

Machiavelli's Political Philosophy and Its Reception

Hadjer Khatir

The University Of Jordan Amman

Abstract: Machiavellianism emerged as a whole system of thought. Early in the 16th century, Niccolo Machiavelli worked as a political advisor to the ruling Medici family in Italy. Machiavelli collected all the details of his political thoughts in his 1513 famous and controversial book "**The Prince**". He became increasingly known for his political motto "the ends justify the means". This motto became perpetually utilized in different political agendas. Most significantly, this research tends to see in depth how this Machiavellian perception has been received by the critics and how it was integrated into literature mainly the Renaissance period where this idea of ultimate authority and control is being projected. For at the time when certain philosophers were asserting that the individual is more important than the state, Machiavelli supposedly saw this as entirely simplistic and unemployable. To put it differently, this research tends to explore to which extent this Machiavellian philosophical approach was understood or misunderstood by different critics.

Key words: Machiavellianism, critical receptions, Renaissance, political theory, hegemony, power, deceit, the individual, the state

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I. INTRODUCTION

Machiavelli is a political philosopher who died since 500 years ago, but his name remarkably lived on and became the very core of exercising bad faith in the world of politics. Shakespeare called him once "the murderous Machiavel". Hereafter, there spread a general agreement among the moralists that his philosophy stands for odious and loathsome political ends. Correspondingly, this research's main focus lies on accentuating on Machiavelli's defenders and detractors. It tends to examine how Machiavelli's ideas were received by different critics. This research engages two important debates about the controversy that Machiavelli's philosophy projects. My own interest in this research is to see whether Machiavelli's philosophical and political perceptions that are introduced in his book "**The Prince**" are as direct and strait forwards as such or they actually bear deeper rhetorical truths. This research introduces accordingly a number of critics who actually discuss his philosophy from different corners. The main question that becomes overwhelming all along the composition of this research is what lies behind this fraudulent reputation that Machiavelli acquired? Did Machiavelli truly deserve all these perpetual accusations, or was there an urgent need to look at his works further? This research introduces therefore some critics who attempted to read Machiavelli and see his approach from a much deeper level. Those critics such as **Paul A. Rahe, Jeremie Barthes, Victoria Kahn**, and others tended to redress the balance and hence to do justice to Machiavelli's thought. By contrast to **Gentillet** and others who regarded Machiavelli as a counsellor for the princes and the enemy to morality and justice. Indeed, to make an intact judgement about Machiavelli's state of mind there is an urgent necessity to see carefully through the circumstances he went through. Historically speaking, it is said that most of Machiavelli's productions were burnt. There are certain historical hints and this can be seen even through his books "**The Prince**" and even "**Discourse on Livy**" that foreshadow Machiavelli's preferences of the maintenance of a republican state this idea is indeed explicitly or implicitly echoed in his works. Most importantly, he shows his profound understanding of how villain princes sought power for its own sake.

It is widely known that one of the ultimate laws of politics is success with all what its literal meaning suggests. It is indeed for this sole reason that politics all along the world's history has never kept the same stream of law. To put it differently, politics could not, cannot, and can never recognise a moral law to be entirely bound to a particular state or nation. It becomes more clearly noticeable that amongst politics there reign a chain of actions and reactions between what we might call means and ends. In this research where lights are being shed directly or indirectly upon the politics and the literature of the Elizabethan era through the thought of Machiavelli who is perhaps regarded as the most remarkably political among the political philosophers themselves. Machiavelli articulated his theory about the effectiveness of the government vis a vis the individual or the citizens as a whole in his controversial book "**The Prince**". Machiavelli defined in his own way what is a

good ruler and to which extent this ruler can be successful. According to him, the good ruler is the one who would devoid himself from any form of goodness. He actually should set apart all the ethical concerns of justice, honesty, consciousness, and even kindness. For him as long as these aspects are set aside this means that this particular ruler would effectively establish stability in his state. Indeed these ideas blew into the minds of his readers at the first place a gloomy and shocking atmosphere. The readers would have the impression that for Machiavelli the ruler can do whatever that seems in his own eyes necessary no matter what, just for the sake of maintaining his own power over the nation.

