

# Contradiction in the prince



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Throughout *The Prince*, Niccoló Machiavelli explores human nature in the context of ruling and being ruled. In the letter to Lorenzo de' Medici that prefaces the text, Machiavelli explains that he has greatly studied “ the deeds of great men” and is well acquainted with “ contemporary affairs and a continuous study of the ancient world” (Machiavelli 3). From these studies of history and the nature of both the common man and the princes, Machiavelli has concluded that the surest way to hold on to a city or territory is to raze it to the ground, and that men sooner forget the loss of their father than the loss of their patrimony. Both of these claims are concerned with the seizing of wealth and resources; however, they contradict each other in the aspect that destroying an entire city is the same as taking a person’s wealth, which is something men do not quickly forget. As a result, and although scattered and lacking resources, the refugees from the demolished city will become bitter toward the prince and will seek revenge. In chapter seventeen, Machiavelli states “ above all, a prince must abstain from the property of others; because men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony” (55). The reason for this is that a man whose father has been killed is less often reminded of his loss than a man whose whole fortune has been taken from him. For the impoverished man, every day he lives in poverty serves as a bitter reminder of the wrong done to him by the prince. A man who has lost all of his possessions is a dangerous adversary because he has nothing left to lose. What can be taken away from someone who has already lost everything that he has worked for his whole life. Given the context of *The Prince*, the people that Machiavelli is most likely talking about are the aristocracy and not the common man. These upper-class men have had their wealth and land in their family for

generations. It may seem as though Machiavelli is exaggerating the brutish and self-centered nature of man by saying that men care more about money than their own flesh and blood, but the truth is that more blame can be placed on a ruler who confiscates possessions than one who executes individuals. For this reason, the one who has lost his possessions will be more likely to seek revenge, as a greater number of problems can be pinned back to the prince who robbed him of his wealth. Similar to these ideas on the seizure of property, chapter five is concerned with the management of resources. After a city has been conquered, the best way to hold it securely is, according to Machiavelli, by devastating it. If the buildings are allowed to stand, they will serve as a constant reminder of the freedom once enjoyed by the residents of the land. The buildings become a symbol of past happiness and freedom, especially in republics. Justification for the razing of the city then, lies in the nature of the inhabitants, for “ when there is a rebellion, such a city justifies itself by calling on the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, never forgotten despite the passing of time and the benefits received from the new ruler” (Machiavelli 18). Machiavelli gives the historical examples of the Spartans and the Romans. The Spartans attempted to rule Athens and Thebes through the existing oligarchic structure, yet they lost the cities in the end. The Romans, on the other hand, destroyed Capua, Carthage, and Numantia after conquering them and therefore never lost possession of them. While it is relatively obvious that these two claims are related inasmuch as they both deal with how the prince should handle property, they are actually much more related than is apparent at first glance. Machiavelli argues that it is unwise for a prince to take property, yet he encourages the taking of heritage. It is indeed true that

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men seek greater revenge for the loss of their fortune than for the loss of those close to them, but the acceptance of this idea naturally leads to the rejection of Machiavelli's other idea regarding the destruction of conquered cities. Machiavelli says that the standing buildings will remind the people of their former freedom, and "the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest" (19). If this is true, then how much more so would seeing the charred and ruined skeletons of demolished buildings incite rebellion? Each husk of a library, a legislative building, or a museum would serve as a stark reminder of the cruelty of their current leader. Therefore, one of Machiavelli's claims must be false. Since Machiavelli's ideas about razing conquered lands builds upon his more basic claims on the nature of man, it must be the secondary claim that is false. The majority of wealth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was held by what today would be considered "old money," or riches that have been passed down from generation to generation, usually in the form of land or established businesses. For this reason, when one has his possessions and land taken from him, he not only loses his money, but also his way of life and his heritage. The countless tapestries, pieces of furniture, and estates that were held by his father and his father's father now belong to the prince and the state. Everything that the offended man associated with his day-to-day life was stripped from him in one instant, one royal decree. His old life now gone, this man has a new goal: revenge. The same can be said about the destruction of cities. When a city is razed, the residents of the city lose everything. They lose their whole way of life and their heritage. Every memory they have will now be relegated to reminders of the lives they once had, lives that were torn asunder by the will of a tyrant. The idea that the

surest way to keep something is to destroy it may be true, but only so far as one cannot truly possess something that doesn't exist. However, news of the destruction will spread, along with sympathy for the disposed people.

Nations will rise up with arms in order to stop the opposing army that is carving a burning path through the land, leaving destruction and sorrow in its wake. Machiavelli states, "in republics, there is more life, more hatred, a greater desire for revenge... in their case, the surest way is to wipe them out," as if destroying a whole republic will somehow assuage their anger (19). It is apparent then, that Machiavelli deeply contradicts himself in his advice to the prince. He urges the prince to "make himself feared in such a way, that if he is not loved, at least he escapes being hated" (54). While destroying entire cities is a good way to become feared, it leads to hatred as well. Machiavelli failed to recognize that just as taking a man's wealth is a guaranteed way to become his enemy for the rest of his life, so is destroying an entire city an excellent way to stir up revolution among the people who used to call that city their home.