the latter constitution more desirable than the former. It is quite clear that Machiavelli asserts that the greatest virtue of the French kingdom ann. its king is the dedication to law. "The kingdom of France is moderated more by laws than any other kingdom of which at our time we have knowledge," Machiavelli declares (Machiavelli 1965, 314, trans. altered). The explanation for this situation Machiavelli refers to the function of the Parliament. "The kingdom of France," he states, "lives under laws and orders more than any other kingdom. These laws and orders are maintained by Parliaments, notably that of Paris: by it they are renewed any time it acts against a prince of the kingdom or in its sentences condemns the king. And up to now it has maintained itself by having been a persistent executor against that nobility" (Machiavelli 1965, 422).

Obviously these passages of the *Discourses* seem to suggest that Machiavelli has great admiration for the institutional arrangements that obtain in France. Specifically, the French king and the nobles, whose power is such that they would be able to oppress the populace, are checked by the laws of the realm which are enforced by the independent authority of the Parliament. Thus, opportunities for unbridled tyrannical conduct are largely eliminated, rendering the monarchy temperate and "civil."

Machiavelli then applies this wide-ranging code directly to the case of France, remarking that "the people live securely (*veer secure*) for no other reason than that its kings are bound to infinite laws in which the security of all their people is comprehended" (Machiavelli 1965, 237). The law-abiding character of the French regime ensures security, but that security, while desirable, ought never to be confused with liberty. This is the limit of monarchic rule: even the best kingdom can do no better than to guarantee to its people tranquil and orderly government.

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Machiavelli holds that one of the conclusions of such *veer secure* is the disarmament of the people. He comments that regardless of "how great his kingdom is," the king of France "lives as a tributary" to foreign mercenaries. This all comes from having disarmed his people and having preferred... to enjoy the immediate profit of being able to plunder the people and of avoiding an imaginary rather than a real danger, instead of doing things that would assure them and make their states perpetually happy. This disorder, if it produces some quiet times, is in time the cause of straitened circumstances, damage and irreparable ruin (Machiavelli 1965, 410).

A state that makes security a priority cannot afford to arm its populace, for fear that the masses will employ their weapons against the nobility (or perhaps the crown). Yet at the same time, such a regime is weakened irredeemably, since it must depend upon foreigners to fight on its behalf. In this sense, any government that takes *veer secure* as its goal generates a passive and impotent populace as an inescapable result. By definition, such a society can never be free in Machiavelli's sense of *veer libber*, and hence is only minimally, rather than completely, political or civil.

In his view, whatever benefits may accumulate to a state by denying a military role to the people is of less importance than the absence of liberty that necessarily accompanies such disarmament. The problem is not merely that the ruler of a disarmed nation is in thrall to the military prowess of foreigners. More crucially, Machiavelli believes, a weapons-bearing citizen militia remains the ultimate assurance that neither the government nor some usurper will tyrannize the populace. "So Rome was free four hundred years and was armed; Sparta, eight hundred; many other cities have been unarmed and free less than forty years" (Machiavelli 1965, 585). Machiavelli is confident that citizens will always fight for their liberty-against internal as well as external oppressors. Indeed, this is precisely why successive French monarchs have left their people disarmed: they sought to maintain public security and order, which for them meant the elimination of any opportunities for their subjects to wield arms. The French regime, because it seeks security above all else (for the people as well as for their rulers), cannot permit what Machiavelli takes to be a primary means of promoting liberty.

Machiavelli demonstrates particular confidence in the capacity of the people to contribute to the promotion of communal liberty. In the *Discourses*, he ascribes to the masses a quite extensive competence to judge and act for the public good in various settings, explicitly contrasting the "prudence and stability" of ordinary citizens with the unsound discretion of the prince. Simply stated, "A people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince" (Machiavelli 1965, 316). This is not an arbitrary expression of personal preference on Machiavelli's part.

He maintains that the people are more concerned about, and more willing to defend, liberty than either princes or nobles (Machiavelli 1965, 204-205). Where the latter tend to confuse their liberty with their ability to dominate and control their fellows, the masses are more concerned with protecting themselves against oppression and consider themselves "free" when they are not abused by the more powerful or threatened with such abuse (Machiavelli 1965, 203). In turn, when they fear the onset of such oppression, ordinary citizens are more inclined to object and to defend the common liberty. Such an active role for the people, while necessary for the maintenance of vital public liberty, is fundamentally antithetical to the hierarchical structure of subordination-and-

rule on which monarchic *veer secure* rests. The preconditions of *veer libber* simply do not favor the security that is the aim of constitutional monarchy.

