

Machiavelli on the Use of Immoral Means in Politics

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Was Machiavelli Right to Argue that Learning the Appropriate Use of Immoral Means is a Necessary Part of Responsible Political Leadership?

The fact that Niccolò Machiavelli introduced a whole new approach to the tradition of political science, based on the consideration of immoral means as a political method, has indeed generated a potentially inaccurate representation of the philosopher and diplomat he was, as well as of everything he represented. In order to understand Machiavelli, one ought to regard him as the political realist he was—an innovative thinker who analysed the political sphere in its most natural and real state. (Powell, 2010: 4). This essay will focus on understanding Machiavelli's approval of immoral methods, as the necessary means to achieve a great principality and to maintain it.

In order to comprehend his resort to a required moral misconduct, one ought to explore his perception of the perfect prince. Therefore, this essay will begin by briefly contemplating the background that originated Machiavelli's disregard for Christian moral values, followed by an analysis of his approach to notions as fortune and virtù. Linked to the previously mentioned concepts, Machiavelli's suggestion of a blend between a lion and a fox shall be fairly explored and associated to the employment of immoral means for a responsible political leadership. Once Niccolò's argument has been clearly exposed, the case of two American political leaders as Abraham Lincoln and George W. Bush will be reasonably disclosed in order to illustrate how important it is for a political "prince" to develop the capability of appropriately using immoral methods when necessary, if the primary purpose is to maintain his leadership.

It is of extreme relevance to begin any analysis on Machiavelli's line of thought by considering the historical and political context in which he conceived his work. Therefore, in order to obtain an accurate understanding of the originality attached to Machiavelli's political realism, one ought to regard the political and intellectual framework inherent to the Italian Renaissance. Indeed, when Niccolò Machiavelli was nominated second chancellor of the republic of Florence, Italy's political framework was intensively characterised by a growing influence of Humanist ideals. Humanists, who were rather glorified for their intellectual skills in the XIV and XV centuries, sought to implement the ideals of glory and honour into the Italian political life in order to maintain sovereignty and combat the imminent tyranny and corruption. The fact that Machiavelli's father was a student of the Humanities himself is argued to be one of the reasons why Niccolò entered the political arena at the first place.

Nevertheless, Machiavelli's experience within Florence's department of foreign affairs notably alerted him to the weakness attached to the Florentine political system when compared to great powers of the time as France or Spain (Skinner, 1981: 8, 9). According to Machiavelli, Florence lacked key elements such as military strength and a powerful and tenacious political leadership. As a result, Machiavelli developed a significant objection toward the Humanist influence on the political realm, rejecting values advocated by Humanist leaders, such as virtuosity, as well as the Christian connotation given to those precise principles (Skinner, 1978: 129).

As far as Machiavelli's theory itself is concerned, it is substantial to place a significant emphasis on understanding how he defines fortune and virtù in order to possess the required tools to analyse his perception of the "perfect prince." Regarding fortune, Machiavelli argued, both in *The Prince* and in *Discourses*, that there is an ultimate force beyond the jurisdiction of regular men—a force capable of placing a political leader in unpredicted and complex

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circumstances which might compromise the success of his agenda, as well as the preservation of his position (Pocock, 1975: 156). Machiavelli emphasises the role fortune plays in the political sphere by attributing a feminine and malign essence to it. In fact, despite acknowledging that throughout history men have accomplished glorious achievements due to the force of fortune, Machiavelli claims that a victorious prince shall never rely exclusively on the action of fortune if the main purpose is one of success. For it consists in an external and powerful authority, a political leader must not subordinate himself to an ambiguous and uncertain path, as it will certainly jeopardise the security needed to maintain a state. Therefore, Niccolò insists that, concerning fortune as a woman, "it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down"; this is, considering that fortune administers approximately half of the outcomes of a leader's actions, he shall exploit the opportunity of controlling the other half in order to obtain a greater self-reliance. Hence, rather than pursuing the path drawn by fortune and being at the mercy of it, one ought to focus on the qualities required to reduce the dominance of fortune and simultaneously strengthen the ruler's autonomy (Machiavelli, 1998: 101).

Accordingly, Machiavelli introduces a redefined notion of *virtù* that utterly departs from the orthodox humanist perspective. Indeed, in spite of assigning a reasonable pertinence to the humanist expectation, which assumes rulers should develop and sustain moral qualities as honour, genuineness, and consequent glory, Machiavelli vigorously argues that a prince could not possibly maintain a state by invariably preserving such "moral" conduct. He does, on the other hand, claim that if permanently ascribed to a political leader, such qualities would remarkably boost the admiration toward him. However, it is quite important to understand that Niccolò Machiavelli does not have any interest whatsoever regarding normative hypothesis within the practice of politics. Rather, he is concerned about the appreciation and analysis of reality exactly as it is and how a political leader has to face it. If one considers Machiavelli's affinity with the principles endorsed by political realism, it becomes pertinent to claim that even though he concedes the need of seeking a principality and the conservation of the former, his "prince" cannot endeavour both if he relies on the virtues Christianity has defined as being "good." Therefore, a man of *virtù* shall be the one who prevents fortune from determining his actions – the majority, at best – and who, besides entering the sphere of political leadership, holds the required *virtù* to maintain his authority (Warburton et al., 2000: 26).

