

MACHIAVELLI

Vahid Nick Pay

Dates - 1469 - 1527 Late 15th early 16th century. Renaissance Italy. Italy as a nation state does not exist, it is composed of a collection of feuding city-states and Papal domains with hinterlands dominated by nobles, peasants and brigands. It was called the Age of Bastards and Adventurers & was highly unstable & unsafe politically. Italy had been invaded by the French and Spanish - both unified states. But it was exciting both intellectually and politically. City states gave rise to a more intellectual individualistic culture (based on thriving commerce). They broke down the medieval hold of the Church on knowledge and culture. The Church at that time was not a purely spiritual power - but a strong temporal political power. The Renaissance was rebirth of ideas, looking to the ancient world for new intellectual and artistic models and thought. There was a tendency to worship the ancient - golden age of past, the present being seen as degeneration both in terms of personal and political morality. The church was seen as partly to blame. It was an age, however, when there was a chance for some people other than the nobility to have some impact - either notoriety or glory and when town populations occasionally could have some sort of role in politics. But it would be wrong to think that vast majority of population was either immoral or atheistic - this tended to be the privilege of a very small group.

Machiavelli himself was from a bourgeois family of Republican persuasion. He was classically educated and played an important role as a servant of the Republic of Florence acquiring a lot of diplomatic experience. He clearly loved politics, loved his job and when deprived of it by the misfortunes of political circumstances constantly contrived to get it back. The Prince does seem a clear appeal to the Medici for a new post. The Discourses (about Rome) do not. These two works appear to be very different, shot through with different ideas and values. However, this is not entirely so. Much of the thought is the same, except the Discourses concentrates on a more ideal form of government for an altogether better age and the Prince concentrates on the present 16th.

What are the main problems Machiavelli is addressing?

Political stability. Italy was in turmoil. The lives of citizens and people were constantly and totally disrupted leading to a loss of freedom and safety. This is not an unusual problem for political thinkers e.g.- Plato, Hobbes, De Maistre. & more recently 1960s American comparative political science theory.

Hence Machiavelli's interest in political power - how to maintain it - make it last through time against misfortunes. Those who manage to do this he deemed to have great virtue (excellence). Rome he deems as worthy of much study because it lasted for so long through time - an example of fantastic political endurance. Political stability appears almost as an end in itself. (Modern relevance - may be both Africa and Middle East).

Also, there is a hint of the possibility that Italy might be united in the future like France and Spain and therefore better able to resist intervention. (Machiavelli says in Discourses that Church in the way of Italian unity). However, one should be wary about over emphasis on Italian unity.

The major problem for Machiavelli was the time he lived in ie. the 16th century because of what he regarded as the corruption of the ottimati (bigwigs) and the people. The human material he had to operate with in the 15h-16th centuries was not like that of old. There

seemed a huge problem of establishing a decent Republic (his best form of government) in such evil and corrupt times. The best thing in present circumstances was to try to establish strong firm and stable rule of new princes. He was not interested in hereditary kingdoms and Papal domains. They did not have the same problems - it was easy to rule them and maintain power despite numerous errors on the part of their leaders

The problem which confronted him, and of interest, was the exercise of power by the sort of men available and that those bold enough to try were not usually good men and the good anyway were unsuitable for political power in a corrupt age. So, one needed to work with the material at hand and offer advice according to the circumstances. His aim, therefore, was initially some sort of political stability, with some hope of Italian reunification and perhaps an eventual turn in the cycle of history to a better system more reminiscent of the Republic of Rome.

Methodology and Assumptions

That politics is about power i.e. its study is the science of power - how to get it, hang on to it and exercise it. In a republic - it is about how it is distributed, checked, institutionalized and managed. Politics is not about the good life (Aristotle) although politics is a master science and the most important. Politics is an autonomous activity - it has its own rules which do not necessarily derive from other types of laws and rules.. He assumes that the autonomy and sovereignty of the state is the most desirable aim and that politics should be dedicated to ensuring that autonomy and sovereignty. The state itself has come about for defence and security – hence military provision the most important requirement.