One of the main reasons that security and liberty remain, in the end, incompatible for Machiavelli-and that the latter is to be preferred-may surely be traced to the "rhetorical" character of his republicanism. Machiavelli clearly views speech as the method most appropriate to the resolution of conflict in the republican public sphere; throughout the *Discourses*, debate is elevated as the best means for the people to determine the wisest course of action and the most qualified leaders.

This connects to the claim in the *Discourses* that the popular elements within the community form the best safeguard of civic liberty as well as the most reliable source of decision-making about the public good. Machiavelli's praise for the role of the people in securing the republic is supported by his confidence in the generally illuminating effects of public speech upon the citizen body. Near the beginning of the first *Discourse*, he notes that some may object to the extensive freedom enjoyed by the Roman people to assemble, to protest, and to veto laws and policies.

But he responds that the Romans were able to maintain liberty and order because of the people's ability to discern the common good when it was shown to them. At times when ordinary Roman citizens wrongly supposed that a law or institution was designed to oppress them, they could be persuaded that their beliefs are mistaken... [through] the remedy of assemblies, in which some man of impact gets up and makes a speech showing them how they are deceiving themselves. And as Tully says, the people, although they may be ignorant, can grasp the truth, and yield easily when told what is true by a trustworthy man (Machiavelli 1965, 203).

Machiavelli's arguments in favor of republican regimes also appeal to his skeptical stance toward the acquisition of *virtue* by any single individual, and hence the implication that a truly stable principality may never be attainable. The effect of the Machiavellian dichotomy between the need for flexibility and the inescapable constancy of character is to demonstrate an inherent practical limitation in single-ruler regimes. For the reader is readily led to the conclusion that, just because human conduct is rooted in a firm and invariant character, the rule of a single man is intrinsically unstable and precarious. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli provides a psychological case that the realities of human character tends to favor a republic over a principality, since the former "is better able to adapt itself to diverse circumstances than a prince owing to the diversity found among its citizens" (Machiavelli 1965, 253).

Machiavelli illustrates this claim by reference to the evolution of Roman military approach against Hannibal. After the first flush of the Carthaginian general's victories in Italy, the circumstances of the Roman required a circumspect and cautious leader who would not commit the legions to aggressive military action for which they were not prepared. Such leadership emerged in the person of Fabio's Maximums, "a general who by his slowness and his caution held the enemy at bay. Nor could he have met with circumstances more suited to his ways" (Machiavelli 1965, 452). Yet when a more offensive stance was demanded to defeat Hannibal, the Roman Republic was able to turn to the leadership of Scipio, whose personal qualities were more fitted to the times. Neither Fabio's nor Scipio was able to escape "his ways and habits" (Machiavelli 1965, 452), but the fact that Rome could call on each at the appropriate moment suggests to Machiavelli an inherent strength of the republican system.

Machiavelli thus seems to stick on to a genuinely republican position. But how are we to square this with his statements in *The Prince*? It is tempting to dismiss *The Prince* as an inauthentic expression of Machiavelli's "real" views and preferences, written over a short period in order to prove his political value to the returned Medici masters of Florence. (This is contrasted with the lengthy composition process of the *Discourses*.) Yet Machiavelli never repudiated *The Prince*, and indeed refers to it in the *Discourses* in a way that suggests he viewed the former as a companion to the latter. Although there has been much debate about whether Machiavelli was truly a friend of princes and tyrants or of republics, and hence whether we should dismiss one or another facet of his writing as ancillary or peripheral, the questions seems irresolvable. Mark Hurling's suggestion that "both" Machiavelli's need to be lent equal weight thus enjoys a certain plausibility (Hulling 1983).

What is "modern" or "original" in Machiavelli's thought? What is Machiavelli's "place" in the history of Western ideas? The body of literature debating this question, especially in connection with *The Prince* and *Discourses*, has grown to truly staggering proportions. John Peacock (1975), for example, has traced the diffusion of Machiavelli's republican thought throughout the so-called Atlantic world and, specifically, into the ideas that guided the framers of the American constitution. Paul Rah (1992) argues for a similar set of impacts, but with an intellectual substance and significance different than Peacock. For Peacock, Machiavelli's republicanism is of a civic humanist variety whose roots are to be found in classical antiquity; for Rah, Machiavelli's republicanism is entirely novel and modern. Likewise, cases have been made for Machiavelli's political morality, his conception of the state, his religious views, and many other features of his work as the distinctive basis for the originality of his contribution.

