

The Prince

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Machiavelli is often seen as the epitome of the political cynic. An evil genius set out to instruct, not to say corrupt, the ruthless man of power, perfecting his vicious art. As a reaction, his writings are sometimes viewed as the satirical outpourings of a desperate moralist. The truth is often between extremes, in this case it is neither. Machiavelli as I see it, is not out to extol naked power, nor to disparage it, neither to seek a compromise. His ambition is to treat the exercise of power, as he sees as inevitable, in a clear-sighted and rational way, in the same spirit as one would say investigate geometry. Still, one has to admit, that even if the ambition is pure, its execution is somewhat sullied. After all Machiavelli ousted from the political scene yearned to rejoin it. His book thus is not free of ingratiating aspects, as his ostensible disinterested project was not free from personal ambition to achieve a specific purpose, namely recognition and appreciation, not primarily by posterity. Machiavelli is not immoral, nor amoral, he does recognise some basic ethical principles. Killing is bad, yet he asks what is worse, the killing and looting of entire populations, or the killings of a few individuals? If you are an intellectual, you may disavow both, as a man of power you are confronted with a choice you cannot evade. Every man of power has blood on his hands.

The basic tenet is that a strong and orderly state is a good thing, almost by itself. To live in a lawless society is to most citizens an intolerable calamity. How should a state be ruled to stay a state? Machiavelli is convinced that only a strong ruler can hold a state together and save it from anarchy. Or at least this is his basic premise, and as a result his point of view shifts from that of the welfare of the populace to that of the individual. How should an individual best go about seizing and maintaining a state. Those are difficult questions that require level-headed thinking and almost technical expertise, Machiavelli is set out to provide both. As his sources he resorts to the tales of the ancients, which until modern times provided a blueprint of a past golden age from which invaluable advice was to be sought and found. In addition to this, he can also benefit from personal experience in the corridors of power and strong familiarity with the local Italian politics of the late 15th century with its interminable wars and alliances. The nakedness of power and its executions might shock a modern reader in spite of the fact that contemporary history has provided far more ruthless scenarios than were possible in a less technologically advanced society.

Machiavelli sets out the main difference between a ruler that comes to his power through established internal ways, or one who has to seize power through external force. As to the latter he observes that a divided society is far easier to conquer than one united under a single head of power. The former is weakened by internal strife, and allies to do your bidding and share temporary interests are easy to find, while the latter provides a united front with no cracks to exploit. On the other hand when conquered the latter are much easier to maintain, because when the all-powerful head of state has been replaced,

allegiance is more or less automatic by internal structure; while the divided state stays divided, and what initially worked in your favour, now works against you¹.

Any ruler of a state has to contend with a powerful elite and a mass populace, usually referred to as the people. (The case of the late Roman emperors were even more complicated as they had to contend with powerful armies, whose interests were at variance with that of the people, and whose power was too strong to be simply discounted.) A ruler that allies himself with the ruling elite is invariably weakened, as the elite will look upon him as an equal, only by allying himself with the people will he rise above it. The issue we are addressing is legitimacy of rule which lies at the heart of any exercise of power that transcends the ephemeral might of pure violence. By forming an alliance with the people, however formal such is bound to be, as the notion of the people is an abstraction not an individual, the ruler makes it clear that his ambitions go beyond that of the petty personal, that he in fact identifies himself with the state. Thus a Monarch, rather than being one of a band of robbers, set out to aggrandizing their fortunes, identifies himself with a transcendent goal. By making the monarchy hereditary, the legitimacy of the ruler is further enhanced, and by being the beneficiary of an abstract principle, owes his power to no one in particular and is thus free of special interest obligations. Machiavelli claims that the beneficial rule of a Marcus Aurelius was indeed only possible by his having inherited the title and the power that came with it. This sounds pretty nice in theory, and many tend to swallow it, seeing in the absolute ruler a deity on earth and as such guarantee of justice and a protector from evil. Of course practice is another matter, and many a monarch in confusing their private and public roles, set out to pursue boundless exploitation. As such, if they are not very skilled, they earn the reputation as tyrants, and as such they break the pledge that granted them power and authority in the first place, and become lawful objects of deposition and murder. This fairy-tale relation between the people and its ruler may seem outdated, yet it was extolled even during the 18th century of enlightenment in the notion of the enlightened despot. And in our day and age, recent and often artificial entities with ambitions of being states, devoid of democratic institutions, nevertheless claim a democratic stamp to their strong rulers, only by virtue of having been elected by a popular vote. The trappings of a modern parliamentary democracy are in place, but as powerstruggle and legitimacy are concerned, they do in no essential way differ from more ancient precedents.