Nevertheless, some critics perceive Machiavelli's "*The Prince*" as a satire or rather a mockery of those who adopt and espouse its content. In his essay entitled "*Machiavellian Political Thought From the Age of Revolutions to the Present*", Jeremie Barthes states that Machiavelli in truth "invites us to mistrust authority, including that represented by tradition and constituted power may be necessary to define freedom against his enemies" (Barthes). Jeremie goes further accentuating on the idea that Machiavelli boldly emphasised on the significance of history and the fact that it is undoubtedly written by the winners. He correspondingly argues that Machiavelli's work is just like a thorn in the ruler's flesh. He designates with a keen description a number of political devices and methods that target in a way or another, the ultimate power and authority. Indeed, Jeremie saw that the dialectic that Machiavelli's state of mind projects was received in a very abstract way, this kind of abstraction misled his readers and made them see of Machiavelli's philosophy nothing but a mere cynical and immoral reflection of power and human nature. He accordingly asserts that, at the contrary, Machiavelli's book foreshadows what he calls "Resistance". To fully apprehend Machiavelli's perception requires an independent mind reader who in turn can decipher and decrypt his dialect. One of the independent minded philosophers who truly defended Machiavelli from these accusations is Hegel who in turn insisted on the necessity of approaching Machiavelli's philosophical thought with a historical consideration. Moreover; in his philosophical book "*The Will to Power*" Nietzsche elevates Machiavellianism which he finds as a superior form of morality simultaneously devoid from moral hypocrisy, for he went further attempting to upgrade the bold and exaggerated definition of the state :

Now, no philosopher will be in any doubt as to the type of perfection in politics; that is Machiavellianism. But Machiavellianism is superhuman, divine, and transcendental, it will never be achieved by man, at most approximated. Even in this narrower kind of politics, in the politics of virtue, the ideal seems never to have been achieved (Nietzsche 170)

Hence, Machiavelli seems to be inviting his readers to mistrust this deceptive authority that leads to nothing but tyranny and despotism. This is indeed another way of perceiving Machiavelli's philosophy which in turn hints at certain misconceptions. According to Jeremie we sometimes do not attempt to reach the core of it and hence stop at its very surface absorbing not the entire truth, but only the half of it. That is to say, by viewing Machiavelli's idea as a recipe for not only the initiation of power, authority and human nature, but also a preparation for an impending doom. Instead of having a profound understanding of the matter, we can only acquire and put all our focus on the general agreement which everyone sees as the same and therefore becomes a logical fact. Jeremie in his essay calls for another consideration of Machiavelli's political thoughts that should be received from a historical eye rather than emphasising on the moral aspects of it. This peculiar insistence on moral aspects actually tends to transform partially if not completely the core of Machiavelli's thought and message.

Moreover, in his book "*Machiavelli: Very Short Introduction*", Quentin Skinner provides a further reading where he sheds the lights on how Machiavelli's readers and most significantly the politicians always directly or indirectly miscomprehend a very simple yet significant lesson that Machiavelli in truth wanted to spread among his contemporaries. Quentin Skinner puts this peculiar matter as the following:

Although Machiavelli's pronouncements on the rulers of his age are in general severely critical, it would be misleading to conclude that he regarded the entire record of contemporary statecraft as nothing more than a history of crimes, follies, and misfortunes. (Skinner 17)

It seems accordingly that Machiavelli was reflecting on what is this tremendous power that keeps on overwhelming human affairs. If the one comes closer to Machiavelli's "*The Prince*" pondering upon a keen statement concerning the very idea of fortune his argument runs as the following:

For my part I consider that it is better to be adventurous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you wish to keep her under it is necessary to beat and ill-use her; and it is seen that she allows herself to be mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go to work more coldly. (Machiavelli 144)

He makes a parallel between the whole idea of "Fortune" and "a woman" to delineate to which extent "Fortune" stand for manliness. As long as man becomes ready to absorb her power and learns correspondingly to render himself in a perpetual harmony with her, he undoubtedly becomes successful in his own affairs. If we take Machiavelli's genuine words from the latter quote such as "it is necessary to beat and ill use her" and it is accordingly when she is ill treated and beaten that she can submit herself and accept the enslavement. On the

surface this sounds cruel, it sounds as if Machiavelli is championing villainy however and as Quent Skinner telescopes the matter, beneath the surface we can arrive at a more profound level of understanding, that is to say:

