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Machiavelli: Prince or Republic

An Examination of the Theorist's Two Most Famous Works

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Nicollò Machiavelli is one of the most well-known and influential political theorists in history. He coined phrases that are still applicable even five hundred years after his death, and his concepts changed the way rulers and philosophers thought about government. In the modern era, Machiavelli's reputation is controversial, with some readers appreciating his pragmatism and realistic, "modern" view of people, while others are uncomfortable with some of his harsher, more infamous phrases. Most of these opinions, however, are based on Machiavelli's most read work *The Prince*, which is known for its deviation from similar works at the time. Far less well-known, Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* focuses on republican government and contains the theorist's analysis of the famous Roman historian Livy's history of the Roman Republic. This work is unique in that it is a hybrid of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the contemporary ideas of good and virtuous government. In his analysis of Livy's history of Rome, Machiavelli highlights some of the same ideas that he is famous for in *The Prince*, while also examining the great Roman republic as well as modern republics, with the purpose of demonstrating how learning from the past can help one create the ideal republic and become a better prince.

Machiavelli's *Discourse on Livy* is the theorist's attempt to end some of the historical ignorance that he believed plagued modern statesmen. While men look to history for a multitude of reasons, they seldom truly learn from it. Machiavelli writes:

In organizing republics, maintaining states, governing kingdoms... and in expanding an empire, no prince, republic, or military leader can be found who has recourse to the examples of the ancients. I believe this arises not so much from the state of weakness into which today's religion has led the

world, or from the harm done to many Christian provinces and cities by an ambitious idleness, as from not possessing a true understanding of the histories, so that in reading them, we fail to draw out of them that sense or to taste that flavor they intrinsically possess.¹

This passage, taken from one of Machiavelli's two different prefaces to his work, demonstrates several important aspects of the author's thought process that is prevalent throughout the entire book. First, it shows that Machiavelli's focus is not entirely centered on republics, even in his book based upon a republican history of Rome, for he believes anyone in power can learn from history. Second, it shows that Machiavelli places a degree of blame on modern Christianity in making states and rulers weak, displaying a hint of his well-known pragmatism, characteristic in *The Prince*, rather than the traditional Christian idea of virtue. Third, the passage reveals the main reason that Machiavelli chose to base his analysis on Livy's history; to Machiavelli, modern statesmen had a woefully inadequate understanding of history, for simply reading it was not enough. To truly govern wisely, a real understanding of the lessons of history is necessary, and this is why Machiavelli decided to use the most famous history of the greatest republic in the world as his basis for his attempt to educate statesmen.

To begin the *Discourses*, Machiavelli discusses the founding of Rome, in order to show the importance of the foundations of a state. According to Machiavelli, Rome's "early institutions, even if defective, did not, none the less, deviate from the straight path which could lead them to perfection."² These early Roman laws set the stage for later changes that combined both kingly and republican aspects, thus creating almost a system of checks and balances between the senate and the people. Indeed, Machiavelli claims that "disturbances between the nobles and the plebeians... were the primary cause of Roman liberty," suggesting that the conflict between

1 Niccolò Machiavelli, Julia Conaway Bondanella, and Peter E. Bondanella, *Discourses on Livy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

2 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 27.

the two groups was positive.³ This idea is contrary to thought in Machiavelli's time, for conflict within a state was typically perceived as entirely negative.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses the beginnings of a state as well, though from the perspective solely of a prince. Corresponding with the above section on the founding of Rome, Machiavelli writes:

The actions of a new prince attract much more attention than those of a hereditary ruler; and when these actions are marked by prowess they, far more than royal blood, win men over and capture their allegiance. This is because men are won over by the present far more than by the past; and when they decide that what is being done here and now is good, they content themselves with that and do not go looking for anything else... Thus the new prince will have a twofold glory, in having founded a new state and in having adorned and strengthened it with good laws...⁴

This passage contains similar ideas to those in *Discourses*, for in it Machiavelli suggests that the founding of a state is vital to its later success. Like in Rome, the early days and laws determined the later outcomes. It is also interesting to note that, while discussing princes, Machiavelli at the same time seems to dismiss the idea of hereditary rulers necessarily being better, believing that a new prince can establish a stronger state if he uses the right laws at the beginning, probably in reference to his admiration of the founding of Rome. Additionally, the passage includes Machiavelli's idea that people do not know history, but in this case he suggests that it has a positive effect for a ruler, for the prince's people will be more won over by strong action in the present compared to anything in the past.

The goal of both *The Prince* and *Discourses* is to serve as a blueprint of how to best run a state, and while of course meant for already established rulers, Machiavelli does seem to prefer the idea of starting one's own state either as a new republic or as a new prince in order to best establish good laws and precedents for the

3 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 29.

