

Machiavelli: Father of Leadership Studies

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A.

Leadership Studies is an interdisciplinary attempt to understand, and prepare people to become, leaders in contemporary society and organizations. At present, there is no consensus where it belongs in the university. The liberal arts claim to have been dealing with leadership all along, but now departments and programs specifically on leadership pop up in the military sciences, in schools of education, in psychology and sociology, in addition to business and management. My own department of organizational leadership is part of the School of *Technology*. And of course there has been no lack of interest from political scientists: James MacGregor Burns, as most of you know, is a past president of the American Political Science Association, and it is his book titled *Leadership* that many credit with spurring this enterprise known as Leadership Studies.

By 1990, Bernard Bass identified about "600 institutions of higher learning in America [that] offer some form of 'leadership studies' in their curricula." (Born, p. 45) With such widespread academic interest in the subject, as a distinct subject area, part of the task now is to trace its intellectual roots, if for no other reason than placing it into a theoretical context. What I have proposed is that we can trace leadership studies back to Machiavelli - not because Machiavelli was the first to write about leadership, but rather because he is regarded as the first to write about leadership in the manner now adopted in leadership studies.¹

To explain this claim, my paper has two parts. One part challenges those engaged in leadership studies who already acknowledge the relevance of Machiavelli to consider the uses to which he is being put. I see two problems with the way leadership studies use Machiavelli, to the extent they do so at all. First, it would enrich their understanding of Machiavelli to consult commentators such as Voegelin and Strauss, to be wary of accepting a simplistic version of what Machiavelli wrote. The second problem with the way leadership studies use Machiavelli is that they could afford to re-visit the implications of his influence: what follows logically from his premises? Is he really a teacher of evil? Are his methods adequate to the task we have set for ourselves? Are there hidden presuppositions to detect? I won't be answering such questions today. My goal is to inject these kinds of questions into their conversation. What I am trying to do is set the table for the others assembled here at the rostrum.

The second part of my paper tries to bring more voices to that conversation by showing to those in leadership studies who don't acknowledge him the plausibility of claiming Machiavelli as a precursor, a model (rightly or wrongly) for what folks in leadership studies are doing. In this way, I would like to bring them to the stage where they become open to the kinds of deliberations mentioned in the first part of the paper, so we leave nobody out.

It's very much like revealing the identity of your biological father. If you didn't know, perhaps you should, because there are implications.

¹ I almost wrote that leadership studies is Machiavellian because it is not sufficiently Aristotelian.

B.

1. Not every writer on leadership acknowledges the influence of Machiavelli. It goes without saying that many make no reference to him whatsoever. A few even explicitly refuse to include authors pre-dating the last century. Joseph Rost, to cite one example, insists that leadership "as we know it, is a twentieth-century concept and to trace our understanding of it to previous eras of Western civilization ... is as wrong as to suggest that the people of earlier civilizations knew what, for instance, computerization meant." (p. 43 2) If he is correct, then somebody should tell this to the publishing houses, because when I conducted a search of book titles at amazon.com last spring, the following stuck out as particularly obvious attempts to apply Machiavelli's precepts or bring them up-to-date:

*Rudolf Berner, *Machiavelli 2000*

*Stanley Bing, *What would Machiavelli do?*

*Richard Biskirk, *Modern management and Machiavelli*

*W.T. Brahmstedt, *Memo to the boss from Mack: A contemporary rendering of*

**The Prince by Niccol6 Machiavelli*

*Gerald Griffin, *Machiavelli on Management*

*L.F. Gunlicks, *The Machiavellian manager's handbook for success*

*Phil Harris (Ed.), *Machiavelli, marketing and management*

*Richard Hill, *The Boss: Machiavelli on managerial leadership*

*Antony Jay, *Management and Machiavelli: Discovering a new science of management in the timeless principles of state craft*

*Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Machiavelli on modern leadership: 97hy Machiavelli's iron rules are as timely and important today as five centuries ago*

² Early in his career, Eric Voegelin identified this sort of claim as one of the dogmas in a "system of scientific superstition". For the scientifically superstitious who presume that science itself progresses steadily, "[t]he problems and ideas of earlier times are 'antiquated,' 'overcome,' irrelevant to the present, and need not be known." (1933/1997, 11:9)

*Alistair McAlpine, *The new Machiavelli: The art of politics in business*

*Fritz Lawrence Mervil, *The political philosophy of Niccolao Machiavelli as it applies to politics, the management of the firm, and the science of living*

*Dick Morris, *The new prince: Machiavelli updated for the twenty-first century* V. Paperback (?), *The Mafia manager: A guide to the corporate Machiavelli*

*Harriet Rubin, *The princess: Machiavelli for women*

Back in 1950, Daniel Bell made the following observation: "Almost the en literature on leadership stems in large measure from the writings of Aristotle and Machiavelli." "Nor has the

craft of political leadership been elaborated much beyond the descriptions of Machiavelli in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*." (p. 395f) James MacGregor Burns, writing in 1978, observed that "[t]oday, more than half a millennium after the author's birth, *The Prince* still stands as the most famous - and infamous - of books of practical advice to leaders on how to win and wield power." (p. 444) "Machiavelli has had countless imitators. The vogue of the 'how to' manual still thrives today...." (p. 446; cf. p. 16) Textbook writers Baron and Greenberg echoed these sentiments in 1990.

