

A book review of the prince by machiavelli politics essay



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The first known review of the most famous work of the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, certainly did not anticipate a best-seller: “ I found this type of book to be written by an enemy of the human race” (Kraye 1997: 275), concluded the Cardinal Pole five years after the death of the Italian writer in 1527, when the book finally got into press.

Nevertheless, weve all heard at least once of Machiavelli or said that someone “ is Machiavellian” or something “ Machiavellian”, terms that infer a conception of self-serving behaviour - in politics, business or other aspects of life - around how to dominate and power-seeking regardless of moral and ethics. Like in many other topics, conventional wisdom - understood as Galbraith defined it in *The Affluent Society* (1998 [1958]: 6-11), that’s the ideas accepted as true by the public - has generated a prejudice around ‘ *The Prince*’. Despite having a previous concept of what the book is about, not everyone has read this fundamental piece of the political science, but also of the daily art of politics, ‘ *The Prince*’ has inspired many important figures of History: a copy of it has been in the bedside table of Louis XIV, Napoleon, Bismark, Cromwell and Antonio Gramsci among others (Downs 1983: 201).

“ I have neither decorated nor filled this work with elaborate sentences, with rich and magnificent words, or with any other form of rhetorical or unnecessary ornamentation” (Machiavelli 2005 [1532]: 6), says the letter that accompanied the treaty, an original and provocative for it’s time gift to the original addressee Lorenzo de Medici, then de facto ruler of Firenze. The clear, direct, fluid, unusual and straightforward writing style also indicates the intention of the to generate a positive and strong reaction on Lorenzo.

We should consider that the most probably intention of Machiavelli was to

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gain a position as assessor in the Florentine administration, at the time controlled by the Medicis, that he served as secretary and representative in the times of the Republic. It were precisely his tasks as representative of the city-state during that period which allowed him to gain the experience and knowledge reflected on 'The Prince', but that also costed him the expulsion of the city and torture under accusations, that we now know that are false (Viroli 2005: 11), of conspiracy against the Medicis.

This political science classic is surrounded by a lot of prejudices and ignorance that lead to a miss-interpretation of the original text that is not more, nor less, than a treaty on politics as the art of the possible, an analytical description of the diverse forms of state power, how to achieve and keep it, written by a perceptive Italian that mainly studying the success stories of two admired Spanish statesman, Ferdinand the VIth and Cesare Borgia - the first person to resign the cardinalate to pursue war - , wanted to recover part of his life and to contribute with his acquittance to the unification of Italy, evident on the last chapter of the book and crucial in my opinion to understand the real meaning of the text and the ultimate intention of the author. I would present in this review, the piece as it is, so to show that the common knowledge that claims that the piece is a defence of immorality and cynicism is at least untrue. To be clear: The Prince is about states power and governors interests, but not immorality or evil per se. And why to do so almost five centuries after the last dot of the piece was written? To grasp the importance of Machiavelli's work is enough with opening any modern political science journal: those topics are still disputably addressed

by scientists and taught at universities, and the Florentine author quoted when discussed over and over again.

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We can identify four big blocks in the book: from the first to the eleventh chapter types of principalities are discussed; mercenaries, armies and security occupy his thoughts until the fourteenth part; reflections and advises about how to behave with population are present up to the twenty-first unit and, finally, the last part proses about the inner circle of the Prince.

In the twenty six chapters that form 'The Prince', available in the 2005 translation of Peter Bondanella from the collection "Oxford World Classics", Machiavelli describes and gives historical examples of the types of principalities, the duties of the rulers and how to build and maintain a loyal and useful army with advices such as: "A prince must not worry about the infamy of being

considered cruelty" (Machiavelli 2005 [1532]: 57), "it is much safer to be feared than to be loved" (Ibidem: 58) and "From [foreign powers the prince(...)] can defend himself by his effective arms and his effective allies, and he will always have effective allies if he has effective arms" (Ibidem: 63).

How not to think by reading these affirmations, that would be tagged as cynics and immoral by almost everyone, that the book is an ode to power regardless the means? And this has to be acknowledged; power is a goal for Machiavelli, but - and this should be stressed - not an ultimate goal: the accumulation of power by a 'good' Prince, understood as the one that

ideally results from all the recommendations Machiavelli gives for rulers in <https://assignbuster.com/a-book-review-of-the-prince-by-machiavelli-politics-essay/>

the treaty, is a mean to a better ruled of society, thus more stable, peaceful and prosper, but also to unify Italy: two overall positive goals with a deep moral significance. If the goals are moral, the means are not to be judged on those terms. Machiavelli describes how he sees that power is better achieved and used in a scientifically aseptic way, but he does have preferences on what to use this power for.

