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Gaye İLHAN DEMİRYOL

Assist. Prof. Dr. | Dr. Öğr. Üyesi
Bahçeşehir University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul, TR
Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, İstanbul, TR
ORCID: 0000-0001-8214-8153
gaye.ilhandemiryol@eas.bau.edu.tr

Machiavelli's Republican Philosophy

Abstract

Is Machiavelli a teacher of evil, a defender of absolute, despotic rule? Or is he really a republican thinker as he appears to be in *The Discourses*? This article presents Machiavelli as a republican thinker. The contention of the article is that Machiavelli throughout his life expressed a preference for the republic as the best government despite his views expressed in his controversial work, *The Prince*. The article demonstrates that when Machiavelli's life and the political atmosphere of his time are taken into consideration, *The Prince* fits in with the republican account of Machiavelli's life-work.

Keywords: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, *The Discourses*, Republicanism.

Machiavelli'nin Cumhuriyetçi Siyaset Felsefesi

Öz

Machiavelli, mutlak, despotik yönetiminin en azılı savunucusu mudur? Yoksa *Söylevler* kitabından yola çıkarak gerçek bir cumhuriyetçi düşünür müdür? Bu makale Machiavelli'yi cumhuriyetçi bir düşünür olarak sunmaktadır. Makalenin temel savı, Machiavelli'nin *Prens* eserinde ifade ettiği görüşlerine rağmen, hayatı boyunca cumhuriyeti en iyi rejim olarak tercih ettiğidir. Ayrıca Machiavelli'nin hayatı ve zamanının politik atmosferi göz önüne alındığında, Prens eserinin Machiavelli'nin cumhuriyet rejimini hayata geçirme tasavvuruna da uyduğu iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Machiavelli, *Prens*, *Siyaset Üzerine Söylevler*, Cumhuriyetçilik.

Introduction

Machiavelli's infamous book, *The Prince*, has always been a focus of interest for scholars. In this advice book to the ruler, Machiavelli claims that deceit, plunder, murder are justifiable means for a monarch to maintain his rule. *The Prince*, prima facie, suggests that Machiavelli is a supporter of absolute power. This claim, however, runs counter to the essence of Machiavelli's other work, *The Discourses*. In this book, which he considers "more important, more comprehensive, and closer to his own republican sympathies," Machiavelli praises and idealizes a republican government (Bondanella & Musa 1979: 18). This apparent controversy preoccupied his followers as well as his critics: Is Machiavelli really a republican thinker as he appears to be in *The Discourses*? If so, how can one account for *The Prince*? More precisely, what is the place of *The Prince* Machiavelli's political theory?

I argue that Machiavelli was and always remained a republican thinker. Machiavelli, throughout his life expressed a preference for the republic as the best government; the views he expresses in *The Discourses* are representative of his thinking in general. This position requires a detailed account for his other work, *The Prince*, which stands out of the republican project. I demonstrate that when Machiavelli's life and the political atmosphere of his time are taken into consideration, *The Prince* fits in with this republican account.

The starting point of the essay is the assertion that Machiavelli valued a specific particular political arrangement, the "well-organized" republic as the ideal regime type (1979: 230). The establishment of this well-organized regime requires initially the leadership of a princely figure, which singles out Lorenzo de Medici as the most apt contender for this role. However, Machiavelli's republican project requires more than a princely figure in order to be sustainable in the long term. The last step of this project, the maintenance of the republic over time, cannot be realized without the role that Machiavelli himself envisages to play in its realization.

In the first part of this essay, I will present the theories that have previously sought to account for the discord between *The Discourses* and *The Prince*. In the second part, I will develop an alternative account by first establishing the importance of a republican regime for Machiavelli. I will then present a historical analysis of the circumstances under which *The Prince* was written. Given the constraints of *realpolitik*, the appeal to princely power was the best strategy for the attainment of Machiavelli's republican goals. However, this account is incomplete without accounting for Machiavelli's own ambitions. Hence in the last part, I will expose the role Machiavelli wants to play in the establishment of the republic.

Machiavelli's Intentions: An Assessment

The discord between *The Discourses* and *The Prince* puzzled Machiavelli scholars. I start with an assessment of the various standpoints among intellectuals reflecting on the way out of this apparent paradox (Dietz 1986: 778-780). For those scholars who are convinced of the republican quality of Machiavelli's political theory, *The Prince* stands out as an aberration or a peculiarity. Contemplating on the nature of this masterwork, scholars proposed different reasons, which they argued to be Machiavelli's genuine intention in writing *The Prince*.

