

On the Moral Considerations of Machiavelli's "De-Moralization" of Politics

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Abstract: Machiavelli was an influential political thinker during the Western European Renaissance period, and his work "The Prince" has been a subject of controversy for proposing the "de-moralization" of politics. However, an in-depth study of his writings reveals a profound moral consideration for people, the populace, and the state, which aids in a more comprehensive understanding of Machiavelli's true thoughts.

Keywords: Machiavelli; Political de-moralization; Moral considerations

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1. Introduction

Machiavelli is a much-debated and highly controversial figure in the history of world political thought. He is considered the first person to completely separate politics from moral ethics, advocating for the de-moralization of politics. However, this view overlooks his profound insight into the moral consequences of political behavior. In fact, understanding Machiavelli's thought should not be limited to discussing political tactics, as his theory incorporates multiple moral considerations for people, the populace, and the state, demonstrating sensitivity to the moral risks behind the use of power.

2. Human value consideration: humanistic analysis amidst the tides of the times and real crisis

Machiavelli is often misunderstood as an advocate for immoral political actions, but in reality, he prefers to separate political analysis from moral consideration. He views politics as an independent domain, focusing on its own purposes. Sabine pointed out: "Rather than being immoral, he is non-moral. Machiavelli actually stripped politics from other considerations and wrote as if it were the purpose itself." ^[1] Marx also made a fundamental judgment: "Italian Renaissance thinkers such as Machiavelli, Campanella, and later Hobbes, Spinoza, Hugo Grotius, as well as Rousseau, Fichte, and Hegel, have all begun to observe the state from a human perspective, deriving the natural laws of the state from reason and experience rather than theology" ^[2]. This essentially

outlines how Machiavelli and subsequent philosophers began to understand the state from a human rather than a theological perspective, emphasizing reason and experience, and promoting the development of political science along an independent path.

Machiavelli's political thought was deeply influenced by the humanism of the Renaissance, emphasizing reason and experience, and shifting the focus to individuals. Faced with the turbulent political situation and power struggles in Italy, Machiavelli, with his rich political experience, believed that traditional morality exhibited weakness in real politics. "The old moral rules are no longer respected: most of the city-state leaders have gained their positions through betrayal and have maintained their rule through ruthless cruelty" ^[3]. His play "The Mandrake" satirized the moral and ecclesiastical society of the time, reflecting his view on the ineffectiveness of virtue in times of chaos ^[4].

Machiavelli's writings reflect his focus shifting to people. He first replaced medieval theological concepts with the personified concept of "Fortuna." In "The Prince," he emphasized the human ability to overcome fate, believing that through active action, one can conquer destiny. "Fortune is a woman, and if you want to subdue her, you must strike her, challenge her. One can see that she prefers to be conquered by those who act in this way, rather than those who work coldly and methodically" ^[5]. He praised "great individuals who remain unflustered in any situation, maintaining a firm spirit and will, so that everyone can see that fate has no power to sway them" ^[6]. This highlights the limited effects of fate on humans and underscores human initiatives and value.

Machiavelli overturned the traditional relationship between religion and humanity, emphasizing that religion should serve people rather than control them. Compared to God, he placed more importance on both the people, including rulers, and the populace, including the ruled, with the emphasis on rulers being paramount.

Machiavelli emphasized the value of humans, believing that politics should be centered around people and consider the impact of human nature's good and evil on political measures. What is the true nature of humans, good or evil? Machiavelli has different expressions in different works.

In "The Prince," Machiavelli believed that human nature is inherently evil, describing people as ungrateful, fickle, avoiding danger, and pursuing self-interest. "About humans, one can generally say: they are ungrateful, fickle, dissemblers, impostors, avoiders of danger, and pursuers of self-interest" ^[7]. However, in "Discourses on Livy," he explored the relativity of good and evil and their geographical differences, suggesting that good and evil coexist and shift with regional changes. "I believe the world always remains the same, and I believe there is as much good as evil in this world, only the kind of good and evil moves between different regions" ^[8]. He also pointed out in Chapter XLIII of Volume III that human nature is roughly the same in the same region, influenced by customs and education.

