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Abstract

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* is regarded as one of the first works of political realism, a text that put power and pragmatism before all else. I speculate that Machiavelli took absolutism as a point of departure because he was attempting to regain Medici favor. However, his commitment to a prince and its corresponding praxis exemplifies the power of utopia. Along the lines of Lezsek Kolakowski, "utopia" here refers to a state of social consciousness that is an inevitable product of developing historical conditions. Without utopias, there could be no social subject which processes and shapes the world. Antonio Gramsci would later identify this in *The Prince* and apply it to early 20th century socialist aims. However, as our society has continued to lose its subjective quality, politics have become increasingly capitulatory and utopias have become obsolete. It is now the *dystopia,* a social consciousness with no real subjectivity, that dominates ideology. An analysis of *The Prince* and its subsequent interpretations shed light on this phenomenon.

The term “Machiavellian” is commonly understood to refer to a kind of cruel and calculating thirst for power. At his best, the Machiavellian knows how to leverage the available resources to benefit him the most. At his worst, his attempts to appear benevolent fail and he is revealed to be an immoral sham. This concept of “Machiavellianism,” however, is not actually derived from most of Machiavelli’s work. It largely refers to his most idiosyncratic piece, solitary in its apparent amorality: *The Prince*. Written out to Lorenzo de Medici,[1] *The Prince* aimed to instruct de Medici on the means of gaining and maintaining power. It was likely written simply as an attempt to regain the favor of the Medici family. However, in committing to an unyielding support of his prince, Machiavelli created an especially compelling political system. Both human nature and specific historical circumstances are considered in his instructions to Medici, meaning that the mode of analysis is versatile across space and time. Due to the modernist character of *The Prince,* the form of his thought has been widely applied, as it relies on a conviction which places morality secondary to aim.

The Prince is grounded in reality by its guiding utopia: the potential of Italian unification. Later, Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci would apply *The Prince* to the common will of the Italian proletariat. For him, a socialist Italy was constitutive. These utopias, analyzed within the framework of Polish theoretician Leszek Kolakowski, are social products of real conditions and made possible by their corresponding praxis. Therefore, they escape pure idealism. **An analogous situation is difficult to imagine today. This is due to the fact that instead of producing utopias, contemporary society can conceive only of the *dystopia*.** Trapped in the contradiction of our freedom, it seems to us that there is no escape or alternative to our society. Following from this, the logical conclusion of our current trajectory is a downfall, brought about by the irreconcilability of the subject to the objective world. This sentiment has been expressed in popular media since the turn of the 20th century. A return to Machiavelli presents a contrasting social politic, giving context to the contemporary condition.

[1] Lorenzo de’Medici, or Lorenzo il Magnifico, was the contemporary ruler of Florence. Although Florence was officially a republic, the Medici line had been manipulating the electoral process for generations in order to stay in power.

The Prince in Context

Niccolo Machiavelli, born in 1469, grew up in a fractured Italy during a time of dictatorial rule. He developed an interest in politics, influenced by the unrest he saw around him. In 1498, the ruling theocracy of Girolamo Savonarola fell and Machiavelli was elected to a secretary position of the new Florentine state. He quickly grew to be Florence's top diplomat and enjoyed his political status. However he was constantly frustrated with Florence's weakness and the impotence of Florentine leader Piero Soderini.[2] It was during this time that Machiavelli met Cesare Borgia, the Son of Pope Alexander and the ruler of a neighboring Italian state. Machiavelli was impressed with Borgia's decisiveness and positivist attitude, something which the former felt lacking in his colleagues. Borgia would later become somewhat of a hero in *The Prince.* After 14 years, Machiavalli's criticism of Soderini was confirmed when Florence fell to Pope Julius. The Medici regime was subsequently restored and Machiavelli was thrown into exile.[3]

Now jobless, Machiavelli spent his time writing political works based on his experience as a diplomat. Among these works was *The Prince*. Many interpretations of *The Prince* focus on Machiavelli's psychical processes during this time, depicting him as a bitter has-been. A letter from Machiavelli to a close friend detailed that he would often dress in regal clothing upon coming home, engaging in aspirational delusions. "I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection"[4] This seemed to be a way of processing the last 14 years of his life. He continued, "I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them."[5] When viewed in conjunction with *The Prince,* a treatise on the acquisition and maintenance of monarchical power, it is easy to attribute Machiavelli's writing to

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[2] Tim Parks, Introduction to *The Prince,* ix-xxxxiii, (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2014), xi-xvii
[3] Ibid, xx.
[4] Niccolo Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513, 1.
[5] Ibid, 1.

a bitter turn in his beliefs. However it is important to note that his other most culturally resilient work, *Discourses on Livy,* was written concomitantly with *The Prince.*[6] The *Discourses* being a cornerstone work of modern constitutionalism which was antithetical to *The Prince.*[7]

The Prince opens with a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici wherein Machiavelli offers the gift of political guidance, informed by his time as a top diplomat. His tone is obviously flattering.

