

The New York Times

Text to Text | 'The Prince' and 'Why Machiavelli Still Matters'

By **Michael Gonchar** March 11, 2014 4:13 pm

The political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli wrote “The Prince” as a manual on leadership and governing during the late Italian Renaissance, a time of feuding family dynasties and warring city-states. But even though 500 years have passed, and the world is a very different place, “The Prince” somehow feels as relevant as ever in modern culture and politics.

In this Text to Text, we pair Machiavelli’s “The Prince” with the Times Opinion article “Why Machiavelli Still Matters” by John T. Scott and Robert Zaretsky.

Background: Machiavelli is typically maligned as being the author of a playbook for autocrats and tyrants who use evil means to hold onto power. He is often remembered as the political philosopher who counseled that it was better to be feared than loved and that ends justify means — in fact, these notions are the basis for the less-than-flattering term “Machiavellian.” But Machiavelli’s how-to manual is more complex than these oversimplifications can capture.

Machiavelli does not embrace meanness and violence for their own sake; he uses examples from history to make his case that sometimes these devices are necessary for the good of the republic. Machiavelli counsels that a ruler must act on “the real truth of the matter” rather than “the imagination of it,” because in reality people do not always do what is right and virtuous. He argues that “a man who wishes to act

entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil.” Machiavelli’s views can be seen as cynical, callous and tyrannical. Or they can be judged to be pragmatic and sound advice for an effective democratic and just leader.

John T. Scott and Robert Zaretsky argue that contemporary Americans, perhaps more than anyone else, could learn a lesson or two from Machiavelli. “Like the political moralizers Machiavelli aims to subvert, we still believe a leader should be virtuous: generous and merciful, honest and faithful,” they write. “Yet Machiavelli teaches that in a world where so many are not good, you must learn to be able to not be good.”

Below, we selected passages from four chapters in Machiavelli’s “The Prince” that relate most to Mr. Scott’s and Mr. Zaretsky’s Opinion piece. You can find the entire book online at [Project Gutenberg](#). In Excerpt 2, we republish the second half of “Why Machiavelli Still Matters.” Read both, and then decide for yourself what Machiavelli is really saying, and why you think “The Prince” is relevant today.

Key Question: Why does Machiavelli still matter?

Activity Sheets: As students read and discuss, they might take notes using one or more of the three graphic organizers (PDFs) we have created for our Text to Text feature:

Comparing Two or More Texts

Double-Entry Chart for Close Reading

Document Analysis Questions

Excerpt 1: From “The Prince,” by Niccolò Machiavelli

Concerning Things for Which Men, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed

It remains now to see what ought to be the rules of conduct for a prince towards subject and friends. And as I know that many have written on this point, I expect I shall be considered presumptuous in mentioning it again,

especially as in discussing it I shall depart from the methods of other people. But, it being my intention to write a thing which shall be useful to him who apprehends it, it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of the matter than the imagination of it; for many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen, because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation; for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil.

Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity. Therefore, putting on one side imaginary things concerning a prince, and discussing those which are real, I say that all men when they are spoken of, and chiefly princes for being more highly placed, are remarkable for some of those qualities which bring them either blame or praise; and thus it is that one is reputed liberal, another miserly, using a Tuscan term (because an avaricious person in our language is still he who desires to possess by robbery, whilst we call one miserly who deprives himself too much of the use of his own); one is reputed generous, one rapacious; one cruel, one compassionate; one faithless, another faithful; one effeminate and cowardly, another bold and brave; one affable, another haughty; one lascivious, another chaste; one sincere, another cunning; one hard, another easy; one grave, another frivolous; one religious, another unbelieving, and the like. And I know that every one will confess that it would be most praiseworthy in a prince to exhibit all the above qualities that are considered good; but because they can neither be entirely possessed nor observed, for human conditions do not permit it, it is necessary for him to be sufficiently prudent that he may know how to avoid the reproach of those vices which would lose him his state; and also to keep himself, if it be possible, from those which would not lose him it; but this not being possible, he may with less hesitation abandon himself to them. And again, he need not make himself uneasy at incurring a reproach for those vices without which the state can only be saved with difficulty, for if everything is considered carefully, it will be found that

something which looks like virtue, if followed, would be his ruin; whilst something else, which looks like vice, yet followed brings him security and prosperity....