This brings Machiavelli to the key question the Roman moralists had originally posed. How can we hope to forge an alliance with Fortune, how can we induce her to smile on us? He answers in precisely the terms they had already used. (Skinner 22)

Correspondingly, Machiavelli philosophical ideas have perplexed the minds of its receivers; it actually fused a tremendous controversy. It is for this peculiar reason that this research in turn attempts to allude at some of the various stands of thought that emerged. Further, when we consider the idea of tyranny and despotism and we attempt in a way or another to see through it, the one may reach the famous political motto which is "the ends justify the means" and it is correspondingly uttered by Machiavelli in the following manner:

In affairs that lead to the end which every man has before him, namely, glory and riches, to get there by various methods; one with caution, another with haste; one by force, another by skill; one by patience, another by its opposite; and each one succeeds in reaching the goal by a different method (Machiavelli 142)

Here indeed lies what we call Machiavelli's "Consequentialism". As readers of Machiavelli's most controversial book "*The Prince*" we come to ask ourselves the question what is Machiavelli's real intention, what does he really want to teach us after all? There is an urgent need to reconsider the superficial interpretations that we give for a book at the first reading. For Machiavelli's philosophy cannot be as simple as that. To put it in another manner, behind his stern words there must be a deeper meaning, perhaps an ironic connotation that only the feeble minded cannot absorb it. In his essay "*Machiavelli as a Political Philosopher*", Bernard John D asserts that Machiavelli's own background stands as a very significant justification that would lead us in turn to a counter conclusion which is that at the end of the day Machiavelli in truth does not mean what he says about the princes and tyranny in his book "*The Prince*" that is to say: "everything he states there is written with tongue in cheek." (Bernard 3)

Nevertheless, the arguments that lie in its depth had a great effect on the Renaissance attitudes towards the government. Machiavelli's "*The Prince*" blew different moral contradictions. His main assumption that human nature has always been the same he goes on citing that Cesare Borgia as the perfect model who takes off morality with all what it bears of virtues of a human being just for the sake of what he calls "political attainment". All along Machiavelli's "*The Prince*" we encounter a kind of malicious idealisation of Borgia, for Borgia becomes a dominant concept of the prince after all:

He exerted his utmost endeavours and employed every means that skill or prudence could suggest to retain those states which he had acquired by the arms and good fortune of another (his father). If the measures he adopted did not succeed it was not his fault, but rather owing to the extreme perversity of fortune. He laid a firm foundation for future greatness. (The prince)

One comes correspondingly to see that indeed Machiavelli made a clear distinction between ethics and politics. Further, if we consider Machiavelli's conception of the will to power and its reception in the Elizabethan age, we shall apprehend that Machiavelli's name was deeply rooted in its people's perception of life. It accordingly could never fade. Machiavelli stood as a symbolic representation of evil, treachery, and murder. Most significantly, the writing of Machiavelli and more peculiarly his remarkable and most controversial book '*The Prince*' puts forwards a largish commentary and criticism. Among the most condemnable works that stood against his philosophical perception of powerful and tyrannous rulers is Gentillet's "*Contre-Machiavel*" which in turn was published in 1576. Gentillet's work has been recognized as the source of anti-Machiavellian sentiment in England. To put it differently, that book spread into its readers an abhorrent and horrendous atmosphere concerning what he articulates as the state craft as well as human nature. In Gentillet's "*Contre-Machiavel*", we are acquainted with the Machiavelli, who becomes more and more the inaugurator of all sins. Politically speaking, different devices as well as techniques began to be effectively used by different rulers all over the world and we cannot but mark them as Machiavellian. At the time when certain philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant for instance looked at politics and its despotism from an entirely ethical side, Machiavelli looked at the political field with a scientifically constructed mind. He consequently came up with a whole philosophical perception that is literally devoid of any ethical clue or indication. In his critical book: "*Policy or The Language of The Elizabethan Machiavellianism*" Napoleone Orsin states a variety of terms derived from the Machiavellian philosophy and which in turn became widely overused in the world of politics such as: *policy, practice, aphorism, maxim, politic, practice, practitioner, aphorism* and others. Napoleone correspondingly goes further explaining that:

All these words in their specialised meaning became almost the technical terms of Machiavellianism in England to the extent that whatever they found with that meaning in the Elizabethan text, Machiavellian influence may be traced either directly or indirectly

It seems accordingly that Machiavelli stood as master figure not only for the Elizabethans themselves but also for the Elizabethan drama as well and there is a keen possibility that he might have stood behind the back of every despotic technique practiced against the public. Shakespeare's Charles III and Iago portrayal was

set literally in the demonic “stage of Machiavelli” which contributed in rendering his reputation as teacher of evil and villainy completely intact. Marlow’s “*The Jew of Malta*” is another significant dramatic masterpiece which contributed effectively to put this peculiar Machiavellian philosophical image in the very front for the Elizabethan readers. Marlow’s “*The Jew of Malta*” begins with a crucial epilogue where Machiavelli’s spirit is found literally and abstractedly lurking spreading a peculiar atmosphere in the whole play. This delineates in a way or another that Machiavelli’s philosophical ideas and mind’s eye played a significant role in shaping Marlow’s writings. Marlow’s epilogue in *The Jew of Malta* goes as the following:

Gracious and great that we so boldly dare
(Mongst other plays that now in fashion are)
To present this, writ many years agone,
And in that age thought second unto none,
We humbly crave your pardon. We pursue
The story of a rich and famous Jew
Who liv'd in Malta: you shall find him still,
In all his projects, a sound Machiavill;
And that's his character. He that hath past
So many censures is now come at last
To have your princely ears: grace you him; then
You crown the action, and renown the pen. (The Jew of Malta)

All along the play, we are introduced with a peculiar kind of tyranny that we can see it mainly through his characters Ferneze and Barabas who are keenly associated with Machiavellianism. It is indeed through these characters that we can see Marlow digging into the profundity of this Machiavellian thematic investigation concerning the will to power, authority, and most significantly villainy. It is very important therefore to ponder upon the way Marlow gives as clues that the story will dive deeply into a further discussion concerning Machiavelli’s religious and political implications. In her book “*The Machiavellian Rhetoric*”, Victoria Kahn argues that: “the sixteenth-century Englishmen from Pole to Marlowe saw Machiavelli as the convenient symbol of a range of cultural anxieties about threats to the social, political, religious and linguistic status quo” (Kahn 7). It seems therefore according to Kahn that Renaissance Machiavellianism adopted the core of its rhetorical dimension. Indeed it is rhetoric that plays a crucial role in perpetuating legitimacy. This means that the matter has no longer to do with whether the people of this age in particular naively understood or misunderstood his political philosophy. According to Kahn, they absorbed from Machiavelli’s philosophy exactly what could have suited their own policy. If Machiavelli was truly misrepresented he was misrepresented solely for the sake of the needs of the age itself.

All in all, it seems for a certain number of critics that Machiavelli indeed initiated a powerful philosophical perception that in turn created an enormous controversy among them. So these critics and theorists not only during the Elizabethan era but from the Renaissance until now are still torn between genuinely apprehending and artificially misapprehending the essence of this strong political discourse. So it is either to take the statement from the surface, make it a general agreement, and hence place it effectively to achieve certain purposes, or look at the deeper of level of it regarding its historical circumstances. So it all began with the Renaissance Rhetoric, for Machiavelli’s philosophy stood as a barrier at that very peculiar age. To put it differently; Machiavelli became for the renaissance readers extremely disturbing. Nevertheless, according to my own readings to some of the Machiavelli’s defenders it seems that he actually gave rhetoric of a theatrical violence. For other critics; however, I still believe that Machiavelli’s philosophical perception is truly complex. As far as the receptions of his thoughts are concerned they stand in a very paradoxical position. Yet still, Machiavelli was truly a republican philosopher, who really understood that republicanism was the most suitable form that would preserve the state. One main idea that shall conclude the whole aspect is that the Renaissance writers knew exactly how to integrate this very notion of rhetoric within the political ideologies that existed at that time. The very mastery of this remarkable tool paved the way for them to decipher all hideous and beclouded aspects. I think the same can be said as long as Machiavelli’s writings are concerned, for he lived in a political milieu and got certain position (a senior official in the Florentine Republic) and then he was put down this allowed him to fully understand the ideological system of that time which in turn enabled him to turn it into a whole symbolic system of the Renaissance social life and pour them into his works.

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