> Eager myself to bring Your Highness some token of my loyalty, I realized there was nothing more precious or important to me than my knowledge of great men and their doings, a knowledge gained through long experience of contemporary affairs and a constant study of ancient history.[8]

Informed by the context of Machiavelli's aforementioned nighttime ritual, the fact that Machiavelli chose to dedicate *The Prince* to de'Medici indicates that the former was attempting to escape exile. As Gramsci points out, Machiavelli states within *The Prince* that the tactics he describes are often things that have already been done. Therefore it is hard to believe that Machiavelli wrote to Lorenzo de'Medici solely for the sake of educating the latter.[9]

Furthermore, the formatting of *The Prince* suggests that its content did not necessarily align with Machiavelli's personal convictions. In one of the opening sections he states, "I won't be considering republics since I've written about them at length elsewhere."[10] Thus for the purposes of writing *The Prince*, he takes the necessity of a monarchy with a solitary leader for granted.

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[6] Claudio Corradetti, "The Solitude of Machiavelli's Prince," *Philosophia* (Ramat Gan) 50, no. 3 (2022): 1036.
[7] Mortimo N. S. Sellers, "Niccolo Machiavelli: Father of Modern Constitutionalism," *Ratio Juris* 28, no. 2 (June 2015): 218.
[8] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince,* trans. and ed. Tim Parks (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2014), 3.
[9] Antonio Gramsci, "The Modern Prince," in *Selections from The Prison Notebook,* trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 135. Gramsci in fact used this to theorize that Machiavelli was attempting to inform the uninformed: "The revolutionary class of the time, the Italian 'people,' or 'nation.'"
[10] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 6.

The nature of this *a priori* has its most significant theoretical effects when Machiavelli discusses the taking of provinces which are democratically run. According to Machavelli, a province already accustomed to self-governance has fostered a populace which will never forget the freedom of democracy--and will be willing to fight to retain it. To get around this, Machiavelli sees three options, two of which limit the influence of the Prince: the ruler could move to the democratic province himself, or only exert loose control over the area with a tax. The former of these two forces the Prince to move the center of his influence within the territory, potentially sacrificing the advantages of other capital sites. The latter simply allows the enclosed system of self-governance to persist, but with the collection of surplus from without. The third and safest choice is to reduce the providence to rubble. Not only is this the only path to unadulterated control, but the only way to ensure reliable cooperation from subjects. "If you conquer a city accustomed to self-government and opt not to destroy it you can expect it to destroy you."[11] Machiavelli's unyielding conviction towards princely power has been cited as one of the first instances of political realism. This is characterized by a separation of ethics and politics and a system in which, to put it crudely, "the means justify the ends."[12]

Initially, *The Prince* saw little success after its publication in 1532. Instead, it entered the public sphere in 1576 when Innocent Gentilliet published *Anti-Machiavel*, a polemic against *The Prince.* Gentillet was a Huguenot who witnessed the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre and painted Machiavelli as a great lover of the Medicis.[13] He wrongly contributed the quote "that a dead man biteth not or makes no war" to Machiavelli, implying that the latter exhibited an overzealous attitude towards the execution of civilians. On the contrary, Machiavelli is very clear in *The Prince* that subjects should be executed only when necessary, in order to avoid arousing hatred towards the ruler. "If he really has to have someone executed, he should only do it when he has proper justification and manifest cause."[14] *Anti-Machiavel* was published in most of

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[11] Ibid, 19-20.
[12] Caterina Carta, "Gramsci and The Prince: Taking Machiavelli Outside the Realist Courtyard?" *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2017): 346.
[13] Rhodri Lewis, "La Morte Del Padre: Translating Machiavelli," *Notes and Queries* 64, no. 2 (2017): 249-250. The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre was an instance wherein Queen Catherine de'Medici instigated Catholic mob violence against the French Catholic Huguenots, leading to a massacre of the latter. This was done in a time of supposed truce and was an unexpected tragedy for Huguenots.
[14] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 66.