Unsettlingly, the ideas Machiavelli proposed are still very much with us. In fact, they are readily visible in many books that have made their way onto the best-seller lists in recent years - books that describe similar self-centered strategies for gaining power and success.... The popularity of such books suggests that people today are as fascinated by the tactics of Machiavelli described as they were more than four centuries ago. But are these strategies really put to actual use? Are there individuals who choose to live by the ruthless, self-serving creed Machiavelli proposed? The answer appears to be 'yes.' (p. 197) 2. A few textbooks on leadership try to explain the importance of Machiavelli or

include excerpts of *The Prince* - usually to give students a brief lesson in the history of ideas. For example, Shriberg, Lloyd, Shriberg, and Williamson (1997) place him between Aquinas and Hobbes and then in a later chapter offer the following heading: "The Ethical Perspective: Mother Teresa versus Machiavelli". (p. 133) Keith Grint (1997) sandwiches Machiavelli between Sun Tzu and Vilfredo Pareto. J. Thomas Wren (1995) draws a contrast between Machiavelli and Lao-Tsu.

Those of you familiar with the secondary literature might be wondering which Machiavelli these texts and programs are teaching, inasmuch as there are several interpretations to choose from. It simplifies the task to realize that by and large they restrict themselves to *The Prince*. Even so, we end up with several interpretations. One interpretation insists that Machiavelli was writing exclusively for his own time and place, which means that for the rest of us his work would be of only historical interest. (e.g. Burd, 1891/1960; Sabine, 1937) Along these lines, James MacGregor Burns wrote the following: "Even Machiavelli's celebrated portrait of the uses and abuses of power, while relevant to a few other cultures and eras, is essentially culture-bound and irrelevant to a host of other power situations and systems." (p. 16)³ Another interpretation claims that Machiavelli was never in earnest about what he wrote in *The Prince*. Within this camp, one version says that the work is satirical (e.g. Mattingly, 1958/1960), while another says he was hiding his real message to avoid detection. (e.g. Strauss, 1987) Be that as it may, most if not all efforts to teach Machiavelli in *leadership* programs do so in accordance with an interpretation that he was writing in earnest about what he had come to learn about the uses of power, so that when he offers advice, he truly believes in it. He meant what he said, and we in our times have something to gain by listening to him (even if only to repudiate or qualify what he wrote).

³ This from an author who made good use of Machiavelli, especially in *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (1956).

For example, making the rounds is something known to folks in organizational behavior as

"Machiavellianism". The notion here pertains to a personality profile of someone willing "to manipulate others for personal gain and to put self-interest above the interest of the group." (Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, p. 128) Apparently, "[p]sychologists have developed a series of instruments called *Mach scales* to measure a person's Machiavellian orientation." (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, p. 54)

Here we can discern the popular Machiavelli, the Machiavelli everyone loves to hate (even if it is a *cartoon* Machiavelli, as Professor Germino just reminded us⁴). Machiavelli has really become more a symbol of a particularly ruthless and cunning approach to leadership. Unfair to the man and his writings? Perhaps. Nonetheless, he is a useful symbol, and to be honest (again, as Professor Germino observed) he has no one to blame but himself. Many passages lend themselves to this kind of appropriation.

3. So, in our zeal to tell folks doing leadership studies that they might have misconstrued or oversimplified the man's work - something I'd often like to do -perhaps we are missing the point. Perhaps they don't care what Machiavelli intended. I'm not so sure some of them care what he actually wrote. They are content that they understand him well enough. They are now hard at work at the process of symbolization, and the name of Machiavelli has an accepted and useful meaning - a meaning whose relationship to the actual Renaissance author is at risk of becoming increasingly remote.

⁴ Voegelin wrote that what Machiavelli had been trying to do was an "alternative of developing a materialistic, nihilistic theory of politics - the alternative of developing the 'Machiavellianism' that his critics attribute to him." (Voegelin, XXII:86)

Seasoned Voegelinians recognize this as a problem. "We have to distinguish," wrote Voegelin, "between resistance to truth and agreement or disagreement about the optimal symbolization of truth experienced." (1987, p. 35) It is one thing to debate whether an interpretation is better or worse than another. It is quite another to reject the text or experience to be interpreted and proceed to use it in a manner oblivious to its origins. For those in leadership studies willing to debate the adequacy of their symbolization, then the panel here today can make a difference, and I should get out of the way. Unfortunately, for those in leadership studies unwilling to debate the adequacy of their symbolization, the panel is wasting its breath, since it takes an entirely different set of tools to pry a person out of his "Second Reality". (1966/1990, XII:33f) He or she won't listen to any of us here.

