

# From the valley to the peak



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Within his work *The Prince*, Machiavelli presents a double perspective on rulership that works to focus the direction of outlook beyond the habitual leader to leader approach we have previously seen. Breaking from tradition, Machiavelli's idea that "in order to properly understand the behavior of rulers one needs to be a member of the lower classes" introduces a whole new set of problems for the reader that introduce the dynamic between the people and the prince. (p. 6). This relationship creates a type of double-layered viewpoint, as neither the people nor the prince have a complete perspective. Thus the people are not predictable, and it is this assertion that really individualizes Machiavelli's political theory. Bringing in the peoples' viewpoint breaks with traditional political theory in that it allows for a type of real-world analysis and contextual accuracy that is not possible within theoretical and ideological discussions of rulership – relevant historical examples and personal experience supercede moral arguments about goodness in Machiavelli's realistic doctrine. One of the major effects of such a populist vantage point is its concentration on the people's actual realistic relationship with the ruler. Rather than "constructed imaginary republics and principalities that have never existed in practice and never could" Machiavelli chooses to acknowledge that "the gap between how people actually behave and how they ought to behave is so great that anyone who ignores everyday reality in order to live up to an ideal will soon discover he has been taught how to destroy himself" (p. 48). Through the prism of this wisdom Machiavelli illustrates many significant aspects of the actualities of ruling a population. The most prominent of these features are the omnipresent ideas of fear and the fragile and fallible nature of control. Machiavelli looks at the conditions around him to illustrate these tenets of

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leadership – talking about the King of Spain, Machiavelli remarks that the King “ is always plotting and carrying out great enterprises, which have always kept his subjects bewildered and astonished, waiting to see what their outcome will be. He has never left space between one [enterprise] and the next for people to plot uninterruptedly against him” (p. 68). Thus the populace can be governed without fear of uprising. “ As far as bringing fear is concerned, since men decide for themselves who they love, and rulers decide whom they fear, a wise ruler should rely on the emotion he can control” (p. 53). This idea breaks radically from the previous ideas of social control we have seen, because its illustration is based both in reality and in the opinion of the populace of the ruler, rather than the ruler of the populace. Machiavelli also utilizes the analysis of the populace when instructing what to do about mixed principalities. He puts forward that “ one of the best policies is for the new ruler to go and live in his new territories. This will make his grasp on them more secure and more lasting. As a consequence [the subjects] have more reason to love you, if they behave themselves, and, if they do not, more reason to fear you” (p. 9). The acknowledgement of such realities as region-specific cultural institutions and traditions is a conception achieved from the view of the populace, one that is overlooked in previous political philosophies with their much more vague and malleable citizens. Machiavelli asserts with his every instruction the individualized and highly personified character of the populace, reinforcing the reality that people are ruled, rather than figurative sheep. The simple fact that it is people that are being ruled creates the fundamental notion of a dynamic between the ruler and the citizens. Human nature is unpredictable, and Machiavelli acknowledges this by working so hard to explore the outlines

of this dynamic. He does this through persistent examples of how the people must be dealt with while understanding this dynamic, with everything from violence to cultural appreciation defining the necessary qualities of a good ruler. “ Fear restrains men because they are afraid of punishment, and this fear never leaves them” (p. 52). The idea of founding violence is also a large part of the relationship to the populace. “ In order to get a secure hold on [territories] one need merely eliminate the surviving members of the family of their previous rulers. In other respects one should keep things as they were, respecting established traditions” (p. 8). Machiavelli very logically instructs to concentrate the bad and disperse the good, thus creating a stable and satisfied popular impression of the ruler. Machiavelli asserts once again the importance of human nature in the dynamic between ruler and people: human memory makes men “ quicker to forget the death of their father than the loss of their inheritance” (p. 52). The vantage point of the people also enables Machiavelli to address seemingly quotidian issues, such as “ subjects’ exactions” that actually deeply affect the power of the ruler because ignoring them could create popular hostility. Such an unseen bottom-up method allows a level of thoroughness that Machiavelli exemplifies in his appraisal of local politics at the time. His explanations of the political strategy of everyone from the King of France to Caesar lets the reader see for himself the significant breadth of the lower-class viewpoint. Yet at the same time the ultimate fallibility of a reliance on either viewpoint is shown – human nature can not be predicted from either the mountain or the valley, and perhaps that is Machiavelli’s ultimate goal, to illustrate the complex dynamic between populace and ruler without relaxing into the traditional comfort of aristocratic idealism.