Politics is also an interesting mixture of good and evil. It is not a pure activity and not for the pure. It offers the opportunity to do great things as well as evil. It can convey honour and glory on those who achieve something of importance for the state (e.g. victory in battle, a lasting peace, a wise settlement). Sometimes evil must be done if necessary for some good effect or end. Politics itself has no other end than itself and to some degree it is a good in itself. This comes out clearly in the Discourses when he is discussing the republic.. Participatory political activity of all groups and classes in the republic is a good in itself - it develops civic patriotism and virtue and makes states strong. However, the populace in the 16th century was not capable anymore of such virtuous activity, although it could be fostered.

There is also an assumption that politics is about the force that goes with exercise of power. With the use of force some violence may be needed - but the aim is an economy of violence (an expression Wolin uses) However, this should be just and only enough to achieve a given desired effect, not gratuitous and for its own sake which must undermine any desired end.

Methodology:- On the face of it this looks relatively simple. He takes examples from history and from his own experience in politics to formulate generalisations about how one must behave to exercise power in order to be successful and not lose it. This technical know-how, it is assumed, will be of use and interest especially to new princes who lack authority and legitimacy. However, it has been interpreted in a variety of ways which are worthy of later discussion. Some say he was attempting a value free science of politics. Was he? How scientific? Others that it came more simply from his experience rather than drawn from history which is just used as a back up. Guiccardini (a contemporary of his) thought that using history for examples to follow wasn't a good idea at all (we should discuss why later). A clear

assumption behind his methodology that there is some uniformity about human nature and behaviour, otherwise given changing circumstances, examples from history would be irrelevant. If he were simply looking to past – he would appear more of a Renaissance thinker, but if really using current experience he would seem more empirical and modern . The question of Machiavelli's modernity requires some consideration as to what "modern" might mean.

Major Propositions

1. Political rulers have an exceedingly difficult task in maintaining stability and order and relying on luck isn't enough. They need a particular disposition of mind, to be shrewd and follow good advice from those with experience as well as to reflect on those who have been successful. The main reason for this is the visceral nature of FORTUNA ie. lady luck, lady chance - changing circumstances which cannot always be predicted. A wily ruler builds up dams and dykes against the blows of possible misfortunes - in order not to get swept away. Machiavelli is not a fatalist nor a determinist but sometimes he thinks that fortuna can deal blows that no cunning can withstand. Hence it is very important to act in order to control it as far as possible. There is no plot or plan to history - no idea or laws working themselves out through history - but circumstances are ever changeable, unreliable, fickle. This is unlike a christian view of history. but it not really ancient either.

Maxim therefore was that for rulers to stay in power they must be flexible and adjust to necessity. They must seize opportunities when they arise and they must retreat strategically when necessary. Rigidity, dogmatism, following binding precedents and universal moral norms in all circumstances is absolutely wrong and useless. Nothing can be binding in honour in politics because one is continually coping with Fortuna in a world where one cannot trust the honour of others. Princes with no foresight and cunning not only are a danger to themselves - but unforgivably a menace to their populations, and would land them in servitude. A prince therefore needs the qualities of the Fox and the Lion. Foxiness - shrewdness, intelligence, cunning to understand and analyse forces and events - dangers and main chances - then when it is understood what needs to be done must have strength and power - of the lion to do what is necessary.

It is also necessary that a new prince should build up authority. He should inculcate fear and respect. Rispetto - like the Godfather. Love would be good too - but respect is essential. This deters factions. Hatred and scorn are to be avoided. How to do this? This is fairly easy as regards the population. The prince must simply avoid messing with their women or appropriating their property. If order and peace is maintained, they will be fairly passive even if some violence has to be committed against enemies. Any such violence should be done quickly and all at once. It should be clear to enemies what will happen to them. However, not too much violence is required and violence shouldn't beget violence i.e. it should not get out of hand and become uncontrollable (Stalinism). The prince should endeavour to do great things (impress people). A major incentive for political leaders should rightly be glory - for self and state. No doubt that the Prince might need to break his word, be deceitful, commit murders when necessary in order to preserve his power and authority and the stability of state. (*Raison d'état*).