The mainstream view of Machiavelli is that human nature is inherently evil, and he believed that rule based on benevolence is unrealistic and foolish because human behavior is driven by interests. Nevertheless, he still harbored expectations for the goodness in human nature, believing that it could be guided and improved through laws and governance strategies, which became a part of his republican political philosophy.

It can be said that the focus on the individual has become an important source of Machiavelli's unique political thought. The analysis of human nature and full recognition of human value also becomes the first layer of consideration behind his "de-moralization" of politics, laying a humanistic foundation for subsequent considerations.

3. Consideration of the populace's tendencies: pragmatic moral demands in the exercise of rulers' power

Machiavelli is seen as a "Machiavellian" because of his state theory based on the premise of human evil. He

believed that the original intention of the state was collective self-defense, to prevent the various struggles and killings caused by the false and hypocritical relationships between people, where virtue is worthless. This strengthens his advocacy for the de-moralization of politics in the issue of the state.

Based on the assumption of human evil, Machiavelli pursued de-moralization in politics and morality, and extracted power from the core issue of politics, hoping to remove the useless moral colors and raise the bright scepter of power, thereby emphasizing power as the core of politics. Marx pointed out, “Starting with Machiavelli, power has become the basis of law, and as a result, the theoretical concept of politics has freed itself from morality, leaving only the independent study of politics”^[9]. As Machiavelli himself said, “A ruler’s primary task is not to become a virtuous person but to maintain his own regime and state”^[10].

Since the ruler should regard the maintenance of the regime and the state as his primary task, then how should he use power to achieve this? Machiavelli pointed out in “The Prince” that “such acquired territories, or those accustomed to living under a prince’s rule, or those that have always been free; and their acquisition, either through the force of others or the ruler’s own force, or due to fortune or ability”^[11].

Machiavelli believed that “force” is key to maintaining the regime, and that fortune is unreliable, while ability is a political and military quality that a ruler should possess. He emphasized *virtù* (virtue) and ability, “reducing virtue to the ruler’s political and military capabilities,” and believed that certain traditional virtues such as generosity and kindness are less effective in political practice than stinginess and cruelty^[12]. For example, in *The Art of Ruling*, he advocated for stinginess over generosity. “In order not to plunder the people, in order to be able to defend oneself... a ruler should not mind being called stingy, because this is one of the vices that allows him to continue ruling”^[13]. Regarding how a ruler can achieve great deeds, Machiavelli advocated for hypocrisy over honesty. He said, “However, our times have shown that those rulers who have achieved great things do not value honesty, but know how to use deceit, confuse people, and ultimately conquer those who always keep their word”^[14]. Machiavelli advocated that a ruler should combine the cunning of a fox and the courage of a lion, “A ruler must know how to skillfully use the methods of struggle unique to beasts and humans”^[15]. “Since a lion cannot prevent himself from falling into traps, and a fox cannot resist wolves. Therefore, a ruler must be a fox to recognize traps, and at the same time, he must be a lion to intimidate wolves”^[16]. This ensures the stability of the state and the security of the regime, reflecting his utilitarian and pragmatic thoughts on the de-moralization of politics.

However, when emphasizing the utilitarianism and pragmatism of power, Machiavelli also showed contradictions and concerns about the ruler’s reputation. In Chapter XV of “The Prince,” he mentioned that on the one hand, “a prince who wants to maintain power must be willing to do evil when circumstances force him to”^[17]. On the other hand, “the difficulty lies in how to do evil without leaving the impression of being evil. The real problem is even more serious because the true goal of a ruler is not just to consolidate his position, but also to win fame and glory”^[18]. A ruler may have to commit immoral acts to maintain power, but he must avoid gaining a bad reputation for this, as it may lead to the instability of the regime.