Of these positions, I would like to start by discussing two fundamental positions in this essay. The adherents of the first, what Dietz calls the "weak republican thesis" (1986), among whom are Baron (1961), Hale (1961), and Anglo (1969) view *The Prince* as evidence of Machiavelli's acceptance of the circumstances of his day and an attempt to extract private benefits by obtaining a post in the service of the Medici. According to this thesis, after the Medici's return to power in 1512, Machiavelli abandoned his aspiration for a republican Florence, admitted Medici domination and addressed this book to Lorenzo de Medici, though maybe reluctantly. Shortly after completing the book however, he became committed anew to a republican vision, the product of which is *The Discourses*.

This point of view seems to be discredited if one looks at the timing and the sequence of the two books. The evidence suggests that when Machiavelli started to compose *The Prince,* he was already working on *The Discourses* and interrupted this project for only a few months to complete the former (Bondanella & Musa 1979: 8). This is a very short time period for any serious political thinker to make a complete shift from his original position to its opposite and back again. In this case, the only possible explanation is that Machiavelli did not actually give up his republican aspirations while writing *The Prince*. This implies that beneath the surface of the book, there is a hidden subtext, which constitutes Machiavelli's real intention. Let me now look at the theses that start with republican assumptions about *The Prince* but advocate that these remain disguised within the book.

The first of these thinkers is Rousseau, who in the *Social Contract,* claims that "Machiavelli's *Prince* is a handbook for republicans" (1968: 118). Rousseau does not doubt Machiavelli's sincerity in being a republican, a good citizen and a defender of liberty but suggests that Machiavelli had to hide his true nature. For Rousseau, the real addressee of *The Prince* is the republican people. While pretending to instruct the ruler, Machiavelli is actually rendering the republicans alert to deception by the prince by way of uncovering the tricks that princes employ in sustaining their rule. I agree with Dietz that *The Prince* cannot be intended as a warning to the people because they were not meant to read it. The first and foremost audience of the book is Lorenzo de Medici, the "potential founder" for Machiavelli.

The second view is the "trapping the prince" perspective. According to Dietz, "*The Prince* is not about deception, but is itself an act of deception," a well-disguised trap designed to restore the Florentine republic by tricking a "gullible and vainglorious prince to heed the duplicitous advice of *The Prince,* and thereby taking actions that will jeopardize his power and bring about his demise" (1986: 781). Lorenzo de Medici, following the instructions of Machiavelli, will forego liberality, arm the people, distrust the nobles, refuse to build a fortress and come to reside in a city, where the "memory of an ancient liberty" still haunts the citizens, and consequently will be captured and

destroyed by the republicans. Dietz does not elaborate how the republic will be established after the Medici rule but the implication is that liberty-loving citizens of Florence will manage to found a working republic.

Did Machiavelli really have a conspiracy against the Medici in mind? Was he such a decided enemy that when he devoted his time to assuring the Medici family of his trustworthiness, honesty and willingness to enter their service, he was in reality acting according to a scheme to destroy the prince? Did he think that a republican regime in Florence would be restored by the citizens? The answer is no. In what follows I put forward another thesis regarding Machiavelli's intentions in *The Prince*. This view point starts by taking *The Prince* for what it is: an advice book to the ruler.

The Republican Project: An Alternative

In arguing for a republican subtext to *The Prince*, it is first necessary to discuss the nature of Machiavelli's republic.

Machiavelli's republic can be best defined as a "mixed regime" (McCormick 1993: 888-900) or a "well-ordered popular government" (Viroli 1998). The characterizing feature of this well-organized republic is that each component of this political body has its proper place in the civic and political life. At the beginning of *The Discourses*, after discussing three forms of government and reproaching them for being defective, Machiavelli concludes that "those who are prudent in establishing laws recognized this fact and, avoiding each of these forms in themselves, chose one that combined them all, judging such a government to be steadier and more stable, for when there is in the same city, a principality, an aristocracy and a democracy, one form keeps watch over other" (1979: 179). In Machiavelli's well-ordered state, each component of the political body, the one, the few and the many are kept in balance.

In this formulation Machiavelli considers two components in particular: the nobles (the Great, the upper class) and the people (the commoners). These two groups have different inclinations: The nobles desire to dominate, whereas the people only

desire not to be dominated (1979: 185). The desire of the common people is "more honest than that of the nobles" and it is always possible to satisfy the people whereas "one cannot honestly satisfy the nobles without harming others" (1979: 108). The nature of the ideal republic for Machiavelli then, is one where the relation between these groups is moderated.