The art of holding power and governing cannot be learned from a book, it is perfected by a combination of natural instinct and extended practice². Machiavelli's book is nevertheless a book of giving advice, and as such it has many good and concrete advices to

¹ One is reminded of the fact that it is easier to win the favours of an unfaithful wife than a faithful, but once accomplished the prospects of maintaining your conquest is much less in the former case than in the latter. A similar sentiment is expressed by Orson Wells in one of his movies, maybe the third man - 'I usually do not go for women who cheat on their husbands, as they may as well cheat on me'

² This was brought home to me powerfully through the actions of a colleague of mine. He had on his own initiative decided to arrange a major international conference. After this decision had been taken he enlisted allies to help him out. The problem was that the allies, having had no part of the initial decision did not as a consequence share in the responsibility. Thus the poor man found himself alone in shouldering the awesome responsibility for which he was not strong enough to do alone. He was the only one who had

give. In fact a ruler cannot rule without the support of good advisers, and it is important that those display intelligence. Intelligence come in three varieties, there is original, and there is appreciative, the latter can indeed value and understand if not necessarily produce. Then there is intelligence that is neither. Advisors of the first kind are excellent, those of the other good, while those of the third are naturally useless. A ruler should indeed listen and encourage men to speak freely, but advice should be given only when asked for, never pushed unsolicited. The onerous duty to make decisions falls on the ruler, and it is important that when once made they are stuck to. Once a ruler is seen to waiver he will be done for. Thus one concludes that in most cases it is better to stick to bad decisions in order to avert an even greater calamity. Wise as advisors may be, their wisdom will be lost on an unwise prince. A ruler that is not shrewed himself will never benefit from good advice.

In making your fortune a prince should appreciate that fortunate circumstances and lucky breaks only provide the matter, prowess is what is needed to give it form. Machiavelli likens Fortune to a woman, thus to win her over, being impetuous is better than being circumspect, and ardour works better than coldness. And besides she prefers the young to the old. But Fortune, unlike me to their peril, is fickle and changeable. The Pope Julius II was impetuous and successful. However, had he stayed on longer, his reputation for being favoured would have changed drastically, calling on circumspection which would not have been in his nature.

So what are the basic advice to be given to a ruler? First and foremost a prince should be well-armed and have good allies. In fact once one is well-armed good allies follow as a consequence. He also should prefer having an army made out of his own people to that of employing mercenaries. The latter are expensive to keep, and their loyalty is contingent upon your paying them, and as a consequence you cannot trust their loyalty and with the natural tendency of man to avoid exertion and danger they will as soon evade fighting as engage in it. With mercenaries there will be no campaigns in winter, nor any sieging at night. (This sounds like contemporary problems with labor unions). And if your soliders nevertheless would turn out to be competent, they will invariably be dangerous. Thus with mercenaries your conquests will be feeble, while your losses may be enormous. But bad as mercenaris may be, it is even worse to be dependant upon foreign armies. If they lose, so do you, and if they win they will turn against you. Furthermore a prince should also not be adverse to breaking his promises if that will be to his advantage. This may sound very bad, but the world being as it is, with everyone following their own interests and their promises being contingent upon the former, an honest prince is at the same disadvantage, as an unarmed prince is among those armed to their teeth. On the other hand it is very important for a prince to maintain a reputation of honesty. Thus one concludes that the skilled ruler does not break his promises lightly only when it is crucial and those that suffer are in no position to hurt him. A ruler should do good most of the

sleepless nights, and his ostensible co-workers could watch with a mixture of amazement and amusement as he slowly sank to the ground crushed by the undertaking. If you want real help from someone, you need to be united by a common interest and responsibility. This lesson could easily have been formulated in a book, but read it would have never made the same impact on me, as when watched and slowly taken form.

time, but he should also know how to do evil, only to be exercised exceptionally. Yet the art of deception is a subtle one, and as an example of its mastery he mentions the pope Alexander VI. The possibility to appear virtuous is due to the fact that men judge by sight not by touch. Everyone may see you, but few will be in the position to touch you. As to cruelty Machiavelli reminds his prospective employer, that cruelty that leads to order and prosperity is more beneficial than compassion if it invites chaos and invasion. Cruelty after all only affects a few individuals, while general disorders affect the multitude. When cruelty and violence is being employed it is very important that it is done all at once and for all. People tend to forget what has only happened once, while they remember what is happening repeatedly. Thus act of benefits should be conferred gradually and in that way they will taste much better. As to generosity it is important to have that reputation, but generosity paid out of your own funds will be self-defeating, as it will undermine your ability to bestow largesse, and in the end ruin you. Misery may bring about ignominy but not hatred, generosity will eventually bring both. Thus if you have to give away, make sure that what you give is not yours. The conclusion is that a ruler should be half man and half beast, founding his power on both law and force. In fact he should emulate both the fox and the lion. The latter is defenceless against traps, the former cuts not teeth when it comes to wolves.