Europe years before *The Prince* itself, so the public conception of "Machiavellianism" can be traced back to Gentillet's exaggerated and at times inaccurate reading of *The Prince.*

The section of *The Prince* "Cruelty and Compassion. Whether it's better to be feared than loved." is one of the most commonly analyzed and was heavily subjected to Gentillet's criticism.[15] Here Machiavelli makes the claim that fear from subjects is less conditional and more powerful than love, therefore preferred (although, ideally a ruler is both feared and loved). Machiavelli is easily quoted such that he appears to operate purely upon the individual pursuit of power and virtue. However, even in this infamous section he accepts some conventional ethics: "A ruler mustn't worry about being labeled cruel when it's a question of keeping his subjects loyal and united; using a little exemplary severity, he will prove more compassionate than the leader whose excessive compassion leads to public disorder, muggings and murder."[16] *The Prince'*s politics and ethics are separated in process, but intertwined in end.

In 1772, Jean-Jacques Rousseau[17] returned to the original text of *The Prince* and reinterpreted it as an enlightenment text. He proposed that the book was intrinsically a work of republicanism because it was effectively a tale of caution against an unfree society. For Rousseau, *Discourses on Livy* was more representative of Machiavelli's true beliefs and *The Prince* had to be written due to oppression from the ruling Medicis. Later, the book was banned under the Papacy. Following Rousseau's analysis, this was because it was not an endorsement of the Medicis but a direct critique.[18] Considering Machiavelli's habit of conversing with nonexistent royalty after his expulsion from office, it is likely that his main motive behind writing *The Prince* was to gain employment and return to his days of political glory. Nevertheless the system he elucidated within *The Prince* turned out to be culturally salient, whether in its apparent absurdity or remarkable conviction.

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[15] Lewis, "Translating Machiavelli," 249.
[16] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 65.
[17] Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the most influential philosophers of the 18th century Enlightenment. In *The Social Contract*, he explores the question of freedom within society and the idea that liberal society brings about its own form of unfreedom.
[18] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* trans. G.D.H. Cole (DigiReads, 2018), 33

The Prince and Utopia

Machiavelli's rejection of everything but absolute monarchy creates an internal system which is not philosophically complicated, but materially clear-cut. It can thus be applied in many places. Some interpret Machiavelli's conviction that Italy must be unified by a cunning leader as an instance that allowed "utopianism to penetrate the citadel of realism."[19] This is extrapolated from the fact that his idea of Italian unification is almost literary in its presentation. A poem by Petrarch takes the last words of the work: "Virtue against fury / Shall take up arms; and the fight be short; / For ancient valor / Is not dead in Italian hearts."[20] Machiavelli is employing a political myth, of which utopias are a part. Caterina Carta theorizes that myths are a mediating force between reality and historically produced ideas of how the world should be. Because the myth produces a "world of its own," it necessarily diverges from objectivity.[21] Thus the peculiar quality of myths comes out of the subjective realm, and is conditioned by the character of its subject.

For the purposes of this essay, Machiavelli's political myth will be analyzed in the framework of Polish theoretician Leszek Kolakowski's idea of utopia. For Kolakowski, a "utopia" is not a purely idealist construction but an inevitable social formation which is dispensed by a population as it processes material conditions. A utopia signifies the wants of a population and the manner in which their collective consciousness functions. Kolakowski analyzed utopia heavily in the context of the modern left, which, according to him, relied upon utopia as "a state of social consciousness, a mental counterpart to the social movement,"[22] without which society could never move past its established mode of function. Drawing on Carta's idea of myth, this means that a utopia is a product of certain historical circumstances which bring a hypothetical situation into the adjacent possible as they interact with a social consciousness.

Kolakowski later expanded upon his idea of utopia, making myth ("myth," essentially referring to a more developed idea of "utopia") central to his epistemological system. The myth

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[19] Carta, "Realist Courtyard," 355.
[20] Machiavelli, *The Prince,* 105.
[21] Carta, "Realist Courtyard," 349.
[22] Leszek Kolakowski, "The Concept of the Left," in *The New Left Reader,* ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Evergreen Press, Inc., 1969), 147.

has the ability to cover up the real alienation of things, giving cohesion to thought. Therefore even though positivism and science are able to *explain* phenomena, only a myth can attempt the process of *understanding.*[23] The phenomenon and necessity of myth is historically situated alongside the death of God in the 18th century. Utopia, as discussed in his earlier works, is a working through of the remnants of original sin. Where God is no longer there to provide an antithesis to the incomplete or sinful nature of the world, a utopia takes the unifying position, giving meaning and possibility to the gaps.[24] It is important to note that Machiavelli was writing before the French Revolution, when the modern left was born. However *The Prince* exhibits the beginnings of utopia and praxis when it takes a political myth as its aim and material analysis as its means. Thus *The Prince* escapes traditional morality, but not in the vulgar manner that Gentilliet presents.

