

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.3.57>

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*: True Image and False Spectacle

Chetan Vimal

M. Phil from Guru

Gobind Singh

Indraprastha University,
Delhi, India

Abstract

The paper deals with the layers of meaning to which we attribute as reality. Machiavelli uses satire (almost) as a form to penetrate into the essence of what it means to be a ruler of a state and what follows to become an able one. The inherent evil nature of human being is emerges whenever one needs to control a state. One needs to put on a masquerade to “look” good and be bad in an essence. Further media and internet plays vital role to further escalate the situation which further obscures what we want to see and what we are shown.

Keywords: Appearance, Power, Perception, Reality, Inherent Evil

The concept of Original sin is at the foundation of Machiavelli's politics, thus it is no surprise that Machiavelli and being immorally manipulative comes out in same breath. The honor or reputation is based on his most famous work *The Prince*, written in around 1513 (and published in 1532), at the height of Renaissance, as no less than a love letter to Lorenzo de Medici, the then governor of Florence, to satiate his craving for political offer. Considering its motive and the space when it was written it is highly arguable whether it should be considered for reading in Post modern world, but since it's the moral treatise of epic stature when it comes to politics and man can never stop being a political animal hence it cannot be left in the dust of anonymity. As professed by Machiavelli politics is not what is there on the mere appearance of it rather the mechanics of that appearance and what goes behind in the making of that appearance. It is obligatory to understand the difference between the true image and the spectacle generated to demonstrate that. The Machiavellian understanding of politics is unconventional; maintaining a safe distance from Aristotelean– Christian view where God is the prime resource of authority. In Machiavellian understanding of politics: wellbeing of commoners is not the priority, but protection and welfare of the state is. His idea of good quality is not of moral character, but of what is best or useful in the service of the country.

It is believed that being part of active politics is like that forbidden fruit which will always tempt you to try your luck on part of your freewill for an awaiting predestined danger.

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*: True Image and False Spectacle

BY

Chetan Vimal

The indispensable characteristic of Machiavelli's life was the fact that he always desired to inhabit political office. But came 1512, when this democratic supporter of Florentine Republic was not only booted out of the office but later arrested and tortured with coming of Lorenzo Medici in power. The closest vocation taken by Machiavelli, post his sacking was re-living those first hand political experiences through his writings which were centered on the political reality. Main proposition on which Machiavelli frames his argument is that we are fallen and sinful, and in his words "Men never do any good except through necessity". Like Luther he trusted that the corruption and ill-will of the human spirit could only be remedied with help of external agency, but unlike god fearing Luther he gives acknowledgment to the fear of the Prince. Machiavelli is strong believer of the fact that history repeats in itself and universe remains same, as it is just that people come and go. In other words general tendency of people basically remain as it is, be it whatsoever. The evil sustains in human from one age to another, the goodwill holds no proper place and greater evil is required to control the residing evil. Machiavelli's ruler is concerned with nothing but his maintenance of power.

The concept of appearance and representation is primary in the work of Machiavelli, being at the service of ruler from close proximity as civil servant, he had the privileged knowledge about the working of the ruler. Machiavelli's perception is based upon his first hand experiences of political power as it appears in the actions of his rulers and in the existence of subjects. Chapter 15 of *The Prince* highlights the idea that the key virtue of ruler is the ability to display the virtues that people want to see in their ruler. Virtue varies from being a benefactor to being religious; the prince/ruler cannot observe these qualities sincerely as it is not plausible to make everyone happy at the same time. As a consequence of the regular danger and uncertainty rulers must identify that "some of the things that appear to be virtues" can lead to their ruin and that "some of the things that appear to be vices" will bring them success. Likewise controlled destruction and cruelty can bring harmony between separated and disputing communities, and in the long run can be seen as compassion. Machiavelli uses the vocabulary of appearances like "striking demonstrations" "cloak of religion" "rewarded and punished in a way that sets everyone talking" to prove that language of politics is the language of appearances.

So to what extent does the language of politics is the language of appearances? The famous quote, 'whether it is better to be loved than feared' which Machiavelli answers in negative, it is important to observe that not all decisions are made either black or white, but there is a middle space which provides ground between the extremes to work. As love or benevolence cannot make everyone happy at the same time and on the other hand a despised or loathed ruler is at the mercy of upcoming insurgence and revolt. Rulers must be in control of how they appear to influence people to perceive them in their own light. Thus maintaining a certain appearance of being compassionate, faithful to word and devout helps in solving the purpose more than being actually so. Since sustaining a state involves countering to

conditions and individuals, not to principles, character, or virtues. It is an accepted thing that common people are always amazed by appearances and results or as what Machiavelli declares 'the end justify the means'. Machiavelli is true in pointing out in concluding chapters that a prince cannot allow common people to come near him and should always employ ministers to maintain appropriate distance between him and his subject. Then only the balance between "generally perceived right" and "positive right" could be maintained. It is up to the ruler to decide unmistakably when one or the other of these resources conduces most to the betterment of his regime. The whole game of politics is all about appearances and the relationship between prince and its state. Machiavelli made it clear that actions were not nearly as important for what they were, but rather for WHAT they would do to improve the reputation of the leader.