Concerning Liberality and Meanness

Commencing then with the first of the above-named characteristics, I say that it would be well to be reputed liberal. Nevertheless, liberality exercised in a way that does not bring you the reputation for it, injures you; for if one exercises it honestly and as it should be exercised, it may not become known, and you will not avoid the reproach of its opposite. Therefore, any one wishing to maintain among men the name of liberal is obliged to avoid no attribute of magnificence; so that a prince thus inclined will consume in such acts all his property, and will be compelled in the end, if he wish to maintain the name of liberal, to unduly weigh down his people, and tax them, and do everything he can to get money. This will soon make him odious to his subjects, and becoming poor he will be little valued by any one; thus, with his liberality, having offended many and rewarded few, he is affected by the very first trouble and imperilled by whatever may be the first danger; recognizing this himself, and wishing to draw back from it, he runs at once into the reproach of being miserly.

Therefore, a prince, not being able to exercise this virtue of liberality in such a way that it is recognized, except to his cost, if he is wise he ought not to fear the reputation of being mean, for in time he will come to be more considered than if liberal, seeing that with his economy his revenues are enough, that he can defend himself against all attacks, and is able to engage in enterprises without burdening his people; thus it comes to pass that he exercises liberality towards all from whom he does not take, who are numberless, and meanness towards those to whom he does not give, who are few....

Concerning Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether It Is Better To Be Loved Than Feared

Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but,

because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with. Because this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life, and children, as is said above, when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you. And that prince who, relying entirely on their promises, has neglected other precautions, is ruined; because friendships that are obtained by payments, and not by greatness or nobility of mind, may indeed be earned, but they are not secured, and in time of need cannot be relied upon; and men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.

Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared whilst he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women....

Concerning the Way in Which Princes Should Keep Faith

Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word. You must know there are two ways of contesting, (*) the one by the law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man. This has been figuratively taught to princes by ancient writers, who describe how Achilles and many other princes of old were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse, who brought them up in his discipline; which means solely that, as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how

to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable. A prince, therefore, being compelled knowingly to adopt the beast, ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves. Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand what they are about. Therefore a wise lord cannot, nor ought he to, keep faith when such observance may be turned against him, and when the reasons that caused him to pledge it exist no longer. If men were entirely good this precept would not hold, but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them....

Excerpt 2: From “Why Machiavelli Still Matters,” by John T. Scott and Robert Zaretsky

...“The Prince” is a manual for those who wish to win and keep power. The Renaissance was awash in such how-to guides, but Machiavelli’s was different. To be sure, he counsels a prince on how to act toward his enemies, using force and fraud in war. But his true novelty resides in how we should think about our friends. It is at the book’s heart, in the chapter devoted to this issue, that Machiavelli proclaims his originality.

Set aside what you would like to imagine about politics, Machiavelli writes, and instead go straight to the truth of how things really work, or what he calls the “effectual truth.” You will see that allies in politics, whether at home or abroad, are not friends.

Perhaps others had been deluded about the distinction because the same word in Italian — “amici” — is used for both concepts. Whoever imagines allies are friends, Machiavelli warns, ensures his ruin rather than his preservation.

There may be no students more in need of this insight, yet less likely to accept it, than contemporary Americans, both in and outside the government. Like the political moralizers Machiavelli aims to subvert, we

still believe a leader should be virtuous: generous and merciful, honest and faithful.

Yet Machiavelli teaches that in a world where so many are not good, you must learn to be able to not be good. The virtues taught in our secular and religious schools are incompatible with the virtues one must practice to safeguard those same institutions. The power of the lion and the cleverness of the fox: These are the qualities a leader must harness to preserve the republic.

For such a leader, allies are friends when it is in their interest to be. (We can, with difficulty, accept this lesson when embodied by a Charles de Gaulle; we have even greater difficulty when it is taught by, say, Hamid Karzai.) What's more, Machiavelli says, leaders must at times inspire fear not only in their foes but even in their allies — and even in their own ministers.

What would Machiavelli have thought when President Obama apologized for the fiasco of his health care rollout? Far from earning respect, he would say, all he received was contempt. As one of Machiavelli's favorite exemplars, Cesare Borgia, grasped, heads must sometimes roll. (Though in Borgia's case, he meant it quite literally, though he preferred slicing bodies in half and leaving them in a public square.)

Machiavelli has long been called a teacher of evil. But the author of "The Prince" never urged evil for evil's sake. The proper aim of a leader is to maintain his state (and, not incidentally, his job). Politics is an arena where following virtue often leads to the ruin of a state, whereas pursuing what appears to be vice results in security and well-being. In short, there are never easy choices, and prudence consists of knowing how to recognize the qualities of the hard decisions you face and choosing the less bad as what is the most good.

Those of us who see the world, if not in Manichaeian, at least in Hollywoodian terms, will recoil at such claims. Perhaps we are right to do so, but we would be wrong to dismiss them out of hand. If Machiavelli's

teaching concerning friends and allies in politics is deeply disconcerting, it is because it goes to the bone of our religious convictions and moral conventions. This explains why he remains as reviled, but also as revered, today as he was in his own age.

