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Understanding Machiavelli as an Italian Patriot: Analysis

Anees Khan
aneeskhan112525@gmail.com
MPhil Scholar, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

Ihtisham Khan
ihtishamawkum@gmail.com
MPhil Scholar, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

Husnul Wahab
Department of Political science, Abdul Wali University Mardan
husnulwahabrose@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Anees Khan aneeskhan112525@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Machiavelli remains one of the most controversial philosophers in the history of political thought, and his ideas continue to generate significant scholarly debate. While some scholars consider him a true patriot and realist, committed to Italy's political unification and stability, others see him as an unscrupulous and immoral philosopher who advocated deception, immorality, and authoritarian rule. This view is reinforced by the fact that ordinary people use the term Machiavellian in daily life to describe thoughts and actions based on selfishness and cunning, without moral justification. This research paper examines Machiavelli life, political philosophy, and the historical and social conditions that shaped his ideas. The study particularly analyzes his major works, The Prince and Discourses on Livy, to evaluate his concept of political leadership, statecraft, and the relationship between ethics and politics. In terms of research methodology, this qualitative study is based on both primary sources (official documents, etc.) and secondary sources (books, articles, etc.). The findings of the research paper suggest that Machiavelli should be understood within the political realities of Renaissance Italy rather than through purely moral or ethical standards.

Keywords: *Niccolò Machiavelli, Political Philosophy, Renaissance Italy, Political Realism, The Prince, Discourses on Livy, Political Leadership, Statecraft, Ethics and Politics, Machiavellianism*.

INTRODUCTION

Niccolo Machiavelli, the man of the Renaissance (as he has been called), was born in Florence, Italy, in 1469 (HARMON). Although his family belonged to the educated middle class with noble ancestry, they did not enjoy significant political and economic privileges. Machiavelli's political ideas were profoundly influenced by the turbulent political environment of Renaissance Italy and his practical experience as a diplomat and civil servant in Florence.

EUROPE TRANSITION

The fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witnessed significant and fundamental changes in political, economic and intellectual spheres across Europe. The decline of medieval political order, the weakening of papal authority and the emergence of centralized states fundamentally reshaped European politics (Thomson, 1965). A new Renaissance understanding promoted humanism, secularism and renewed interest in classical Political thought, encouraging rulers to prioritize state interests, political stability and effective governance over purely religious considerations. Each state can advance by pursuing its own self-interests. This led to the centralization of authority by nationalist monarchs and the corollary states became politically organized and unified under a single authority. At that time, when Europe had

undergone such a fundamental transformation and tremendous progress, under strong monarchs who provided security and strength to their realms, Italy remained divided, although the preconditions for its unification were the same as in other European states (Marvin Perry, Myrna Chase, James R. Jacob, 2013). Politically, the peninsula was divided into five small states, e.g., Naples, Milan, Venice, Florence and the Papal States (Lucchese, 2009). Each was governed by its own independent ruler and none was capable of unifying Italy under its own rulership. Here lay the stumbling block. As a result of this fragmentation, Italy remained vulnerable to the perpetual attacks of strong countries like France, Spain and England. Similarly, the morals of the Italian citizens continued to degrade (Asma Hamid, Muhammad Hameed, 2024). The existing rulers of the different states of divided Italy were unable to impose unity and morality, unlike those of strong centralized kings of other states (HARMON).

IMPORTANT WORKS OF MACHIAVELLI:

Now, taking into consideration such a political vista, the focus should be on why Machiavelli was so misunderstood in the realm of political philosophy. The first and foremost reason is the book he wrote in 1513, ‘‘The Prince’’. This is the most famous book of Machiavelli, which is widely read. But it should be remembered that this is not the only book he wrote about political philosophy. The Prince is the most widely read book because it is short and brilliantly written. The statements and philosophy presented in this book are without proper political context and are mostly unqualified statements. It is an undeniable fact that the explanation of these statements is presented in his other books, like the ‘‘Discourses,’’ but because they are lengthy and comprehensive but less popular, most people evaluated Machiavelli based on ‘‘The Prince’ (Thomson, 1965).

