

Political instability in the prince



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Niccolo Machiavelli lived during the later 15th and early 16th centuries during a time when Italy suffered from much political instability. In early sixteenth century, after the fall of the Florentine Republic and the return of the Medici in 1512, instability was the norm, filled with external threats and internal dissension. Machiavelli's book *The Prince* was written as an impassioned plea to Lorenzo de Medici, Duke of Urbino, for bold action to restore order and unity during a time of political instability.

The Prince, written partly in an attempt to gain goodwill from the Medici, is a guide of behaviors and virtues required of a prince for effective rule. This paper will discuss how Machiavelli recommends dealing with the political instability of the time. Although Machiavelli's recommendations for addressing political instability were extreme, they were well-calculated for a time that called for extreme measures. During the Renaissance period, Italy was continuously invaded and conquered by many states but most often by France.

Those conquered principalities were very unstable and required much political experience and foresight in order to be governed effectively and for any ruler to retain control. Many states and rival families were allied during this period blurring lines of allegiance. Foreign states continued to conquer and re-conquer major towns in Italy for decades. In 1512, the Medici family dynasty was restored to power in Florence, Italy. As the Secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence at that time, Niccolo Machiavelli was arrested, tortured and eventually banished from the city by the Medici regime.

Machiavelli was well educated and studied history and philosophy.

Machiavelli desired to gain a prominent position within the Medici regime and attempted to do so by creating a manifesto of insightful and useful edicts based on contemporary and historical examples of successful actions that ought to be done or not done in order to retain power over a state. The manifesto was to be an offering to help Lorenzo de Medici govern effectively and would place Machiavelli within the good graces of the Medici family and a possible position within the government.

The manifesto would become known as *The Prince*. Machiavelli spells out a number of insights in *The Prince*. One such insight is the need to study and understand history. Machiavelli believes that since human nature remains constant, history will repeat itself; so, only those who study history are truly able understood and learn from the experiences of others. He goes on to say that history is full of both good and bad examples and provides precious sources of wisdom to those that study it.

He further writes that studying history allows man to learn more than would be possible from personal experience alone. Machiavelli uses many historical references to support his theory of the ideal qualities needed to be an effective prince. Although he uses many historical examples, he is quite original in his theories, and even disagrees with Aristotle, a popular political philosopher, on the necessity for moral virtues required in a prince. His actual or “real life” requirements for an effective prince become the tenets of his theory in *The Prince*.

One such tenet of Machiavelli theory is the presence of cruelty within the political system. The Prince was written in 1513 concerning the nature of leaders and the past actions of great men based on the combination of great theory and reality. The Prince's major theme was the usefulness of knowledge and foresight based on political realism. Machiavelli was the first philosopher to divorce politics from ethics and religion during a time when politics were expected to be grounded in the virtues of great leaders and morale laws.

Machiavelli recognized the limitations of the current politics, which were designed to create ideal republics and imaginary utopias, and prescribed a system of political realism and effectual truths as the desired remedy for political instability of the time. Machiavelli dealt with realism versus idealism and identified the two most important aspects of great leaders were virtues and fortunes. A great leader had to be wise and virtuous but needed to also have the foresight necessary to prevent, predict or react appropriately to any and all unforeseen events.

He believed that it was necessary for the use of good virtues as well as injustice and immortality. Machiavelli believed that the Christian virtues like mercy, generosity and compassion put unnecessary pressure on the political system. He believed that cruelty can be badly or well used. For cruelty to be well used it must be out of necessity, occur all at once, and have an overall positive end result. He also notes that cruelty that is progressively worse over time is doomed to fail.

We can say that cruelty is used well when it is employed once for all, and one's safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far as possible turned to the good of one's subjects. Cruelty badly used is that which, although infrequent to start with, as time goes on, rather than disappointing, grows in intensity" (Machiavelli, 2003, pp. 31-32). Machiavelli writes that there is no use to be merciful if by doing so, a prince allows disorder and lawlessness in his state. He believes that controlled cruelty focused on a few law breakers will benefit the state as it will establish order and only hurts a few individuals.

According to Machiavelli, for a prince to be merciful while allowing the majority to suffer is not mercy. Machiavelli presents and analyzes a story of Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI, as an example of someone that uses cruelty to benefit the state. Machiavelli highlights the actions taken by Cesare Borgia to restore order in the Romagna region. Taking others of the qualities I enumerated above, I say that a prince must want to have a reputation for compassion rather than for cruelty: none the less, he must be careful that he does not make bad use of compassion.

Cesare Borgia was accounted cruel; nevertheless, this cruelty of his reformed the Romagna, brought unity, and restored order and obedience. On reflection, it will be seen that there was more compassion in Casare than in the Florentine people, who, to escape being called cruel, allowed Pistoia to be devastated. So a prince must not worry if he incurs reproach for his cruelty so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal. By making an example or two he will prove more compassionate than those who, being too compassionate, allow disorders which lead to murder and rapine.

These nearly always harm the whole community, whereas executions ordered by a prince only affect individuals. (Machiavelli, 2003, pp. 53-54)

Machiavelli continues with the Cesare Borgia example to discuss a key characteristic he calls *virtu*. It is important to understand what Machiavelli means when he uses the term *virtu*. *Virtu* can most closely be translated into English as “ foresight” but also has several additional means such as character, valor, ability, capability, talent, vigor, courage and ingenuity.