[Read entire article »](#)

For Writing or Discussion

1. What advice does Machiavelli offer to a prince? Give at least four examples.
2. How does Machiavelli justify why a prince should not always act based on ideals of virtue?
3. What pieces of Machiavelli's advice do you agree with? What ones do you disagree with? Why?
4. Why do John T. Scott and Robert Zaretsky argue that Machiavelli is still relevant?
5. According to them, why does Machiavelli remain "as reviled, but also as revered, today as he was in his own age?"

Going Further

1. Reappraising Machiavelli: Is Machiavelli maligned undeservedly? Should the term "Machiavellian" be redefined? The political philosopher is often remembered as the author of "ends justify the means" and "it is better to be feared than loved," but these catchy sayings are oversimplifications of the lessons Machiavelli was trying to impart.

Read the above excerpts from "The Prince," or read the entire book, and attempt to boil down Machiavelli's political philosophy as concisely as possible without oversimplifying it or twisting his meaning.

You may want to watch the above interview with the writer Salman Rushdie, who argues that Machiavelli does not deserve the bad reputation he has been assigned.

2. Machiavellian Pen-Pal Activity: What current or historical leaders seem to follow the Machiavellian playbook? What leaders could use some advice from Machiavelli? In the Wall Street Journal Opinion article “Dear Vladimir: Congratulations. You Read My Book,” Josef Joffe introduces his satirical piece with: “Niccolò Machiavelli, the father of realpolitik, has sent a message from beyond the grave to Russian President Vladimir Putin following his grab of Crimea. Through divine inspiration and the services of an elite medium, your correspondent has obtained the document, reprinted below.” He follows with Machiavelli’s “letter” to President Putin. Here is an excerpt:

Yet you, Mr. President, have been both ruthless and prudent — just what I prescribed in “The Prince.” You Russians have distilled my wisdom into a pithy phrase: Kto kovo — who dominates whom? And you have beautifully executed my central idea. I never preached violence to the max, but the “economy of force” — how to get more with less. The Crimean caper was a masterpiece of smart power politics.

Do you agree with Mr. Joffe’s analysis comparing President Putin’s playbook in Crimea with Machiavelli’s advice in “The Prince”? Do you agree with the cautionary words at the end of the letter, that “a nation’s true greatness comes from responsibility?” Is this in line with what Machiavelli believed about governing?

Ten days before Mr. Joffe wrote his article, David Brooks wrote a different satire in The Times: “Fake Putin Diary!” The two pieces together almost work like a pen-pal exchange. Mr. Brooks writes:

Machiavelli was right. Fortune is a woman; only the audacious win her love. That’s why my technique has always been to create facts on the ground. Act first, while everyone else dithers. Force them to react to my reality. That’s why I alone am Mr. Big on the world stage. Heroes drive history, and I will not be ignored!

The naïve Westerners (forgive the redundancy) think Ukraine is about democratic ideals, or whether the country will turn West or East. Please.

There is no room for ideals in my worldview. People are motivated by money and fear.

What connection does Mr. Brooks see between President Putin and Machiavelli?

After reading both articles, write your own letter exchange between Machiavelli and a world leader, either current or historical. You can do this activity with a partner or on your own. You may want to choose a leader who could be considered “Machiavellian,” or someone who you think could learn something from Machiavelli. Include evidence from current events or history to support what you have to say and to connect to Machiavelli’s writing.

3. Debating Machiavelli: Machiavelli’s political philosophy may be oversimplified in today’s culture, but there is no denying that he is a pragmatist who advocates doing what’s necessary over doing what’s right. Read the excerpts above, or the entire book, and debate the ideas that Machiavelli lays out in “The Prince.” When do you agree with his arguments? When do you disagree?

You can hold this intellectual conversation as a class Socratic seminar or debate, or as a written dialogue or letter exchange between you and Machiavelli.

4. Machiavelli in Popular Culture: How does Machiavelli appear in music, movies and art? Choose a way that he has been appropriated or depicted, and write a commentary about whether this use of Machiavelli does justice to the political philosopher’s writings. Below are some Machiavelli references in popular culture:

Tupac Shakur adopted the stage name of Makaveli and used the moniker in some of his lyrics.

Tony Soprano from “The Sopranos” and Lord Varys and Lord Baelish from “Game of Thrones,” among other characters in television, film and literature, have referred to Machiavelli or have been described as Machiavellian.

Assassin’s Creed, the popular video game, features Machiavelli as a leader of a secret order of Assassins.

Or just do a news search of how Machiavelli is being applied in today’s news.

Standards

This resource may be used to address the academic standards listed below.

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