As a matter of fact, Machiavelli's innovation resides in the peculiarity of the qualities he attributes to a man of *virtù*, especially because, as referred previously, he divorces those exact qualities from the virtues Christianity had defined as being appropriate for a political leader. As he believes in the selfishness inherent to men, in the sense that within the political arena, the struggle for the greatest form of power is imminent, Machiavelli argues that that precise self-indulgence will open the path for chaos and devastation in the political state. Since Machiavelli dismisses any assumptions related to human evolution, for he considers that history is merely a "ceaseless process of deterioration and renewal," only the few men of *virtù*, who understand and accept the reality inherent to political life, will be able to rescue the state from collapsing. These precise men of virtuosity shall therefore demonstrate determination, strong skills of leadership, and, if necessary, be feared in order to gain and maintain their authority as leaders.

Nevertheless, if one seeks to understand Machiavelli's ideology, it is extremely important to stress that his concept of a perfect prince does not restrict his actions to behaving as a "lion"; this is, in a determined and relentless manner. In fact, Niccolò Machiavelli argues that the ideal leader ought to develop the intrinsic perspicacity of a fox, in order to be respected and if possible, loved. Considering that the citizens of a state do not have direct contact with their leader, they conceive their opinion on him from the only resource they have: the image the prince wants to pass to his people, this is, the appearances. Consequently, "since they [citizens] are always impressed by appearances, it is necessary for a successful ruler or politician to be a great liar and deceiver" (Femia, 2009: 178).

Although being relentless, manipulative, liar, or even vile might predominantly label a leader as an immoral and unscrupulous one, Machiavelli maintains that in a political sphere in which everyone struggles to acquire more power, it is simply unsustainable for a ruler to exclusively pursue a path of morally "good" actions and decisions, as they may bear negative consequences for the state as a whole. Thus, as illustrated by Michael Walzer, "no one succeeds in politics without getting his hands dirty." This statement conveys the idea of adopting "immoral" means in pursuance of achieving greater ends that will benefit the whole (Walzer, 1973: 164). Indeed, Machiavelli claims that a prince must adjust his agenda according to the political necessities he faces, disregarding the moral element attached to his decisions. It is consequently clear that Machiavelli's "necessary evil" is entirely justifiable if the final result is one of

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great success and prosperity. It is noticeably more advantageous for a leader, as well as for the citizens of his state, to adapt the methods to the changing realities and urgencies, than to create limitations and barriers on the decision-making process and blindly obey the rules of morality. For although those precise methods might be vicious, the maintenance and security of the state ought to be a leader's main concern and by employing the art of fraud a prince does not compromise his appearances, which are the linking element between him and the civilians he governs (Mansfield, 1998: XVIII).

Indeed, if one takes into consideration the realm of modern politics and analyses the actions and resolutions of political leaders, it becomes possible to detect a rather Machiavellian influence, as far as their political programs are concerned. As Arthur Miller illustrates, "the ultimate foundation of political power has never changed, it is the leader's willingness to resort to violence should the need arise" (Miller, cited in Cronin, 2008: 465). Although most of the political leaders publically deny the need to resort to violence or alternative unethical means, the truth is that certain occasions demand special measures and in order to preserve the harmony of a state, sometimes "princes" ought to disregard moral values. In fact, during the American Civil War, Lincoln deviated some of his decisions from the rules outlined by the Constitution. However, since the results were quite satisfactory for the majority of the American people, nowadays those precise deviations are regularly ignored, as they served the welfare of the whole (Cronin, 2008: 465).

Furthermore, the practice of Machiavellian tactics is also evident in George W. Bush's administration, especially the adoption of Niccolò's interpretation of the relevance of being both a lion and a fox in order to succeed as a "prince." In many occasions, such as the war in Iraq and in Vietnam or during the period of the War on Terror, Bush evidenced a quite firm hand, not only regarding the demonstration of his power at a legislative and rhetoric level, but also by the employment of violence, oppression, and "criminal behaviours." Nevertheless, Bush possessed the ability of concealing his immoral conduct behind a mask of benevolence and loyalty, which clearly encouraged most of the American citizens to respect and cherish his political leadership (Hulsether, 2008: 1012).

In conclusion, it is reasonable to argue that although Humanism was the main doctrine pursued in the political arena during the Florentine Renaissance, Machiavelli accomplished the title of founder of modern politics by successfully introducing a remarkable unprecedented approach to the realm of politics. Machiavelli understood that it is the duty of the prince to regard fortune as a deceptive element of political life and exploit his own virtù, as it represents the component he can control. Indeed, by neglecting the relevance of Christianity and its influence on the conceptualisation of moral values, Machiavelli caused immense perplexity as a completely new notion of virtue emerged (Rahe, 2008: 30).

However, despite outraging large numbers of academics with the ethical complexity attached to his ideology, the truth is that Machiavelli's line of thought has been present in several political agendas throughout time. It potentially represents one of the most palpable approaches to politics, as it provides rulers with a theory that actually applies to reality, rather than exploring normative possibilities. Hence, considering that "politics inhabits a world of dark suspicious and hidden dangers, where the only reality is power," the perfect prince shall ultimately be the one who concerns his state as the central and most important body, even if that requires the adoption of immoral mean (Femia, 2009: 181).

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