What is the merit of a mixed regime? Why should it be favored over other political arrangements? For Machiavelli, the yardstick for the success of a political regime is longevity and stability. Machiavelli's political world is characterized by *accidenti*, occurrences external to the regimes, which are neither advantageous nor disadvantageous in nature but can potentially become beneficial or detrimental depending on how they are handled (McCormick 1993). Accordingly, if an opportunity presented by an *accidente* is appropriately exploited, it gives the regime the opportunity to restore its ways; to introduce new modes and methods, which guarantee the liberty and security of its citizens; and to eventually expand.

This point is illustrated throughout *The Discourses* with reference to The Roman republic, with its tribunes and the senate as checks on one another, as compared to Sparta. Sparta was established from the beginning according to the laws of Lycurgus and governed by one king and a restricted senate, which precluded for plebeians the prospects for attaining the offices of the city but at the same time prevented them from harm that can be inflicted by the nobility. As a result, Sparta managed to contain friction that can arise out of a conflict of nobility with the commoners, but at the expense of staying a small city state and falling short of achieving greatness equal to that of Rome. Rome, on the other hand, despite the lack of lawgiver at its origin managed not only to outlive Sparta but also surpassed it in significance and excellence. This can be explained by two factors. If the nature of political phenomena is accidental and it is important to handle *accidenti* in fashion that will benefit the regime, the well-ordered republic of Rome is better suited for this purpose not only because it is born of out of "so many circumstances … that chance brought about" (Machiavelli 1979: 180), but also because the friction itself between the plebeians and the senate brings about *accidenti*

(McCormick 1993: 894). The discord of these two forces provided the republic of Rome with opportunities to produce "all the laws which are made in favor of the liberty" (Machiavelli 1979: 183). Unlike Sparta then, Rome has recurrently found its regime in danger but managed to come out of these predicaments stronger and liberty of its citizens consolidated. When Machiavelli refers to republic throughout *The Discourses* and *The Prince*, this is the type of government he suggests.

The Prince

If Machiavelli's intentions are genuinely republican, how can one account for *The Prince*? The last chapter on the liberation of Italy holds the key interpreting this book. After providing the prince with numerous instructions on how to rule, Machiavelli in this chapter pictures the current situation in Italy, which has been suffering under the "barbaric cruelties and insolence" and which is begging to be rescued by a skillful and prudent leader (1979: 163). Machiavelli is trying to convince his reader Lorenzo de Medici that this leader is none other than Lorenzo himself, who "with his fortune and ability, favored by God and by the Church… could make [himself] the head of this redemption" (1979: 163). Is this also a part of the Machiavellian scheme? Or is Machiavelli sincere in his appeal to Lorenzo to free Italy from this "barbarian dominion" and establish a new regime?

During Machiavelli's youth, Florence was still a republic. Under the reign of Lorenzo de Medici, *il Magnifico*, thanks to the alliances with Naples and Milan, Italy was in peace and Florence was a safe state. With Lorenzo's death in 1492, the political structure that he put together fell apart. Lorenzo's son Piero broke the alliance with Milan. Ludivico, the Duke of Milan, having lost his ally Florence, felt threatened by Naples, entered into negotiations with France and urged Charles to revive French claims to Naples. With the advance of Charles VIII on Italy to make himself the King of Naples, a new period started in Italian history: almost three hundred years marked by fragmentation, turmoil and foreign occupation.

As the French advanced into Italy it became clear that Florence would fall. Since the Medici family, especially Piero de Medici, was held responsible for the danger to which Florence was now exposed, The Medici fled Florence. A new constitution was drawn up under Savonarola's guidance and inspiration. Savonarola, a Dominican priest, was popular with the people of Florence since he opposed corruption and the low moral standards of the Medici rule. Once The Medici fled Florence, Savonarola was put in charge of government reforms. Savonarola's influence, however, did not last long. He was tried and condemned in 1498.

Machiavelli lived in Florence during Savonarola's ascendancy and it is clear from his notes that he was quite out of sympathy with the Dominican priest. In retrospect, he even believed that Savonarola's power over Florence was harmful; that "under the influence of his prophetical doctrines, no unity could be hoped for" (Muir 1936: 18). The most important lesson that Machiavelli learned was about political reforms: "Besides what has been said, people are fickle by nature; and it is simple to convince them of something but difficult to hold them in that conviction; and therefore, affairs should be managed in such a way that when they no longer believe, they can be made to believe by force (…) in our times it befell Brother Girolamo Savonarola, who was ruined by his new institutions when the populace began no longer to believe in them; and he had no way of holding steady those who had believed nor of making the disbelievers believe" (1979: 95). Machiavelli believed that Savonarola's failure was due to his lack of means to enforce the reforms and that power is necessary to achieve permanent political transformation.