This seemed to imply two types of morality - a dual ethics - very shocking in Christian

states (examine later).

Religion itself could also be useful for states to maintain power and stability. Religion would help to maintain a stable disciplined population -helping a community cohere together to form a moral basis. However, the most useful religion for this purpose would not be Christianity with its otherworldliness and institutions separate and often antagonistic to the state but rather a pagan religion where state and religion are intertwined. Hence Machiavelli's preference for ancient religions. In other words, the content of religion was not important for him, simply its function to maintain a moral, stable order and sustain a stable political system. This did not appear as a very Christian position. He seemed unconcerned with salvation or the next world. In fact many of the precepts of christianity - humility, submission, acceptance, passivity, inner and other worldliness were not the sort of virtues he admired much or thought supported civic virtues. In fact they seem to have undermined the civic values and virtues which stressed action, participation, glory in this world and support of collective endeavours.

The Prince must also spend most of his time involved with military matters and preparation. The state should be on an almost permanent war footing. There are endless pages devoted to this and how and why mercenaries and auxiliaries are not as good as citizen armies. Citizen armies of Republics are best he thought because they will fight hard for their freedom. Those who identify with the state will fight harder for it. (perhaps not entirely true - Russians not republic in 19th century - but identification with soil made them strong defenders of their land).. Anyway, patriotism for him makes good soldiers and strong armies make strong states. States are either contracting or expanding - so it is better to be expanding. There can be no static maintenance of the status quo - movement is constant between states. Leaders should occupy themselves with pursuits which lend themselves to martial arts, the major reason being that defence is the basis of all states. That is what they are about (i.e. they do not arise for the sake of justice or the good life as Aristotle thought).

The Discourses has moved on to another proposition: that Republics are the best form of government if one can get them. However, they are only suitable for an uncorrupted population.

The greatest act of pure political virtuosity for any leader is to turn a republic into a principality - but it is the most damnable - and greatest praise is for a legislator who creates a republic out of degenerated human material. This is because culture is not easily transformed. Once corruption and degeneration has set in it is hard to stop. It means that state forms have to approximate the culture of the people.

Republics for Machiavelli are better forms of government because they spread power, balance it and adapt better to fortuna than princedoms. They get the support of the population, encouraging civic virtue , freedom and participation which enhances patriotism and a better military cadre.

Study of the Roman Republic (from Livy) leads him to conclude that the different classes and different types of power which exist in republics allows them greater flexibility to adapt to new & changing political circumstances.

The types of power are:

Regal power & consular power (executive) Represents the power of the Ottimani (important persons) .

Also emergency power which gives total power for short period of dire danger.

Senatorial power - represents aristocrats.

Tribunal power - Represents the plebeians.

Blending of three elements - gives strength i.e. aristocracy (in Roman Senate) balanced against Tribunes of the People (representing the plebeians) and the Consuls (who replaced the old kings). This could respond to the need for different types of rule in differing circumstances enabling republics to adapt and change according to circumstances. In war they could go into an emergency system, in peace they could return to wider participation. More leaders and rulers were sometimes useful whereas during times of danger dictatorship may be necessary. Republics could opt for the best according to the circumstances. Also he thought that republics afforded more freedom for the population than other forms of government.

Freedom he thought was maintained by the balance of forces - the ability to participate and the fact that there existed a conflict between the two major classes. As long as this is institutionalized - this is fine and led to freedom.

This is precisely why Bernard Crick admires Machiavelli. His own thesis is that politics is freedom and freedom means diversity. Machiavelli he viewed as very original in that he postulated that liberty could arise from class conflict. This contrasts with most theorists who view conflict as bad. This also may seem to undermine political stability. But here Machiavelli is talking about managed conflict i.e. the institutionalisation of conflict.

