

Book review on the prince by machiavelli (mid evil european history)

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Book review The Prince by Niccolò Machiavelli

The Prince is a unique book which is not easy to categorize, even though it is a non-fiction book. One can try to define it as a historic book, especially for the contemporary reader, but at its time of publication it was more a kind of manual, a manual for leaders whom Machiavelli calls ‘Princes’ (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 50), on how to behave when it comes to power. Because of this, the book is still negatively labeled and seen as a “dictator’s handbook” (Dove, 2011) and the author seen as a “synonym for intrigues of unsavory nature” (Goodwin, 2003 p. 7).

However, the book is intended to be a sort of a guideline for these princes, these leaders. The author of the book, Niccolò Machiavelli had been a member of the diplomatic apparatus in Florence in service of the royalty of that time, De Medici family. In his service, Machiavelli experienced sufficient trials and tribulations that come with the territory of being in the diplomatic service where there is also some spying involved. Many a lesson in the book is based on his own personal experience in the diplomatic service. However, Machiavelli lost his job unexpectedly and this was for him the greatest loss in his life. The rest of his life he tried to retrieve his job in which he did not succeed. He had to live with that bittersweet nostalgia the rest of his life.

The book was dedicated to “Lorenzo Il Magnifico” which was Lorenzo de Medici and his employer. This is crucial and should not be overlooked. It was by writing this book and the dedication to ‘the Prince’ that Machiavelli tried to win his job back.

The period in which the book is written is the 16th century and the

background is Italy, more specifically the city state of Florence where Machiavelli has lived and where he is still buried (Goodwin, 2003, p. 6). It was an epoch in European history where wars were more casual and power was in the hand of one royalty one day and in the hands of another day. For that reason, the book was a very practical one.

The Prince is a non-fiction book illustrated with historic facts that contain lessons, not only for the reader but mostly to Machiavelli himself as well. The topic of the book is in one word: power.

The central thesis of the book is how to gain and how to maintain power. That thesis seeps through every page of the book. Power in that European time period was more hard power than soft power and therefore the book is also more focused on that hard power. Throughout the book the examples on military strategy and the gaining and maintaining of power are given. For a prince, virtue or fortune are highly important to gain that power and these two concepts support the thesis throughout the book (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 47). For example, “ Princes” who succeeded by virtue and relatively less by fortune are Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus”, among others (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 50).

Defense, strategy and military are aspects that are put forward throughout the book and that are studied well by Machiavelli. The thesis is supported by many examples. Princes who had little effort in gaining their Princedoms, will experience troubles later on (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 51). Machiavelli explores how a leader should always be aware of and in tune with his goals and ambitions. If he is on a field somewhere, even if it is for leisure, he should

look around with the eyes of a strategist, a conqueror and a defender. He should ask himself questions. Where could the enemy hide? Where would my army have problems if I was in the middle of a fight right now? What are good strategic points? These examples are well thought out and clearly brought forward. It is clear that Machiavelli knows what he is talking about despite the fact that Machiavelli was more of an intellectual that sat down and read books than an active member of an army.

The author has a tendency to overuse examples of military history. He provides some lessons on Alexander the Great and pinpoints what his strengths were in conquering Darius and the architecture of his ruling that was beneficial to hold power after Alexander's death (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 42). It is as if the author uses these great men to show Lorenzo, the Prince, that he could be in the gallery of greats if he follows his advice.

While reading *The Prince*, one does not get the idea that one is specifically reading a book from the 16th century. The behavior, the lessons to be learnt are universal and show an in-depth grasp of the psychology of how mankind works. It is man's nature, it is human nature exposed in all its virtues and instincts. The lessons of the book are applicable to this day and many great leaders in the past have read it, from Napoleon Bonaparte to Benito Mussolini (Dove, 2011).

Throughout the book the author's background is visible and in his excellent descriptions, cool observations and insight into human nature his plea to return to the diplomacy in service of the Prince is almost tangible.

I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to achieve something in this world, no matter how little it is. The book is about power and gaining power but not necessarily absolute power. Machiavelli has learnt from his own experience that in order to achieve something, one must deal with stumbling blocks. To everybody who wants to understand the world a bit better, especially politics and its power play this book is a definite must.

References

Dove, W. (2011). Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf and the myth of the “good dictatorship”. 7 March 2012.

Machiavelli, N. The Prince. Trans. Rufus Goodwin. Boston, Dante University Press, 2003.