4 Niccolò Machiavelli and George Bull, *The Prince* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 77.

future. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes “If he carefully observes the rules I have given above, a new prince will appear to have been long established and will quickly become more safe and secure in his government than if he had been ruling his state for a long time.”⁵ For Machiavelli, following the lessons of history reveal the best ways to conduct a government, and the mistakes of contemporary rulers often demonstrate examples of what to avoid, examples of which he includes in both works.

One modern mistake that Machiavelli discusses in both *Discourses* and *The Prince* is the effect of Christianity on both princes and republics, mainly with regards to it not being near as effective for rulers as ancient religions were. In *Discourses*, Machiavelli claims that the Catholic Church in Italy created the opposite of the typical idea of Christian virtue, as well as prevented political unification, writing:

Because of the evil examples set by this court, this land has lost all piety and religion... We Italians have, therefore, this initial debt to the church and to the priests, that we have become irreligious and wicked, but we have an even greater debt to them, which is the second cause of our ruin: that is, the church has kept and still keeps this land divided, and truly, no land is ever united or happy unless it comes completely under the obedience of a single republic or a single prince...⁶

This passage has the kind of cynical tone that many people would associate with *The Prince*, so the fact it is in Machiavelli’s discussion of the Roman republic is interesting. It shows that Machiavelli sees religion as a force that governments, whether they are a principedom or a republic, can use to unify and empower the state. To do this, religion must be the tool of the ruler, not a separate political entity as the Catholic Church was at the time. Religion in Rome was the product of the ruler, and Machiavelli believes this to have been a source of the state’s strength.

According to Machiavelli, “those princes or republics that wish to maintain their integrity must, above all else, maintain the

5 Machiavelli and Bull, *The Prince*, 77.

6 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 55.

integrity of their religious ceremonies, and must always hold them in veneration, because there can be no greater indication of the ruin of a state than to see a disregard for its divine worship.”⁷ Religion is one of the cornerstones that Machiavelli believed was necessary for creating a solid state. Establishing religious institutions is a part of establishing strong laws, for the two are naturally connected in Machiavelli’s analysis.⁸ Unity was important to Machiavelli; a united state was always stronger than a divided one, and uniform religion and laws were some of the defining features of such states. Additionally, establishing such set customs was a way to ensure a degree of continuing strength even without a strong ruler. His views on religion in a state are a mix of both his pragmatic view of government as well as the customary view of the time that religion was extremely important, though in a far more spiritual way than Machiavelli himself seems to believe.

Another area that Machiavelli covers in both works is the idea of ability versus fortune and which plays a greater role in the formation of strong states. In *Discourses*, Machiavelli disagrees with the historian Livy’s suggestion that the Romans owed the success of their empire to fortune over ability, for:

If no republic has ever made gains equal to those of Rome, this arises from the fact that no republic was ever organized so that it could acquire territory as Rome did. The exceptional ability of its armies enabled Rome to acquire its empire, and its mode of conduct and its own way of existence, discovered by its first lawgiver, allowed it to hold on to its conquests...⁹

Machiavelli argues that Roman institutions allowed them to make the proper choices in order to conquer and maintain their empire. This took ability, and allowed them to fully take advantage of the opportunities that fortune offered, opportunities that other states with less ability would have let slip by. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli gives even more attention to fortune, beginning his section devoted

7 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 53.

8 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 52.

9 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 152, 153.

to it with:

Many have held and hold the opinion that events are controlled by fortune and by God in such a way that the prudence of men cannot modify them, indeed, that men have no influence whatsoever. Because of this, they would conclude that there is no point in sweating over things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance.... None the less, not to rule out our free will, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half of the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.¹⁰

Machiavelli believed that, while fortune played a role in events, outcomes were not entirely determined by fate alone. This was important to him from a governing perspective; if fortune was not the only factor that determined a state's future, then it was of the upmost importance to ensure that everything possible be done to maximize the good that opportunity allowed for and minimize the bad that fortune placed upon a state.

Machiavelli goes on to compare fortune to “one of those violent rivers” that could flood and cause destruction at any time, yet because it was not always “enraged” it allowed for time to set up precautions to minimize damage.¹¹ This idea is given so much more attention in *The Prince* rather than in *Discourses* because, for a prince, fortune could cause greater damage to one man's rule than to the government of an established republic. Machiavelli ends his section on fortune with the memorable phrase “fortune is a woman,” claiming that men need to learn to change with the tides of events rather than remain “obstinate in their ways,” for fortune responds not to hindsight but to concrete, “impetuous” action.¹² In both *Discourses* and *The Prince*, Machiavelli suggests that action is the best way to combat fortune and that ability is always more important than luck, believing that accepting events as determined by God would not create a strong state. This also reflects his well-known pragmatism, claiming that actions should be determined by the different situations given by fortune, rather than following one

10 Machiavelli and Bull, *The Prince*, 79.

11 Machiavelli and Bull, *The Prince*, 79.

12 Machiavelli and Bull, *The Prince*, 79.

set ideology no matter what is occurring.