To validate the fact that Machiavelli was a true patriot whose love for his fatherland was unconditional, the research paper will focus on his professional career, the socio-political circumstances of his time and his Political Philosophy, with special reference to Machiavelli’s Discourses along with The Prince to provide each statement with a particular explanation and qualification. Machiavelli foremost fault for being misunderstood is that he presented in his text what was congenial at that time. Politics, before him, had been analyzed through moral lenses, particularly private morality rather than public morality; therefore, he was the first to present the intricate political world through a pragmatic approach without resorting to morality.

PRACTICAL LIFE OF MACHIAVELLI:

The first fact toward which this research paper draws our attention is what sort of life Machiavelli lived. He was a government servant, working in the chancery of Florence that dealt with war and foreign affairs. Therefore, he engaged in frequent diplomatic missions with the other states of Italy as well as major powers like France, Spain and Germany. He therefore met with the most famous and influential statesmen of the time, for instance, King Maximilian of Germany, Louis XI of France, Pope Julius II and one of his lifetime's most famous personalities, Cesare Borgia (Ridolfi, 2010).

INFLUENCE OF EXPERIENCES ON MACHIAVELLI POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY:

From these experiences and interactions with influential statesmen, the research paper has shed light on how they influenced or even determined the political philosophy of Machiavelli, the practical man. The first experience was the failed attempt of Florence to capture the Pisa territory. Florence tried to capture the territory for four years but always failed. In 1499, Florence again attacked the territory by hiring a great number of mercenaries under a well-known military general, Paolo Vitelli. Florence, being a merchant state, had no army of its own; therefore, each time they hired mercenaries to fight for them. At this time, a huge amount was spent on mercenaries, but on the brink of success, mercenary commander Paolo Vitelli betrayed and the attack failed (Thomson, 1965). Based on this experience, Machiavelli advised that each ruler should maintain a long-standing army of natives to defend and promote the well-being of the people. Native people will fight for the nation, for a cause, while

mercenaries fight for money; therefore, mercenaries cannot be trusted. As Machiavelli stated in The Prince;

‘‘A prince must build on sound foundation; otherwise, he is bound to come to grief. The main foundation of every state, are good laws and goods arms; and because you did not have good laws without good arms, and where there good arms good laws follow, I should not discuss law but give my attention to arms’’ (NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI Translated by W.K Marriott, 2016).

As clear from above passage how much importance he gives to arms force but he cautious rulers that military should be state own, as mercenary are: disunited, thirsty for power, undisciplined and more importantly, disloyal. They make an unnecessary burden on the economy of the state, while at the time of war they either desert or disperse.

POLITICS IS NOTHING BUT NAKED STRUGGLE FOR POWER:

Machiavelli in 1500 went to France after the shameful loss of the second attack to capture Pisa, to meet the king and persuade him that the failure of the attack was because of undisciplined troops sent by Louis IX. But this experience had ultimately changed Machiavelli understanding of politics and how it actually operates. In the court of Louis XII, Machiavelli realized that France had no respect for Florence, which they had falsely considered an ally. The Court derided Florence as a merchant state having no army of its own, whose chief concern is only making money and having no interest in maintaining its own army to gain and secure its own position. The Republican government of Florence was also ridiculed as being based on talk, not on action. Republican government was considered a weak government unable to take brisk decisions. Even at the court of the king, Machiavelli heard the words of ‘Mr. Nothing’ for Florence. Machiavelli took a bitter lesson (Thomson, 1965). Thus Machiavelli put it as;

‘’Politics is not something that can be played in a cultural way and rule-based; rather, it demands power, cleverness, the ability to take speedy actions, to be able to use power forcefully and to act dynamically (Niccolo Machiavelli, translated by Harvey C. Manfred and Nathan Tarco, 1996).

