

The Prince by Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469-1527) – Book Review

by

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Abstract

‘The Prince’ is a piece of writing on governance written by Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. In the book, Machiavelli seemingly advocated that the prince (ruler) should act immorally to keep command and control and do everything that favors controlling the state but he actually criticized the immoral acts undertaken by rulers at that time. The purpose of this paper is to review the book.

Keywords: The Prince, Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli, Book Review, etc.

Introduction:

‘The Prince’ is a piece of writing on governance written by Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. He was born at Florence (Italy) on 03 May 1469 and died on 21 June 1527. Machiavelli is primarily known as Florentine political philosopher and diplomat. He remained diplomatic missions at many European courts in the early sixteenth century. In 1512, he was imprisoned and exiled. He wrote the initial writings of the book in the form of letters to Lorenzo de Medici. In 1532, after the death of Machiavelli, the printed version of the book appeared. Machiavelli seemingly advocated that the prince (ruler) should act immorally to keep command and control and do everything that favors controlling the state but he actually criticized the immoral acts undertaken by rulers at that time. He underlyingly gave a message that virtue in the form of pure or moralistic is possible because truth and virtue are the last longing and eventually cannot be exploited. He actually emphasized and recommended that discipline is paramount to hold control over a state so prince (ruler) must be disciplined to maintain discipline and maintaining discipline is the right thing to avoid chaos in the state or territory (Tierney, 2019).

Central Idea of the Book:

In order to integrate the Italian states, Machiavelli was finding root causes of domestic instability and he highlighted that the prince must establish new principalities because (as Machiavelli believed) acquiring and maintaining command and control on new principalities is the toughest task for a prince. He theorized that the diplomatic but powerful acquisition of new principalities by utilizing own resources and men is the task of the prince (Sparknotes, 2019). He gave the example that the fall of Cesare Borgia due to his dependence on his father’s connections and not the power of his own arms or strengths. Machiavelli also emphasized that every prince looking for to rise to power should have a powerful and disciplined army that must obey the prince. An undisciplined army that does not obey the prince is very dangerous. He said, “*A prince must build on sound foundations; otherwise he is bound to come to grief. The main foundations of every state, new states as well as ancient or composite ones, are good laws and*

good arms; and because you cannot have good laws without good arms, and where there are good arms, good laws inevitably follow, I shall not discuss laws but give my attentions to arms” (Machiavelli et al., 1998).

He further stressed the importance of a prince's reputation as the good public image, irrespective of reality, enhances the power of the prince. Machiavelli argued that political action must be judged solely on the terms of practical consequences. Although he superficially advocated immoral behavior in the form of killing of innocents and dishonesty as it is an effective tool in politics. In this regard, Machiavelli said, *“If the ruler wants to keep hold of his new possessions, he must bear two things in mind: first, that the family of the old prince must be destroyed; next, that he must change neither their laws nor their taxes.”* But the message between the lines was to criticize the negative and crucial traditions or customs that were prevalent at the times (Machiavelli et al., 1998).

‘Machiavellianism’ is a negative term that is coined from the concept of unscrupulous politicians characterized in *The Prince* by Machiavelli. He advised princes that it is better to be feared than loved and the ends justify the means. Machiavelli said, *“From this arises the following question: whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The answer is that one would like to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to combine them, it is far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both. One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit. . . . Men worry less about doing an injury to one who makes himself loved than to one who makes himself feared. . . . but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective.”* Here, he was meant that maintaining discipline and implementation of laws is not an easy task so law enforcer cannot be a beloved one (Skinner, 1981).

Summary of the Book:

The book is divided into 25 chapters. The eleven chapters (1-11) of the book are about the art of having power and subsequently command and control of the state. Machiavelli opposed the hereditary monarch as such a ruler is unable to fulfill the state's needs. He advised that the conqueror immediately suppress opposition. The adversaries must be dealt with full ruthlessness. The conqueror must support the minority groups that were previously oppressed by the earlier ruler because they will provide strong support if the majority of people resent opposition to the new conqueror. A prince must take over by creating class conflict among noble and general people (Sparknotes, 2019). Those people who are used to dictatorship may or may not resist a new conqueror but people of democracy are resentful for their deprivation of freedom and such people will put full efforts to regain their status. Machiavelli said, *“But in republics there is more vitality, greater hatred, and more desire for vengeance, which will never permit them to allow the monarchy of their former liberty to rest; so that the safest way is to destroy them or reside there.”* To a safe way for a new prince is complete destruction of the institutions, traditions, and customs of free people. The new conqueror must be strong and firm to bring changes in the society as people are naturally conservative and resist the change. The prince must have the ability to be cunning of the fox with the strength of the lion as Machiavelli said, *“The lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves”* (Machiavelli et al., 1998).