The Republic of the Discourses appeals more to moderns. It supports some sort of equality i.e. citizenship rights, whereas principalities support inequality. Middle classes and cities encourage republics - peasants and agriculture do not. However, republicanism here is clearly not the same thing as democracy. It involves a mixed government with a stress on the importance of law and constitutionalism, participation and civic virtue (in this respect there is some similarity with Aristotle).

But most important civic virtue is necessary for a republic.

The meaning of virtue in Machiavelli is interestingly different from a modern understanding.. It comes from *vir*, i.e. manly qualities and it rests on the values of boldness, energy, resoluteness, dignity, honour, communal duties and exercise of communal activities, patriotism, guts, resourcefulness, drive and discipline. It emphasises success in this world especially in cheating fate and the circumstances - controlling in as far as one can fortuna. Fortuna is seen as a woman (sexist) - looks more kindly on young men who treat her boldly. Virtue can also be translated as human excellence - in achieving what it is you want to achieve. Not a private inward looking spiritual goodness - but an outward looking hardiness in action and patriotism. The civic virtues of the population means they still care about the public domain not simply private interests. They have discipline, morality, they adhere to traditions and values (again some similarity with Aristotle, i.e. not freedom per se to do as one pleases).

However, the virtue of a Prince is not the same as the virtue of a population in a Republic. The prince's virtue must replace and compensate for the lack of virtue in the population.

The prince's virtue may lead to bold actions and immoral acts that would not be appropriate

in private life. Here we appear to have a separation of public and private ethics - two moralities. One which looks moreover purely at effect. If the outcome and effect of the act is right - then the action must be considered justifiable. This has worried people. The rejection of natural law, let alone the divine laws of Church, was cause for concern. The proposition that the people should be moral and the prince not necessarily so but that he should appear to be, was again, worrying. Tudor England was appalled. (Felix Raab - English Face of Machiavelli.).

Others have said it is clear that he is not saying there are two types of morality. Rather that one is *raison d'etat* and no more than that, i.e. not a moral act but in fact an evil act that must be tolerated in the circumstances for the public good or necessity. Others have asserted this is more an amoral position. He is simply describing what happens and not imputing any moral or ethical position - i.e. he is trying to be scientific. and is talking about how to do something not what one ought to do. However, in *The Prince* he does give advice as to how to destroy Republics. This, he admits, is a damnable thing to do - according to his own expressed values. It would imply the destruction of public liberty which is not in the best interests of the state. Is it not, therefore, immoral to give advice as to how to do it?

Although Machiavelli might have used the same technique as many of his time in giving advice to Princes by holding up a mirror to their role and function, he certainly does not give the same traditional advice.

It is perhaps instructive that his book, *The Prince*, fails to obtain him the desired job and it is questionable that the likes of Cesar Borgia or any of the new princes really needed his sort of advice. They may have worried that he was giving away the game which they understood too well.

.
The Discourses: chapters to read: Book 1: chs. 1-4, ch.34 (on emergency powers), 37, 38, 43, 49, 55, 57-9. Book 2: Introduction and book 1, chps. 6 and 7, 11-13, 15, 17, 20, 29 & 39. Book 3: chps. 3,4, 9, 26-29, 34, 40, 41, 44, 47 & 49. This should cut the length down by half. Even this amount covers a lot of repetition. (Chapters 1 to 4 convey a clear feel of the nature of the work).

Second session: (From winter term 2007).

1. Themes: to examine the way Machiavelli approaches nature of the political, the state and constitutionalism and to compare with Aristotle.

2) What differences might there be between the notion of "republicanism" and "constitutionalism".?

3) Interpretations (Hugh to examine I. Berlin - The Originality of Machiavelli).

We can further discuss the ethical dimension and modernity. (Worth noting Strauss's criticism - lack of attention to the individual).

4) Comparison of the Prince and the Discourses. What similar themes run through both?