What makes Machiavelli a perturbing yet stimulating thinker is that, in his attempt to draw different conclusions from the commonplace expectations of his audience, he still incorporated important features of precisely the conventions he was challenging. In spite of his repeated assertion of his own originality (for instance, Machiavelli 1965, 10, 57-58), his careful attention to preexisting traditions meant that he was never fully able to escape his intellectual confines. Thus, Machiavelli ought not really to be classified as either purely an "ancient" or a "modern," but instead deserves to be located in the interstices between the two.

The impact of Machiavelli upon the history of political theories can barely be exaggerated. Not only the method and substance of his philosophy but also the marvelous literary art with which it was expressed served to win for it universal attention. Criticism of his doctrine developed into vehement controversy, in which a grotesquely distorted conception of his system, labeled Machiavelli's by its adversaries, brought much open obloquy upon the philosopher, and at the same time stimulated, though less conspicuously, much respect for and adoption of his method and his real principles. By far the foremost among the ideas which the Florentine made prominent in political science was that of a distinction between the standards of public and of private morality. On this point has turned most of the discussion of which Machiavelli's has been the centre.

It is also mention worthy that the whole trend of theory under the impacts which characterized the time of the Reformation was against the view which Machiavelli propounded; but the practice of the age continued to furnish, like all preceding

ages, incontestable evidence that the "reason of state" took precedence, in political life, of the moral code which was recognized as valid between man and man. In Frederick the Great of Prussia Machiavellian doctrine received a particularly noteworthy confirmation. For Frederick, as a mere irresponsible philosopher, roundly berated the Italian for the immoral teachings of *The Prince*; but in later life, as the ambitious head of a struggling and sorely beset state, he exemplified in his policy some of the very maxims which he had most solemnly denounced.

Subsequently in importance to his view of the relation between politics and morality, in its impact on later political philosophy, was Machiavelli's method -his reunion of theory and practice. Though the medieval tendency to philosophize "in the air"- to speculate on the basis of conditions which had lost, if they ever had possessed, the semblance of reality-by no means entirely disappeared after Machiavelli's time; though it continued for a century or more to characterize a large body of political literature: yet his relentless empiricism gave an impulse to the method of observation and experience which was not exhausted till the last vestiges of medievalism in political theory had vanished.

Finally, a summary of the chief impacts which radiated from Machiavelli into the broad field of political science must include reference to his doctrine of aggrandizement. In the assumption that extension of power was the test of excellence in government, he established a philosophic basis for accepting as rational and as a fit subject for reflection, that consolidation of states which was so prominent a fact of the times. In suggesting-for he did not strongly press the idea-that the logical limit of this consolidation in any case was the limit of ethnic homogeneity, he projected an impact which was felt in the nineteenth century. But the doctrine of nationality, which has thus far played so prominent a part in the expansion of states, has in reality no logical relation to Machiavelli's fundamental principle.

Already a multitude of other bases for conquest, more adequate to later necessities, are familiar to current thought. To justify the extension of political power the Aryan is devised, with a claim to dominate the Semite or the Trainman, the "political peoples" are assigned the desired preeminence over the "non- political," the civilized over the uncivilized. Nationality has proved merely a temporary and transitional phase of the trend toward expansion on Machiavellian lines, which has in fact no logical limit save that of power.

It is also mention worthy that Machiavelli is sometimes called the first modern political philosopher. It is quite as accurate to say that he ends the medieval era as that he begins the modern. Great as was his impact in stimulating reflection, it was not by his radical rejection of all the characteristics of medieval political theory that the modern era was introduced. Western Europe could not be rationalized and aggenized off-hand.

Sooner than the death of Machiavelli, Luther gave the signal for the movement which was to keep the intellectual energy of Europe fully occupied for a hundred and fifty years in the fields of theology and morals. Machiavellian doctrine was influential during this time, though Machiavelli's name was execrated by all parties. Only after the Reformation had been succeeded by the Revolution was frank and open recognition given Machiavelli's philosophical depth and practical political sagacity.