With his appointment to the second Chancery, Machiavelli's political life as a civil servant started. For nearly 15 years Machiavelli was sent on repeated missions to powerful political figures like Cesare Borgia, Pope Alexander VI, Emperor Maximilian and Louis XII. It was a critical juncture in the history of Florence and Machiavelli devoted his energy to the safety of his city state.

The death of Pope Alexander VI in 1503 gave a new twist to the Italian political affairs. His successor, Julius II embarked on a mission to enlarge the papal possessions

and expel the French from Italy. Florence cast its lot with the French and when the latter lost the battle against the Papacy and its allies, the fate of Florence was decided. In 1512, The Medici came back to Florence as private citizens, but soon started to take control of chief offices. In due time, Machiavelli was dismissed from service, and shortly after detained and tortured for being implicated in a plot against the Medici. He was declared innocent, but he had fallen from grace.

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in this period. This is why *The Prince* is sometimes regarded as the result of Machiavelli's desperate attempts to enter the service of the Medici. I propose, however, that Machiavelli was an acute observer of the events of Italy in his life time. The wars in Italy and French occupation must have showed him that it was foremost necessary to have a strong leader, who is also favored by fortune (*Fortúna)*. Hence I argue that *The Prince* is addressed to Lorenzo de Medici, whom Machiavelli genuinely hopes will become "the founder prince." This view is also supported by Machiavelli's theory concerning the origin of the republic.

In *The Discourses,* Machiavelli suggests that at the foundational moment of well-organized republic, a leader emerges and concentrates the political authority in his hands. This founder must be a single authoritarian individual:

> [I]t rarely or never happens that a republic or kingdom is well organized from the beginning, or completely reformed, with no respect for its ancient institutions, unless it is done by *one man alone*; moreover, it is necessary that one man provide the means and be the only one from whose mind any such organization originates: therefore, a prudent founder of republic, one whose intention is to govern for the common good and not in his own interest, not for his heirs, but for the sake of the fatherland, should try to have the authority all to himself … (1979: 200; emphasis added).

In Cesare's success, *Fortúna* played a great part. His rule corresponded to the pontificate of his father:

> [t]he achievements of Borgias was made possible by the rare combination of two men in very peculiar circumstances. Alexander would probably never have embarked on his policy of conquest had it not been for his wish to raise up a kingdom for his son. Cesare would probably never have achieved his

> success had he not been backed up by all the wealth and power of the Papacy (Muir 1936: 57).

When Machiavelli dedicated his book to Lorenzo de Medici in 1516, there was a similar configuration of power in Italy. Shortly after the battle against the French, Pope Julius II died. As his successor the conclave elected Cardinal de Medici, who became Pope Leo X. This decision led to further advancement and empowerment of The Medici. Under these circumstances, it was reasonable for Machiavelli to appeal to Lorenzo de Medici as the potential founder.

So far, I have discussed the importance of a "founder prince", and shown the relevance of Medici in this context. Machiavelli's republican theory however, does not stop at this foundational moment but goes a step further to define how this republic should be maintained. This second step attributes special importance to the people: "(…) though one man alone is fit for founding a government, what he has founded will not last long if it rests upon his shoulders alone; it is lasting when it is left in the care of many and many desire to maintain it" (Machiavelli 1979: 201). It is, therefore, important for prince not to jealously hold on to his position but to establish the institutions –like in Rome- that guarantee the longevity and stability of the regime by giving each group in the republic their proper place.

Wolin, an interpreter of Machiavelli's, sees *The Prince* as the book of a political founder, who will lay the foundations for a republic and then "render himself superfluous" to "give way" to the republican political arrangement (1960: 231). Dietz criticizes this standpoint on two grounds (1986: 780-781). First, she believes that there is no evidence in *The Prince* to support this interpretation. The book, she contends, does not contain any specific instruction concerning the establishment of republican institutions. Second, she claims that Machiavelli knows the nature of the Medici princes well enough not to be deluded about their prospects of renouncing power once they acquire it.

These criticisms are valid as long as an interpretation of Machiavelli's intentions in *The Prince* does not take into consideration "the position, the character and the

aspirations of the other partner in the relationship": Machiavelli himself (Strauss 1984: 74). I maintain that Machiavelli designed for himself a specific role of vital importance for the establishment of the republican government.

