

Does machiavelli
reduce politics to
force?



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In this essay, I assess whether Machiavelli reduces politics to force. To construct a response to this, it is necessary to explore what “force” means, since “force” is a philosophically weak concept. In order to understand “force” as a philosophical concept, we need to separate the concepts of authority and power. With a clear concept of what we mean by power and how it differs from authority, it becomes possible to discuss whether Machiavelli reduces politics to force. Once the concepts of power and authority are clearly differentiated, the question becomes does Machiavelli reduce politics to force, where force is equated to power, or does Machiavelli rest politics on authority.

In this essay, I argue that, despite Skinner’s attempts to re-habilitate Machiavelli and re-construct Machiavelli as a defender of liberty, Machiavelli does not rest power and politics on authority. Instead, Machiavelli argues that power should be utilised for the purpose of “the common good”. For Machiavelli, political necessity allows for incursions on liberty and the use of power, rather than authority. Femia is alive to the implications of “the dark, authoritarian and militaristic element in Machiavelli’s writings” (Femia, 2004, p. 15); and, in this essay, I argue that this should not be overlooked.

Goodwin argues that attempting to distinguish rigorously between power and authority “is ultimately doomed to failure” (Goodwin, 1997, p. 314).

However, she argues that “the distinction between power and authority has exercised many philosophers, who feel there should be a sharp demarcation between the two” (Goodwin, 1997, p. 306). Whilst a “sharp demarcation” may not be possible, Goodwin does separate the two. She argues that power “is the ability to cause someone to act in a way which she would not

choose, [if] left to herself" (Goodwin, 1997, p. 307). This can, obviously, occur in a number of ways, including threats and violence, but also through persuasion, propaganda and advertising. However, authority Goodwin argues, has a basis in law; a government has authority if it has legal validity (Goodwin, 1997). A sharp distinction between power and authority may not be possible, and it may be made to see the concepts on sliding scale, with illegitimate power on oneside, and legitimate authority on the other side, with much in-between.

This separation between power and authority is fundamental to this essay, as it is important to understand whether Machiavelli argues that politics ought to rest on authority or whether it can be reduced to maintaining power. Therefore, in an attempt to summarise the " demarcation" between power and authority, I once more return to Goodwin, who says the individual " defers to authority... [but] yields to power" (Goodwin, 1997, p. 313). If Machiavelli reduces politics to force/power, his concern is that people must yield to the government; whereas, if Machiavelli argues that politics ought to rest on authority, his concern would be that the people deferred to the government, and recognised its legal legitimacy.

Machiavelli's political philosophy is more complex than the often one-dimensional interpretation of Machiavelli as a self-serving manipulator, promoter of immorality and defender of tyranny. In contrast to the one-dimensional view of Machiavelli which implies that he reduces politics to the maintenance of power and a justification of tyranny, Machiavelli is a defender of a certain kind of liberty. However, Machiavelli's concept of liberty is about the liberty of the state or the Government. He argues that in <https://assignbuster.com/does-machiavelli-reduce-politics-to-force/>

order for the people to be free, they must live a free state – a state free from external servitude. Machiavelli's concept of liberty prioritises the state in the relationship between the individual and the state: "it is not the well-being of individuals that makes cities great, but the well-being of the community" (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book II, Discourse 2*). For Machiavelli, it is not the individual that is important, but the community or the state. Therefore, the individual must yield to the will of the state for the liberty and well-being of the "common good".

In his interpretation of Machiavelli's thought, Skinner emphasises the importance of the free state; and crucially, he stresses the seriousness of the metaphor of the body politic to neo-roman thought, which meant that Machiavelli could not conceive of a free individual without a free state. This is only one of many interpretations of Machiavelli, and is not objective as it underpins Skinner's thesis that liberty was an important concept to Machiavelli. Machiavelli defines the free state as one that is "removed from any kind of external servitude" (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book I, Discourse 2*). Skinner expands this by relating it to the concept of the body politic, where, "just as individual human bodies are free... only if they are able to act or forbear from acting at will, so the bodies of nations and states are likewise free... only if they are similarly unconstrained from using their powers according to their own wills" (Skinner, 1998, p. 25). Skinner's elaboration means that a state is only free, when it follows the collective will of the people, and thereby, liberty is equated to self-government, so a free state is defined as a community "independent of any authority save that of the community itself" (Skinner, 1981, p. 52). Machiavelli stridently defends

the free state, arguing that “ history reveals the harm that servitude has done to people and cities... [as they] have never increased either in dominion or wealth, unless they have been independent” (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book II, Discourse 2*). This underpins Machiavelli’s perennial fear that freedom is fragile and liberty could succumb to external conquest or internal tyranny.