Timothy Lukes explains Machiavelli’s use of the word *virtu* as the ability to understand and act on the opportunities provided by time and fortune, to stimulate virtues or qualities as needed, and to combine cleverness and charisma (Lukes, 2001, p. 573). Machiavelli believes that *virtu* is an essential part of practicing statecraft successfully. That is, one needs to be somewhat aggressive, even cruel, in order to maintain power in most situations and to keep order in the state. Machiavelli also uses the term *Fortuna* quite often associated with *virtu*.

He uses the word to represent a unique event or situation that occurs that is beyond an individual’s control, presenting him with a unique opportunity. *Fortuna* does not guarantee that a prince will be successful; rather, it is the circumstance presented to him that provides an opportunity for success or failure. He states that some things are beyond one’s control, but one can be prepared to mitigate and manipulate the effects of the situation. Machiavelli lists several great conquerors, including Romulus, Moses, and Theseus and argues that *Fortuna* gave them only the opportunity to create new principalities; it did not make them succeed.

In the case of Cesare Borgia, he was blessed with Fortuna when Alexander obtained French troops for Borgia's use in conquering the Romagna. Borgia also displays great virtu when he uses treachery and deception to establish control over the people. Borgia recognized that the borrowed French troops would not be loyal to him for long, so he needed to replace them with his own army. He used a cruel man named Ramiro d'Orco to establish order, and then won favor with the people by publically executing Ramiro to show them that he would not tolerate such cruelty.

This was a move admired by Machiavelli, noting that the "brutality of the spectacle kept the people of the Romagna at once appeased and stupefied" (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 25). A great leader need not always be loved nor cruel and feared. Should a prince be loved or feared? Traditional minds of the time would have chosen to be loved; however, Machiavelli says it would be best to be both, but if one must choose, it is best to be feared, not hated. His reason is rooted in human nature in the fact that people are fickle and deceptive.

According to Machiavelli, men are more likely to attack someone loved (but not feared) than feared (but not loved). He writes, "For love is secured by a bond of gratitude which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage to do so; but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective" (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 54). Machiavelli draws from a range of historical examples in exploring how a prince can avoid being hated. In doing so, he offers advice about how a prince today should use the past as a guide.

His examples highlight that a prince can avoid being hated if he abstains from taking his citizens' property, women, and obtains proper justification before executing someone. The examples lead to Machiavelli's conclusion that "since some men love as they please but fear when the prince pleases, a wise prince should rely on what he controls, not on what he cannot control. He must only endeavour, as I said, to escape being hated" (2003, p. 56). A prince can't make someone love him, but he can certainly make them fear him.

The challenge is for a prince to find the balance between being feared and being hated. Similarly, Machiavelli asks if it is necessary or wise for a prince to always keep his word. Following his overall pessimistic opinion of human nature, Machiavelli states that a prince should not feel obligated to honor his word, because he would not expect another man to do the same: "So it follows that a prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist.

If all men are good, this precept would not be good; but because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them. (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 57) This outlook on human nature plays nicely into Machiavelli's view of the responsibility of a prince to make difficult decisions that would normally be considered against societal norms. On the virtues of generosity and miserliness, Machiavelli writes that it is better to be miserly than to be generous.

Machiavelli believes that it is okay to have a reputation of generosity, but there is a difference between having a reputation for being generous and truly being generous. For a prince to be considered generous, he must spend money lavishly to illustrate his generosity, which with time becomes a strain on the people who will ultimately be taxed to support this show of generosity. On the other hand, Machiavelli feels that too much taxation due to wasteful spending will result in public discontent toward the prince. This will start to make his subjects hate him, and, since he will have impoverished himself, he will be generally despised. As a result, because of this generosity of his, having injured many and rewarded few, he will be vulnerable to the first minor setback, and the first real danger he encounters will bring him to grief. (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 51).

In contrast to lavish generosity, Machiavelli writes that “ a prince must think little of it, if he incurs the name of miser, so as not to rob his subjects, to be able to defend himself, not to become poor and despicable, not to be forced to grow rapacious” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 2). With time, the prince may ironically become known as generous because he is able to pay for projects and campaigns without overburdening the people with exorbitant taxes. If a prince campaigns with his armies, acquiring riches that belong to others, then he “ should indulge his generosity to the full. ... Giving away what belongs to strangers in no way affects your standing at home, rather it increases it” (p. 53). Machiavelli acknowledges that many of his theories are considered morally objectionable.

Therefore, he recommends the prince use them as tools to be used to further his objectives or for the overall security of the state. Since it is only upon the <https://assignbuster.com/political-instability-in-the-prince/>

final outcome that a prince should be judged, a prince must not worry about the ethical considerations when making decisions required for the advancement of his objectives. His objectives are, in the end, to establish order and peace in the state, so it should not be a concern to him if he has to make unpopular decisions along the way.

Because Machiavelli believes that a prince has been given the fortune and intelligence to be in the position that he is in, it is essential that he takes all measures to ensure success. It is his special virtues that will determine whether the state will be successful in the end. It becomes clear in the final chapter of *The Prince* that Machiavelli is essentially pleading for the Duke to take a stand to reunite Italy. His plea is for a “prudent and capable man to introduce a new order, bringing honour to himself and prosperity to all and every Italian” (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 2). It is Machiavelli’s extreme nationalism and desire to see Italy reunited that gives credence to his suggestions for ruthless action—for it is the ends that justify the means. The irony for Machiavelli is that *The Prince* was never even read by the person for which it was written and dedicated, Lorenzo de Medici. Although it’s not thought to have been the doctrine for any actual government to date, the potential ruthlessness of its lessons could be beneficial to the most modern day tyrannical dictators like Saddam Hussein and Kim Jung Il.