Machiavelli: The Partner

Leo Strauss highlights Machiavelli's intentions as follows: "Machiavelli presents himself as a man who possesses information which princes necessarily lack and yet need (…). He claims to possess knowledge of nature of princes: just as one sees mountains best from a valley and valleys best from a mountain, so one must be a prince in order to know well the nature of peoples, and one must be a man of the people in order to know well the nature of princes. In other words, while Lorenzo and Machiavelli are at opposite ends of the scale of *Fortúna*, they are equal in wisdom: each possesses one half of the whole of political wisdom; they are born to supplement each other. Machiavelli does not say that they should pool their resources in order to liberate Italy. Nor does he share to hand over his share of political wisdom to Lorenzo as a pure gift. He desires to receive something in return. He desires to better his fortune" (1984: 74-75). I disagree with Strauss' portrayal of Machiavelli as an evil prophet but I concur with him that the role Machiavelli envisages for himself should be carefully considered.

This account is not equal to suggesting that Machiavelli put aside his republican vision to better his fortune and wrote this princely book to acquire anew a post in the government. It also counters Dietz's portrayal of Machiavelli as a schemer who not only wants revenge by destroying his enemy but also thereby accomplishing a moral mission: restoring the Florentine republic. The interpretation I am arguing for grants a special place to Machiavelli. But unlike Dietz suggests, it is not the role of a schemer, but the role of an equal partner at a historical conjuncture. Machiavelli is offering a deal to Lorenzo de Medici. If Lorenzo accepts this deal, he will become the liberator of Italy. In return, he will appoint Machiavelli as his counselor, who will assist Lorenzo to establish the institutions of a well-organized republic that will equal or even surpass the

greatness of Rome. This is a historical opportunity for Machiavelli as well as for Lorenzo. Lorenzo will acquire a reputation and honor his family name and Machiavelli will see his "utopia", the well-organized republic come to life.

Could Machiavelli really hope that Lorenzo de Medici would take *The Prince* and its content seriously and offer Machiavelli a position? After all, Machiavelli's services to Soderini – an ardent opponent of The Medici, were well-known. Moreover, he had been charged with being implicated in a plot against the Medici, although he was later found innocent. In *The Prince* Machiavelli himself advises the monarch against employing individuals, whom he harmed. He reminds the reader that "anyone who believes that new benefits make men of high station forget old injuries is deceiving himself" (1979: 103) Even if, therefore, Lorenzo takes the advice of the book seriously, he must refrain from employing Machiavelli. How could Machiavelli harbor such high hopes?

The only reasonable explanation seems to be that Machiavelli was deluded as to his circumstances. First of all, during the republican period, he had played a very important role in the diplomatic affairs of Florence. He probably believed that his ability and devotion would prove to The Medici that he was a useful employee. These motives are apparent in his letters to Francesco Vitter (1961: 101, 107). Secondly, he was taken in by the force of the ideas he expressed in *The Prince*. He was confident in his wisdom about the world of politics.

Since the events did not turn out as Machiavelli hoped for, we cannot know Machiavelli's real intentions. In this essay, I demonstrated with evidence from both of his books, his private letters and the events of his lifetime that Machiavelli idealized a republican government, the establishment of which required his own engagement in political affairs.

Conclusion

Machiavelli's republican theory occupies a controversial place in the republicanism debate. In this essay, I contributed to this debate by proposing a framework for analyzing Machiavelli's thought within the context of not only his theory, but also of the circumstances of Machiavelli's time and his role as a statesman.

Machiavelli's life-work is characterized by his commitment to a republican regime, which he understood to be a well-organized state. This assertion requires a justification for *The Prince*, the advice book to the monarch. In this essay I presented an account of *The Prince* embedded both in Machiavelli's theory regarding the origin of the republic and the political situation of his time. Machiavelli's theory of the republic, as revealed in *The Discourses,* calls for a founder prince, whom given the circumstances of Italy in 1513 is Lorenzo de Medici. Machiavelli also envisages a role for himself, that of Lorenzo's partner and advisor.

The merit of this analysis is twofold: it not only manages to satisfactorily reconcile the discord in Machiavelli's works, but also it fits into Machiavelli's understanding of the realm of politics as a cyclical progression. Machiavelli locates the standard of excellence in the past and argues "the only positive direction for political change is back to beginnings – rebirth, regeneration, renewal" (Bondanella & Musa 1979: p. 26). Machiavelli valued the Roman republic over all political regimes and devoted his life to realize this government in his beloved Florence.

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