Skinner pursues this notion, and argues that overt coercion is not necessary for a state to be in a condition of slavery: if the maintenance of civil liberty is dependent upon the good will of arbitrary power, then the individual is already living as a slave (Skinner, 1998). This is a rational consequence of Machiavelli’s bleak interpretation of human nature, where men do not promote the common good i. e. the preservation of the state’s liberty.

Machiavelli argues that humans are: self motivated - “ men never do good unless necessity drives them” (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book I, Discourse 3*); bellicose - “ security for man is impossible unless it be conjoined with power” (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book I, Discourse 1*); fickle and untrustworthy - they “ will not keep their promises” (Machiavelli, *The Prince: Chapter XVIII*); pusillanimous - “ when the state needs its citizens, few are to be found” (Machiavelli, *The Prince: Chapter IX*). These attributes are a hindrance to a state that is trying to preserve its ability to enact the collective will without constraint. Therefore, liberty requires overcoming men’s selfish inclination, so they can be fit to govern themselves, and this involves engaging in activities which are conducive to “ human flourishing” (Skinner, 1990). Given that it is contrary to mens’ natural inclinations to pursue the “ common good”, it seems that this involves yielding to the

power of the state. Skinner's eloquent term "human flourishing" describes the need to imbue each citizen with a sense of civic virtù, which is essentially, a public-spirited ethos, whereby the individual commits a great deal of time and energy to participating in the affairs of the state, and maintaining a vigilance to safeguard its freedom. Skinner admits that civic virtù requires placing "the good of the community above all private interests and ordinary considerations of morality" (Skinner, 1981, p. 54).

Machiavelli's political philosophy rests on valuing the public sphere, with a resulting dismissive attitude toward the private sphere. Thus, the citizens of the state are required to yield to the power of the state, and to relinquish their individual liberty, if it is perceived to be in the "common good".

Machiavelli praises Rome where those who worked through the public sphere were honoured, but those working through private means were condemned and prosecuted (Machiavelli, *The Discourses*). Machiavelli argues that a sense of duty to the community, which entails sacrificing the legitimacy of the private sphere, does not curtail liberty but preserve it, as civic virtù is essential to ensuring the state is not constrained from acting upon its own will. He quotes, (possibly apocryphally) from ancient history: "they rebelled because when peace means servitude it is more intolerable to free men than war" (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book III, Discourse 44*), which appeals to Machiavelli's doctrine of public-spiritedness, and his promotion of the well-being of the community.

Machiavelli promotes the ideals of republicanism, and republican liberty, which entails a need to safeguard the state against internal tyranny, through citizens that are active, vigilant, and participate in the daily running of the

community to ensure that the state is not subjected to the caprices of a minority; and that, instead, the community seeks the public interest. Machiavelli criticises the consequences of internal tyranny with empirical reference to the greatness attained by Athens, once “liberated from the tyranny of Pisistratus.... [and] the greatness which Rome attained after freeing itself from its Kings” (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book II, Discourse 2*). Thus, Machiavelli can be read as a defender of liberty by citing his belief that the conflict between the nobles and plebs was the primary reason Rome maintained her freedom (Machiavelli, *The Discourses*), and his assertion that a Monarch’s interests are usually harmful to the city (Machiavelli, *The Discourses*). This interpretation of Machiavelli shows that he does not unambiguously reduce politics to the use of force and power. Instead, he argues that politics rests on the order of a well-structured government. However, for Machiavelli, a well-structured government and political authority are not necessarily synonymous, since he argues that political order may require the use of force and the wielding of power by a powerful leader.

Machiavelli’s writings are littered with references to his love for strong leadership e. g. “dictatorship was always useful” in Rome (Machiavelli, *The Discourses*), or his defence of a Prince’s cruelty to keep his subjects united and loyal, as men are wretched and will pursue their own interest, unless they fear punishment (Machiavelli, *The Prince*). There are clearly elements of Machiavelli’s writings that support the idea of the free state and a certain concept of liberty; for instance, he argues that “experience shows that cities have never increased in dominion or riches except while they have been at

liberty" (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book II, Discourse 2*). This allows Skinner to construct Machiavelli as a defender of liberty, by arguing that "what Machiavelli primarily has in mind in laying so much emphasis on liberty is that a city bent on greatness must remain free from all forms of political servitude" (Skinner, 1981, p. 58). Skinner's reading of Machiavelli suggests that Machiavelli did not reduce politics to force and power; and that, instead, Machiavelli rested politics on political authority. However, this re-habilitating of Machiavelli by Skinner overlooks a number of passages in Machiavelli's writing that show he clearly was prepared to allow force and power to be used without linking it to authority.