Machiavelli doesn't hesitate to recommend Lorenzo to be cruel to make himself respected if it's necessary, but at the same time advises him not to abuse of it's arbitrariness in order to be a good ruler. Isn't a non arbitrativ ruler better than one arbitrativ one for the population? The advise of knowing how to be bad in order to be able to be good - in a moral or a practical sense, but with at the end the same result for the subjects of power - is what we today would call Realpolitik. This thinking that impregnates all the book, is explicitly exposed in the fifteenth chapter and a lapidary phrase for idealistic reflections about politics: " anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation"(Machiavelli 2005 [1532]: 53).

But this utilitarianism of the means it's not applied to the goals. Thus, we could narrow this discussion to one important question to understand the value system of ' The Prince', that would be: Who's the winner of the unification of Italy for Machiavelli? Yes, one could argue that the Prince that achieves the jointure of the peninsula is the ultimate winner, since he would have more power than ever, hence it would control much more population and territory than before, and would be ruling a potency capable of

challenging the other continental powers, in the XVI century mainly Spain
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and France. Unification would also mean first step in the modernization of Italy via the elimination of the inefficient feudal factionalism.

At the same time, a single Italian Prince implies the disappearance of the other Italian princes and rulers for one that should be less tyrannical, the creation of a single administrative body, a professional army instead of mercenaries - as Machiavelli preferred, evidenced in chapter XIII - and above all the end of the dismemberment and fragility of an still in-existing Italy, and thus, Italians. A single Prince implies order instead of the anarchy of the battle for power of different principalities, then less wars where the one's that suffer more are the most fragile ones, civil citizens. For some, it's possible to even go one step forward and argue that the real meaning of 'The Prince' would be a republican one, that what he proposes Lorenzo to do is to create the better possible conditions for a republican revolution to succeed (Deitz and Lagtgon: 1987), even though in this reviewer opinion there's not enough evidence on 'The Prince' itself to support this hypothesis.

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Should we judge Marx because of Real Socialism? Is it correct to discredit Milton Friedman because of Pinochet politics? Would science be better if we had stop reading Nietzsche or Schmidt because of Nazism? Is Adam Smith the responsible of our current economical crisis? Then: should we judge Machiavelli because of Berlusconi?

In a time when the only justification of power was divine, Machiavelli made a step forward and decided to study and explain the Prince to demystify the King. His observations, acute and clear, not only suppose a tool for the daily

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art of politics, but also are a corner stone of Political Science: 'The Prince' supposes the use of empiricism over normativism and metaphysics. By removing the clothes of myths he left a naked and uncomfortable reality of the means of power for many.

Because of his time and his intentions the methodology is not clear nor a philosophical order evident even though as I've said, Machiavelli draws a moral conception of good, present as a second plot mainly in the desire of the unification of Italy, that only occurred three centuries later. In this sense, Machiavelli is a modern author in the late Middle Ages. A man between eras.

'The Prince' in sum, has served as inspiration for politicians as well as for political scientists. The relevance of the book is reflected in the amount of theories that influenced: Antonio Gramsci, a marxist critical theorist, traces analogies between The (Communist) Party and The Prince in his diaries from the jail (Fontana 1993: 3); the office-seeking at all-cost as way of behaviour of rulers can be traced as a precedent of rational-choice theories; the idea of conflict and power-seeking in an anarchic international arena disputed by anthropological selfish men makes Machiavelli look like a realist. Would the theory of the State and Power be the same without his work? Which political scientist hasn't read this piece?

Some may try to interpret 'The Prince' as a how-to for evil and an ancient justification of methodological selfishness. But as stated, Machiavelli doesn't create a new kind of political behaviour, rather he describes what he sees and gives advice on how to better acquire and exercise power, with positive outcomes both for rulers and ruled. Knowing the effect of out-

context sentences on his legacy, Machiavelli would have probably advise twenty-first century Princes not to give unsupervised interviews: “ I know from experience that is easier to miss-understand and blame than to reflect and meditate” he might say. But, reality indicates that is up to us to make a fair reading of his work. Let’s try to be fair.