Should a ruler be loved or feared? Preferably both, but if a choice has to be made, the latter is to be preferred to the former. Love is bound by gratitude, which is easily broken in times of adversity. Fear however is a bond that is strengthened by the dread of punishment. Hannibal was an excellent commander, his inhuman cruelty inspired the respect of the army and thus kept it together. Love is not the same as control, but fear is. On the other hand Machiavelli also extols the virtues of love, writing that love of the people guards the ruler against conspiracy. What he must have in mind is once again the advantage of a good reputation for honesty and virtue, making would-be conspirators leary of their ultimate success, because conspirators can never afford to tolerate the slightest indication of failure, and are always at the mercy of their cohorts liable to inform on them at the slightest provocation. When it comes to love of the people the golden rule is not to interfere with their property. A man more easily forgets the death of his father than the loss of his inheritance. Machiavelli is well aware that in dealing with human affairs one needs to appreciate counter-intuitive facts. People suspicious of your rule, even those opposing it, may in the long run be more loyal to you than friends. The latter need not prove their friendship, the others do, once they have been won over to your cause. Thus if you seize power with the aid of those who are hostile to the present regime, you will find that your allies are less reliable than those that originally favoured it. This tallies well with the initial remarks of a divided state being easier to conquer but harder to maintain once conquered than a united one.

Sprinkled among the general advice there are also trinkets of particular ones. Like a prince fearing his people more than outside enemies should by all means build fortresses, otherwise he should raze them all to the ground. And a prince that comes to his new kingdom should arm his subjects. After all he cannot arm them all, and those he will arm will become loyal to him, maybe even partisan. What he should not do is to disarm them. This shows mistrust and causes resentment, and besides makes him utterly dependant

upon his mercenaries.

The Machiavellian prince is clearly fashioned out of contemporary Italian politics, that does not prevent him to be present in a much wider circle, geographical as well as temporal. The early Renaissance kings of Sweden are often taken as northern disciples of Machiavelli, although any direct influence is highly questionable, although chronology would put no objections to such a hypothesis. Gustavus Vasa³ clearly had an instinctive talent for seizing and maintaining power, like all men of power, who seldom if ever learn their craft from books, even from such explicit and instructive ones as that of Machiavellis. He knew how to divide his enemies, how to punish brutally but sparingly⁴ and to break promises when it was to his advantages. His son Erik XIV⁵ was a natural intellectual, prudent and with good sense. (He followed, fortuitously or not, the advice of Machiavelli as to replace mercenaries with native troops.) But he was honest even when it was to his obvious detriment⁶, he did not abstain from presenting himself as weak⁷, another feature of excessive honesty, charming in an intellectual and an artist, disastrous in a ruler. And with the social inability to practice deception and to sow disension among your adversaries, his downfall was inevitable. He remains a tragic figure in Swedish history, a suitable subject for a play by Shakespeare.

But the lessons of Machiavelli project much further into the future and into arenas seemingly far removed from the courts of late Renaissance Italy. Beheading your rivals may no longer be an option for the corporate executive, but the playing on peoples loyalties, the ability to practice deception, in short what is nowadays euphemistically refered to as social competence, is as important now as it was in Medieval or Roman times. Human nature having changed very little, if any; while circumstances (fortunes) have greatly, just as Machiavelli has taught us.

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³ seen as the founder of the modern Swedish Nation state irrevocably extricating it from Danish influence, in power from 1521 to his death in 1560

⁴ His regime certainly cannot be compared to that of Pol Pot with its mass extinctions, contrary to the exaggaratedly provocative claims of a popular writer

⁵ Inherited the throne in 1560 but lost it in 1568 to a conspiracy of the nobility involving his younger brothers as henchmen

⁶ He did not sacrifice a loyal servant, even when the latter became a political disability, something most modern politicians would have no qualms whatsoever of doing even for far less serious excuses

⁷ acknowledging officially an episode of insanity