From this, he thought of the people (the populace). Machiavelli believed in “The Prince” that the populace is easily deceived, and although he did not consider them worthy of sympathy, he advised rulers to maintain relations with the populace to consolidate power. He proposed three methods to avoid the resentment of the populace: first, to establish a venting system to avoid political turmoil. “In our times, we have seen in the Republic of Florence, how much political turmoil has been caused because people could not legally vent their anger towards a certain citizen”^[19]. Second, to avoid invading the populace out of greed to maintain a reputation; “Even if one cannot win the love of the people, one should avoid being hated by the people”^[20]. Third, to strive for the favor of the populace, especially the relationship between the rulers and the people and

the nobles. Machiavelli believed that there is a contradiction between the people and the nobles, “The former only wish not to be oppressed, while the latter wish to oppress”^[21]. He believed that the support of the people is crucial in times of crisis, so a ruler should show morality to appease the populace, prevent turmoil, and ensure stable rule. “A ruler must maintain a friendship with the people, otherwise, he has no remedy in adversity”^[22].

Thus, it can be seen that while Machiavelli pursued the de-moralization of politics and focused on power, he also pragmatically considered the tendencies of the populace, reflecting his moral considerations for the populace’s inclinations in the pursuit of power, which should not be overlooked.

4. Consideration of public interest: far-reaching moral prospects in the ideal of a republican state

Machiavelli’s consideration of the populace’s tendencies in the exercise of power is mainly for practical purposes, with less moral content. However, in his ideal of a republican state, his moral considerations for the public interest are more profound and pure.

When interpreting the “Machiavellian Paradox,” it can be found that although he provided “The Prince” to the young Lorenzo de’ Medici to solve the short-term problems of Florence, he personally preferred a republic, considering it the ideal long-term political system.

Machiavelli believed that when the state is facing a severe threat, the preservation of the state is more important than moral justice. In both “The Prince” and “Discourses on Livy,” he proposed that a ruler should take necessary measures, including immoral ones, to protect the state and freedom. “In deciding the fate of the motherland, there is no consideration of justice or injustice, mercy or cruelty, praise or shame; on the contrary, he should put aside all other concerns and follow the strategy that can save the life of the country and maintain its freedom to the end”^[23].

However, Machiavelli also believed that justice and morality are the foundations for the maintenance and development of the state, especially when the state is in a normal political life. “The primary foundation for the maintenance and development of all states lies in justice and the military”^[24]. He distinguished between a state of emergency and a normal “vivere civile”, in which national security and independence take precedence, and moral sacrifices may be necessary, while in the latter, justice and morality should dominate, even for a virtuous ruler^[25].

Machiavelli’s public spirit gradually emerges. In “Discourses on Livy,” he expressed his commitment to public welfare, “I have always had an innate desire in my heart to unhesitatingly engage in those things that I believe will bring common happiness to everyone”^[26]. He emphasized the importance of common interests in an ideal republic. “For it is not individual interests that make those city-states great, but common interests. There is no doubt that only in a republic will this common interest be respected; because whatever is useful to the general interest is implemented, even if it may be disadvantageous to this or that citizen, but its beneficiaries are so many that they can override the will of the few who are harmed by it and forcefully promote it. When there is a ruler, the situation is the opposite, in which case, what is suitable for that ruler is often harmful to the city-state, and what is suitable for the city-state is harmful to him”^[27]. He criticized Florence for failing to reform for the public interest, instead pursuing factional interests. “Although many times they granted full powers to a few citizens through public and free voting to reform it, they never reformed it for the public interest, but always for the interests of their faction”^[28]. Machiavelli believed that at the moment of national survival, the security and independence of the state and the public interest are higher than social morality and justice.

Regarding how to seek the public interest, Machiavelli’s view of justice differs from the classical view, which is based on natural law and focuses on human internal social virtues. He emphasized statutory law

rather than natural law, focusing on behavior rather than internal virtues. He believed that laws should balance the interests of different factions within the city-state, reflecting the public interest. On the question of who should formulate laws that conform to the public interest, unlike Plato's advocacy for the formulation by the philosopher king, Aristotle's proposal for the formulation by virtuous and wise legislators, and Cicero's emphasis on the formation by the natural law of human reason, he supported public participation in legislation, reflecting the will of the majority, to represent the public interest, which is an important contribution to his political philosophy. Machiavelli believed that laws should ensure the realization of public interest.

In summary, Machiavelli is often misunderstood as a typical Machiavellian, but his thoughts actually integrate realism and political ideals, de-moralization, and moral considerations. His political theory system is complex and profound, facing reality while containing ideals, and is worth in-depth study for future generations.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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