It is imperative to understand that the appearances, more or less perfect and more or less illusory are symbol of human realities. As Socrates points out that best men rule has to rule anyhow to avert rule by the worst men. The association of people with appearance is very profound. The role of appearance works at the weakness of people's perception, as they let it happen and get caught at slightest tickling of their fancy. Machiavelli is right on the significance of "appearance" over reality when it comes to ruling. Chapter 15 to 18 in the Prince justly showcases that how politics must be detached from the ethics if leader wishes to survive. Machiavelli believes that fundamental realities of the state are psychological, this somewhat stands true, as the reality of the state resided "in the attitudes and desires of the people who inhabit it". It won't be wrong to say that ruler is only as powerful as he seemed to be in the mind of his subjects - the perception of power is power.

It has been suggested that Machiavelli wrote out of resentment and anger but the hope for better Italy and mankind drove him past his resentments. The obvious coldness to party loyalties had earned Machiavelli the title of opportunist which is apparent by his powerful writing on diverse political tendencies. Even his personal ambitions aims at his opportunistic streaks but, as expounded in this paper there is always more what meets the eye. Machiavelli is not limited to the fortunes of his personal self, even though place and power was a strong motivation in his life, his insistence for united Italy with validity of his interest in history and political psychology showcases the grander sweep that petty ambitions can ever explain. To say in absolute terms will be an insult to the persona of Machiavelli, no he was not a patriot per se. What drove him to this level of cynicism is the contempt for inefficiency and moderation. He was concerned with the political effectiveness. Machiavelli is not someone with whom one can expect a satisfying and pleasing picture; he displays human nature stimulated exclusively by terror, pride and egotism. He presents an extremely dramatic picture based on art of government upon empirical study of human nature. He is not concerned with the contentment of individual, but the welfare and prosperity of the state.

The trademark of Machiavelli's political discipline is its hard hitting realism. The motive is to put in place (I quote) "the effectual truth, discern and warn humanity about the

danger of professing goodness in a world where so many are not good". The exercise of force in the manner of government is a crucial step in proper working of government, as it is a universal fact that no rule is here for eternity, so there is no point in adjusting the private or public life around the pursuit of security. He admonishes the age old idealism resting upon moderation which is considered vital to human happiness by distinguishing all the links taken for granted linking realism and moderation. The philosophy of The Prince is by its very nature upsetting and revolutionary by presenting men how to acquire; his realism is extremism. The general human nature is questioned, especially nobility, in all its forms is shown as to facade to hide common tendencies of mankind. For Machiavelli, a spot on conservative is someone who understands very well that with attaining more one cannot conserve anything, moderation simply does not exist. The world Machiavelli wants to bring forth is the one where moderation will give way to hard hitting realism without any limits. Here he is trying to present a sinful world in its genuine form and without any false spectacle.

Media plays significant role in operating image-perception relationship. What is shown to us and what exactly the thing being varies from perception to perception. The idea of reality is fast fading one, social media is providing impetus to this cause. Even while uploading a picture on facebook or Whatsapp the pressure to be socially acceptable or likable surmounts even the factor how one actually wants to be. We are accustomed to develop and thus project only our finest selves, albeit howsoever unrealistic, on social media platforms. Lot of pain and hardships goes through it as well from having a better camera to right filter, right lens, properly suitable clothes, and also right light. This molding of alternate self is focus point in Machiavellan world. The politics of today is shaped up on appearances and news coverage assists in creating an identity.

Machiavelli intends "to write something useful for whoever understands it", he was as blatant and bashful as a timeless spokesperson of human sensibilities, he was true to every word when he bring forth the conception that men cannot speak about other men without noticing at least some of those qualities they consider worthy of praise or blame. Not only in *The Prince* but also in his other work discourses he observes quite precisely that how easily people are moved by "great hopes and rash promises".

The whole paper can be summed up by three fundamental truths as proposed or established by Machiavelli 1. That the "basic realities of the state are psychological". 2. That the belief that policy counts more than appearance is an illusion. 3. That in the political world perception is reality.

If we accept the premise that human nature has not changed over the centuries even though circumstances have, then Machiavelli's assertions in *The Prince* are still very relevant.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. Print.

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*: True Image and False Spectacle

BY

Chetan Vimal

Campbell, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. New York: Viking Press, 1972. Print
Hullington, Mark. *Citizen Machiavelli*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983. Print
Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Trans. Marriott. Delhi: Fingerprint, 2015. Print.