Femia takes the view that Machiavelli was not a defender of liberty, and did not place authority at the heart of politics. Femia concludes that Machiavelli's political thought can be characterised by the belief that "we cannot draw a sharp line between moral virtue and moral vice: the two things often change place. Fair is foul and foul is fair" (Femia, 2004, p. 11). For Machiavelli, it is the state that is important, and the individual's liberty can be subjected to power and force in order for the good of the city to prevail. Machiavelli eradicates the private sphere, which allows Femia to draw a parallel between Machiavelli's concept of freedom and fascists who also argue that "freedom comes through participating in a great whole... [and] nothing to do with limiting the state's autonomy" (Femia, 2004, p. 8). Machiavelli primary concern is maintaining political order, and his advice in *The Prince* often seems to be more about maintaining power, than establishing authority. In places, Machiavelli's advice is brutal, and seems

unambiguously to promote the exercise of force for the purposes of maintaining power.

Machiavelli shows no regard for individual liberties, and allows The State to trample over its citizens when force and power are necessary, arguing that “it should be noted that one must either pamper or do away with men, because they will avenge themselves for minor offences while for more serious ones they cannot” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*: Chapter III). This brutal, cynical observation is an instance of Machiavelli’s realism. Such cynical realistic observations do not, in themselves, prove that Machiavelli reduces politics to force and power. It is possible to argue that Machiavelli’s observation accurately observes politics, and he is simply drawing the reader to an important piece of wisdom about human nature. However, this does not seem to be Machiavelli’s motivation. He is not merely observing brutal realism, but appears to be advocating its application. He argues that those the ruler “hurts, being dispersed and poor, can never be a threat to him, and all others remain on the one hand unharmed... and on the other afraid of making a mistake, for fear that what happened to those who were dispossessed might happen to them” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*: Chapter III). The important word here is “fear”. The people fear the ruler, and so obey. This does not imply that the ruler that governs by authority. Instead, the implication is that the ruler holds power through force.

Despite the ruthless, brutal and cynical methods that Machiavelli appears to advocate, it is important not to misread Machiavelli as someone who advocates force and violence merely for the sake of power. Machiavelli is concerned with “The Common Good”, and thus he argues that the exercise

of force - raw power - is only justified if it is exercised in pursuit of "The Common Good". Or, more simply, the "ends justify the means". Machiavelli does not advocate raw power, per se; instead, he argues that if the ends are "good", then the use of force is justified. This blurring of the common good and the use of power to promote it is evident when he argues that "a prince must not worry about the reproach of cruelty when it is a matter of keeping his subjects united and loyal; for with a very few examples of cruelty he will be more compassionate than those who, out of excessive mercy, permit disorders to continue... for these usually harm the community at large" (Machiavelli, *The Prince*: Chapter XVII). This, however, exposes the paradox in Machiavelli's thought, where cruelty is justified by the ends. The problem is that Machiavelli's initial concern is about holding power to prevent disobedience and disorder. It is possible that this exercising of power may shift, and become authority; but, in its first instance, politics is about maintaining power.

Machiavelli was a Renaissance writer; and, therefore, the differentiation between power and authority that Goodwin discussed had not become a part of political philosophy. Therefore, to argue that Machiavelli did not seek political authority, but power, would be a mis-representation, as these concepts were not available to him. However, for Machiavelli, political necessity dominates, and in a realist vein, he allows for incursions on liberty and the use of force and even cruelty to hold power. Ultimately, he seeks authority in the common good, and this justifies whatever methods are used to hold on to power.

Machiavelli doesn't simply reduce politics to force, since force is used to pursue the common good. However, Machiavelli is not concerned with the individual citizen, since he does not differentiate between the public and private realms. Thus, Machiavelli is not concerned with individual liberty and individuals' rights: when the "private person may be the loser... there are so many who benefit thereby that the common good can be realized in spite of those few who suffer in consequence" (Machiavelli, *The Discourses: Book II, Discourse 2*). Without a clear separation of public and private, and between legitimate authority and illegitimate power, the common good can become the arbitrary will of the ruler. The arbitrary will of a ruler – even one that is seeking to promote the common good – leaves politics very open to the use of force to maintain power, in the name of common good. This notion of the use of force to maintain power is quite different from the use of force by a Government that governs through authority, under the rule of law.

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