The next three chapters (11-14) are about the use of military power. In order to maintain an effective military force, Machiavelli emphasized that the armed forces must be consist of citizen-soldier. Those troops are not to be trusted who fight for money but not for honor. He said

that those troops are loyal and trustworthy who fight to defend their homeland, to safeguard the virtue of their women. He strongly condemned seeking help in the form of auxiliaries. In this regard, Machiavelli said, *“Auxiliaries, which are the other useless arm, are employed when a prince is called in with his forces to aid and defend, as was done by Pope Julius in the most recent times; for he, having, in the enterprise against Ferrara, had poor proof of his mercenaries, turned to auxiliaries, and stipulated with Ferdinand, King of Spain, for his assistance with men and arms. These arms may be useful and good in themselves, but for him who calls them in they are always disadvantageous; for losing, one is undone, and winning, one is their captive.”* He further stressed that despite relying on auxiliaries (troops from another state as help) the prince must form his own disciplined, efficient and well-trained army as Machiavelli said, *“As regards action, he (the prince) ought above all things to keep his men well organized and drilled, to follow incessantly the chase, by which he accustoms his body to hardships, and learns something of the nature of localities, and gets to find out how the mountains rise, how the valleys open out, how the plains lie, and to understand the nature of rivers and marshes, and in all this to take the greatest care”* (Machiavelli et al., 1998).

The next four chapters (15-18) are about the disagreeable reputation of the prince. Machiavelli strongly advised that the prince must secure his power by all means. He described human nature as dominated by the egoistic drive and a wise prince would avoid too much freedom. Machiavelli said, *“Of mankind we may say in general they are fickle, hypocritical, and greedy of gain.”* A prince who is generous must publicize this fact and the people will soon hate policy of lavish for they will realize that they themselves are paying for it. On the other hand, a prince who is economical will initially face opposing but finally, the people will appreciate the prince being courteous towards the property of people. A ruler must not have kindness in his personality as his prime responsibility is to keep the state together. But on the other hand, the rulers also have respect and affection for his people preferably respect. The prince must execute his people but also avoid taking heritage/ patrimony of people, as Machiavelli said, *“Men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony”* (Machiavelli et al., 1998).

The next seven chapters (19-25) are about the advice to princes/ rulers to strengthen their powers. Machiavelli advised the prince that the prince must craft a favorable image in the minds of the people. They (people) must have the perception that the prince is courageous, determined, honest, and firm. Machiavelli said, *“Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.”* In case of war between two states in the neighborhood, the prince must support the weaker state in order to maintain the balance of power in the region. The prince must be careful and focused while selecting, appointing, and giving offices to advisers and officers and disloyal one must be punished severely. Machiavelli said, *“If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.”* A prince must pay attention to the inputs receive from his advisors/ officers carefully and give importance to them if the inputs are valuable (Machiavelli et al., 1998).

Conclusion and Analysis:

The Prince unquestionably has been an amazing book. Although this book was written about 500 years ago still, its big portion is applicable in this era of digitalization. Many people in history praised this book and many philosophers acknowledged Machiavelli as a leading personality in the field of Political Science. Machiavelli leadingly introduced a rational approach toward analyzing government and politics. Apparently, Machiavelli seems harsh and immoral in his ideas but in the real sense, he criticized negativity and underlying advocated positivity which

is why he has also been considered consistently in history to be true. The governments are still required power and balance of power to maintain its writ. Overall, the book has proven to be a classic piece of literature in the field.

Although, Machiavelli disregards morals and virtues such as honesty in political dealings as he believes that “*it is necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic and to be a great pretender and dissembler*”. If deceptive acts were met with equal ruthlessness, a never-ending cycle of deception would develop. Machiavellianism has been known as a negative connotation globally. Machiavelli was well aware of these all negative traits. That is why he very skillfully gave a message that maintains law and order ruthlessly will bring the state in order. Negative minded personalities implied that the book is full of evil recommendations to dictators/ tyrants in order to keep power.

To Machiavelli, it is fundamentally necessary and acceptable in order to maintain discipline for keeping the state in order. He considers them very rational personalities who are ruthless in controlling negative people and maintaining law and order in the society because maintaining discipline is always a very hard task. Negative minded personalities are the people who create hindrances and impediments in maintaining peace, justice, and equality in society. Resultantly, after studying this book, some weak souls and negative personalities further strengthen their Machiavellian's behaviors and attitudes with the tendency to manipulate and exploit others. They (Machiavellians) are the individuals who in order to defend their negative interests use all immoral, unlawful, and unethical means for it. To me, rule of law is paramount for good governance as nobody is above the law in any case or in any situation so, in order to maintain rule of law and discipline, it is necessary to be ruthlessness to those who break the law and create chaos in the state or in the society.

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