Prince Must Act Ruthlessly:

This characteristic of Machiavellian politics was shaped by his most inspired personality, Cesare Borgia. Cesare Borgia was involved, with the support of his father, Pope Alexander VI, in capturing and annexing different territories at the start of the sixteenth century. The tactics Cesare used were force and cunning. The war strategy he used was to promise the enemy not to attack while actually preparing for a devastating attack. An astonishing, yet fascinating, aspect of these techniques was that they had always worked and Machiavelli, practical man observing it worked (Marvin Perry, Myrna Chase, James R. Jacob, 2013). He also observes the famous ‘Massacre of Senigalla’ of Cesare Borgia in which through apparent reconciliation and invitation by presenting banquet of flowers to less able captains and then killed them all (Thomson, 1965). This rule of deceit, cunningness and immorality of Cesare brings him much success in ruling firmly, effectively and successfully. It is also noted that this characterization of politics is not limited to Cesare Borgia; rather, it was the rule of politics practiced everywhere. Every successful ruler had used such tactics to overcome rivals. All these had a profound impact on Machiavelli, which in turn shaped his philosophy (Asma Hamid, Muhammad Hameed, 2024).

All these confirm Machiavelli’s convection that every state must have two kinds of morality: private morality and public morality (Asma Hamid, Muhammad Hameed, 2024). While both moralities were to be determined by the ruler, the ruler should not be bound to any moral standard. Private morality, that is, morality of good will, of justice and of moral actions, and public morality, which is the morality of rulers, morality of success and involves every action that brings success, must be governing principles. The ultimate aim of a ruler is to ensure safety and security, while also, if necessity arises, to

conquer other territories. Therefore, while the stakes of a ruler's actions are many and important, he should make his own morality and should be above the bounds of private morality (David Boucher and Paul Kelly, 2003).

Let him speak for himself in his Discourse (Thomson, 1965)

‘‘When it is the question of saving fatherland, one should not stop for a moment to consider whether something is lawful or unlawful, gentle or cruel, laudable or shameful; but putting aside every consideration, one ought to the end whatever resolve will save the life of the state and preserve its freedom’’.

In The Prince, Machiavelli put it as

‘’A prince, therefore, must not mind incurring the charge of cruelty for the purpose of keeping his subject united and faithful for, with the very examples, he will be more merciful than those who from excess of tenderness, allow disorders to arise, from whence spread bloodshed and rapine; for these as a rule injure the whole community, while the execution carried out the prince injured only individuals’’ (NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI Translated by W.K Marriott, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Niccolo Machiavelli, a practical statesman and devoted patriot of Florence, has often been misunderstood because of the way his political philosophy has been interpreted. While he was sincere in his pursuit of making Italy a unified and strong state like other major states, therefore his primary concern was not to promote immorality but to provide practical solutions for political instability and fragmentation of Italy. Unlike earlier political philosophers who focused on the ideal form of government, Machiavelli emphasized political realities that had been practiced and had worked for kings of that time. Yet what makes him controversial was that he texted practical reality of his time which no one before him had done. Moral values that had been preached and were part of different philosophical writings were not seen by Machiavelli in the practical realm of politics. The success of rulers of Machiavelli’s time lay in manipulation, deceit, and, ironically, these had worked. Rulers who had used these tactics were successful and effective bringing glory and progress to their realm.

One of the principal reasons for Machiavelli controversial reputation is that many readers evaluate his political philosophy solely through The Prince. The study argues that such an interpretation is incomplete. His broader political philosophy is more fully developed in Discourse on Iivy; therefore, reading both works together provides a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of his political thought. Consequently, it would be unfair to judge Machiavelli without a proper understanding of the historical development that was occurring, the fundamental political realities of his time and by studying only his most famous book without giving due consideration to other important but less famous works. But unfortunately, this has been happening to Italian patriot Niccolò Machiavelli.

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