With regards to political ideology, Machiavelli's two books each cover a different method of running a state; *Discourses* focuses on republics, though mentions princes at many occasions, while *The Prince* discusses managing a state as a lone ruler. Despite his somewhat infamous reputation as a supporter of despotism because of *The Prince*, Machiavelli prefers republican rule to that of a prince. Indeed, he writes in *Discourses*:

Nothing is more unreliable or inconstant than a crowd of people: so affirms our Livy, like all other historians... I must say, therefore, that the defect for which writers blame the crowd can be attributed to all men individually and most of all to princes, for each person who is not regulated by the laws will commit the very same errors as an uncontrolled crowd of people... There exist and have existed many princes, and the good and wise ones have been few in number...¹³

Machiavelli disagrees with Livy and other historians with their descriptions of the people as unwise or impulsive, arguing that good laws can make people wise, while also pointing out that many of the same flaws that historians attribute to the multitude can also be assigned to individual rulers. He goes on to state "...with respect to prudence and stability, I would say that a people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince" because of its ability to understand what is good for the state.¹⁴ The people can make the same mistakes that a prince can make, but overall, the people are less prone to bribery or making the wrong choice in leaders, whereas a single prince is far more likely to work for his own good rather than that of the state.

Finally, Machiavelli states in *Discourses* "the fact that governments by the peoples are better than governments by princes," because "in goodness and in glory, the people are far superior," thus outright declaring which government he believes is better.¹⁵ This is interesting for a number of reasons. First, Machiavelli has mainly negative comments regarding the republics in his own time, while

13 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 140, 141.

14 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 143.

15 Machiavelli, Bondanella, and Bondanella, *Discourses*, 144.

mentioning the strength of some of the powerful kingdoms. Second, Machiavelli himself acknowledges that this opinion is contrary to most historians up to his time, so his own analysis that the people are better than a prince is based off of histories that degrade the rule of the people. Third, if republics are indeed better, why did Machiavelli write *The Prince*?

As discussed above, both of Machiavelli's books have a degree of overlap, with both discussing similar ideas of governing, the role of laws, and how to best combat fortune as a ruler. Both also cover different unpopular ideas at the time; *Discourses* with its declaration of a republic as the best form of government and *The Prince* with its blunt separation from the ideas of virtue at the time. *Discourses*, however, reveals the extent to which Machiavelli was influenced by the glories of the Roman republic, and *The Prince* contains a number of references to Rome and the same mentality of learning from the past. Indeed, *Discourses* serves as a guide of what path to follow for republics in the same sense that *The Prince* is a guide for consolidating power as a prince.

Because Machiavelli sees a republic as the best form of government, it would seem that *The Prince* is a guide to consolidating enough power and creating strong enough laws so as to make the state secure enough to transition to a republic. In *Discourses*, Machiavelli writes:

This must be taken as a general rule: that never or rarely does it happen that a republic or a kingdom is organized well from the beginning or is completely reformed apart from its old institutions, unless it is organized by one man alone; or rather, it is necessary for a single man to be the one who gives it shape, and from whose mind any such organization derives. Thus, the prudent founder of a republic... must strive to assume sole authority; nor will a wise mind ever reproach anyone for some illegal action that he might have undertaken to organize a kingdom or to construct a republic.¹⁶

This could be seen as the justification for *The Prince*, for if the sole ruler, the prince, has to take some illicit action to reach the ultimate

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goal, it is justified in order to form a strong government that would ideally be or eventually become a republic. Indeed, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli states that “cruelty is used well when is employed once for all, and one’s safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far a possible turned to the good of one’s subjects.”¹⁷ Both these above excerpts would be impossible to assign to the correct book if taken without reference, demonstrating the similarity of ideas behind the two works. Therefore, both books can be considered guides to the same goal; stronger government with the ultimate goal of achieving a secure republic. If a prince must be cruel at the beginning stages of his reign in order to make the state stronger and safer, it is justified.

Machiavelli’s ideas were controversial at the time he wrote, and many of his concepts continue to surprise readers. Despite his modern pragmatism, Machiavelli was also heavily influenced by history, and most of his ideas are based on historical examples of strength and wisdom. Both *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* discuss the importance of history, and how modern states have grown weaker because of their lack of historical understanding, ranging from the point of religion to the relationship between fortune and action. When examined together, the two works have much in common, with the major differences being *Discourses* focusing more on history and *The Prince* focusing more consolidating power. Taken as a pair, Machiavelli’s two political writings serve as a lesson in history and leadership, containing examples of ancient virtue and necessary pragmatism, all with the goal of achieving a more perfect state, started by a noble prince and continued by a wise people.

¹⁷ Machiavelli and Bull, *The Prince*, 31.

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