Kolakowski's left utopianism and Machiavelli's pragmatism converge in the early 20th century with Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci, Machiavelli's utopia was an example of a Sorelian myth,[25] a concept espoused by turn of the 20th century syndicalist George Sorel. A Sorelian myth is a political event that "enclose[s] within [itself] all the strongest inclination of a people, a party, or a class."[26] The subject of Gramsci's utopia, the "Modern Prince," manifested in the communist party. He makes one vital distinction: that the communist revolution would not simply occur owing to the natural will of the people. Instead, it was imperative that a collective will be intellectually created and guided.[27] "The Modern Prince, as it develops, revolutionizes the whole system of intellectual and moral relations."[28] Both he and Machiavelli theorized a praxis, not solely a system of what ought to be. Their respective myths, or utopias, both gave life to their praxis using the hegemony of a particular force and the power of intellectual guidance.[29] For Gramsci, this force was the Italian revolutionary proletariat. For Machiavelli, it was a virtuous ruler who would unify Italy.

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[23] Saturnino Barreto and Javier Moreno, "LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI: PHILOSOPHY AND THE YEARNING FOR ABSOLUTE," *Vivat Academia (Alcalá de Henares*) 22, no. 149 (2019):118-119
[24] Barreto, "Yearning for Absolute," 112.
[25] Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks,* 123-125.
[26] Ibid, 126.
[27] Ibid*,* 126-127.
[28] Ibid*,* 133.
[29] Carta, "Realist Courtyard," 363.

Gramsci emphasized the relation between utopia ("myth," in his words) and praxis in Machiavelli. The last section of the book, a closing letter to Lorenzo de'Medici, quilts the text into a living praxis because it was there that Machiavelli defined the goal of Italian unification. In this letter, Machiavelli declared that de'Medici was best positioned to unite Italy and bring glory to the nation. Gramsci saw that Machiavelli's utopia could be born of the formation of a national-popular will, and thought that Machiavelli himself understood this. Crucial in Italy was the mobilization of the conservative peasant class, which, according to Gramsci, Machiavelli aimed to achieve with a popular reformed militia. 500 years later, Gramsci was living in a unified Italy and saw socialism as the next great societal overhaul. Intellectual guidance is imperative for both thinkers because they similarly held no delusions about the material nature of the world. In the realist fashion, they aimed to actualize a utopia by manipulating what resources were available to them.

A Dystopian Turn

A recent interpretation of Gramsci's reading of The Prince negates this political conviction. Claudio Corradetti in "The Solitude of Machiavelli's Prince" argues that Machiavelli creates an intentionally *impossible* utopia. Corradetti returns to the aforementioned refusal of republicanism to say that Machiavelli is expounding a system in which the prolonged success of the Prince is impossible. This is because the contradicting interests of the aristocracy and common people cannot be properly reconciled in the long term--creating a potential flip-flop between a republican and princely government.[30] Corradetti uses this to explain the quote from *The Prince*: "Principalities of this type (civil/popular) are usually endangered when they are about to change from a civil government into an absolute form of government." The real possibility of an "absolute form of government" is negated by the continued oppositional interests within society. Thus, the Prince is stuck in an impasse, wherein his goal is one of absolute solitude without popular nor aristocratic support. In summary, "It follows that for Machiavelli, the problem of the duration of the state is interlinked with the notion of mixed or composite government where conflicting class-interests find mediation through a shared

[30] Corradetti, "Solitude," 1051.

constitutional structure."[31] Essentially Corradetti renounces the Machiavallian utopia for one born of dialectical struggle between republic and monarchy, which is for her a true product of historical necessity. She retains, however, Gramsci's notion that *The Prince* is a living text of political innovation.

The academic consensus on the modern application of *The Prince* shows an allergy to utopia. Despite the cultural phenomenon of Machiavellianism, the works of Machiavelli are seldom used in practice. According to John P. McCormick, "Many scholars grossly overstate Machiavelli's concrete impact on practical politics." Maureen Ramsay, when asking whether Machiavellian tactics were still applicable to politics, essentially concludes that *The Prince* creates a system which is too ethically nebulous to be put into practice.[32] This is because Machiavelli creates a system wherein unethical things may be done if they contribute towards an ethical end. But inherent is the implication that the good of the end will outweigh the bad of the means. She explores different ethical schemas which may apply to *The Prince,* but none of them seem to be actionable. These interpretations sidestep the subjugation of ethics to politics that arises from Machiavelli's commitment to absolute monarchy. Thus we lose the utopia, reducing politics to tactics-as-process. This is still more explicit in Ramsey's application of Machiavellian ethics to management, wherein there is no common good but expansion. Businesses do not change the world in the same way that Machiavelli declared in *The Prince.* That is, their aims remain within the private sphere. Modern politics (an increasingly private practice) are thus contrary to Gramsci's Modern Prince. The two share a theory of praxis, but the former has no utopia to give it motion and life.

This is no surprise, as modern society is one of *dystopia.* The most effective way to illustrate this claim is through an analysis of modern media. Books that conceptualized a fictional future gained popularity around the end of the 19th century, at the tail end of the industrial revolution. This was the first time that modern society was confronted with technology and trade as things that could potentially replace or hinder human civilization, not just aid it. Anya Heise-von der Lippe, drawing on George Lukács, theorizes that some of the "fictional future"

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[31] Ibid, 1051.

[32] Maureen Ramsay, "Are Machiavellian tactics still appropriate or defensible in politics," in *Machiavelli, marketing, and management. (*New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 156

trend was due to the emerging socialist method of historical inquiry. Socialism was one form of a conscious self-analysis towards industrial society. Gramsci was writing contemporarily and employed Machiavelli in his own kind of "fictional future." Soon after, however, democratized societies saw great regimes emerge. This shattered the idea that western industrial society was on a linear trajectory towards freedom. Dystopian fictions became popular, with titles such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, and *1984* by George Orwell. Dystopian fiction often employed a protagonist who provided a counter-narrative to an oppressive totalitarian world. However these characters were without politics, helpless to create change.[33] Thus, subjectivity was apparently impossible. This is in great contrast to the living utopias of Gramsci and Machiavelli. Dystopian media has continued into cinema and television as well. *Star Wars, Jurassic Park,* and *Dune* are some popular examples. One struggles to think of a work of science fiction, or indeed any media that depicts a future, that is not dystopian.

This dystopian turn seems to be the fulfillment of what Rousseau identified in the modern era: that liberal society forces us to be free.[34] Exacerbated by the industrial revolution and later the technological revolution, subjects in developed countries are now confronted with the simultaneity of seemingly plentiful choice, and the uncanny feeling that one may have no say at all. One analysis of 1927 urban dystopian film *Metropolis* points to the way in which human autonomy is lost within the depicted city, as if they too had become machines.[35] The movie shows one example of a theoretical future wherein technology developed for utopian aims betrays itself and becomes detached from its humanist aspects. The skyscrapers "cover up an unbridgeable class division, an irrational reliance on machines, alienated and exploited work, and a division between body and soul."[36] It becomes clear that the dystopia is acting as the obverse of the utopia; it bridges the gaps between contradictions and creates a system of thought. However, the subject that is so essential for Machiavelli is removed. The dystopian idea of the world is completely objective, with no room for a subject to act upon and change it.

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[33] Anya Heise-von der Lippe, "Histories of Futures Past: Dystopian Fiction and the Historical Impulse," *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, 66, no. 4. (2018), 415-416.
[34] Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* 8.
[35] Gyan Prakash, "Modernism and Urban Dystopia," in *Noir Urbanisms*, Vol. 3. (United States: Princeton University Press, 2010), 22.
[36] Ibid, 29.

In a society so unconsciously enshrined in the *status-quo* and unable to imagine an inclining future, *The Prince* becomes obsolete. Even the word "virtue" no longer has connotations of strength, but ones of capitulation to proper social norms. Attempts to return to *The Prince* become lost in confused networks of secular morality. Imperatives for the prince, both in Machiavelli and Gramsci, are guided by their respective utopias. However the only utopias with cultural saliency today are conservative myths of the past. Looking forward yields nothing but downfall. One may speculate that this is due to the compartmentalization of society, rendering impossible the creation of a totalizing narrative. If we could give clarity to the past, our conception of the future may be more optimistic. When *The Prince* decided to manipulate politics for a certain unifying end, it propelled a political narrative in a way that is hard to imagine today. But it may be necessary if we are to escape our current stage of development.

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