At least a number of these contemporary writers acknowledge the relevance of Machiavelli, even if they do not agree what it is. These people can be made to prepare themselves to read Voegelin and Strauss, because they shall have crossed a threshold in their thinking, and in the interest of time I shall have to hand them over to the rest of you.⁵ I do want to mention that tomorrow at 3:30, Professor Michael Harvey of Washington College will talk on "Machiavelli as the founder of contemporary management studies".⁶ Some of you might want to attend.

⁵ Even if a writer or teacher explicitly recognizes the relevance of Machiavelli of contemporary leadership studies, one has to avoid proceeding as though *The Prince* (or any other work of Machiavelli) had been written for direct application to any twenty-first century factory manager

or production supervisor. At the far, extreme from believing Machiavelli would be irrelevant is the equivalent extreme that his work is always directly relevant to every instance of leadership. For one thing, such an uncritical use of Machiavelli overlooks the various types of leader that he portrays (Voegelin, Y-XII:77), as well as the various types of regime (Voegelin, XXII:73).

⁶ When I saw this, I approached him electronically and found some of the work he is doing to be first-rate. We have corresponded since, and it turns out he and I had been running along parallel tracks.

C.

For the balance of my time, I want to bring a few more people across that threshold, so they too might benefit from what the experts have to say about Machiavelli and the implications of his works. These people I'd like to discuss next are those in leadership studies who either disavow Machiavelli's influence or simply do not recognize that Machiavelli has any residual influence on their work -- despite all of the new books at amazon.com.

1. For one thing, to echo what Professor Germino has said, Machiavelli was a realist. (Voegelin, XXV:59) He took his lessons from years of direct personal observation and hours poring over the historical record.⁷ Machiavelli sought to derive evidence of the real world, of real people, before offering comment on how one ought to lead. For him, the key to knowing how to rule is knowing how men live. (Strauss, 1987, p. 300)

According to this view, Machiavelli represents the attempt to ground order not on Revelation (e.g. Christianity) or disembodied Reason (e.g. Plato) but on Reality, on the way things are, as though revelation, reason, and reality are mutually exclusive.⁸ In this sense, he serves as a precursor to the empirical, scientific study of humankind, even as "the first political scientist" (Rhu, 1998⁹), and to that extent he serves as a precursor to many of the scholars presently at work in the field of leadership studies. His declared ambition is the same: to accumulate the evidence and draw conclusions to be of use in concrete historical situations.

⁷ There is some question how faithfully Machiavelli pursued this method. (e.g. Butterfield, 1967, p. 25 & chap. 2; Plamenatz, 1963, p. 4)

⁸ Voegelinians would object to this characterization, but I am not offering it for its truth-value. I am trying to place Machiavelli within a category he expressly described for his work that he shares with other writers.

⁹ Voegelin would have objected to Rhu's characterization of Machiavelli as the "first political scientist" because he obviously did not share Rhu's view of what political science is. Professor Moulakis was right to bring this to my attention. The point to be made, regardless, is that many who write about leadership

2. More specifically, Machiavelli concerned himself with the dynamics of social power, not only what it is, but how it works, and from this he was able to come up with a set of prescriptions. These prescriptions together form a handbook for leaders (that is, in *The Prince*, for a particular type of leader). Therefore, as writers today attempt to understand power, they follow in his path, even if unwittingly. Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy have made the connection explicit by devoting a chapter in their textbook on leadership (1993, 1996) to social power and then opening with a reference to Machiavelli's *Prince*. (p. 117)¹⁰ I mention this to illustrate that, not only do present day scholars employ the same or similar methods, for the same or similar reasons, but they also study the same or similar questions.

3. In the accumulation of evidence from the past, Machiavelli was quite aware of situational differences and the fact that these situational differences determine leadership effectiveness - an approach to leadership studies that Northouse describes in his 1997 text on *Leadership* as "[o]ne of the most widely recognized approaches to leadership.... [I]t has been used extensively in training and development for organizations throughout the country." (p. 53; see generally chap.

4) In organizational behavior, the situational

would take sides with Rhu, which has the limited advantage of bringing them into the debate over

Machiavelli's importance for leadership studies.

¹⁰ On the importance of the study of power for understanding leadership, see e.g. Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1999, chap. 11; Northouse, 1997, p. 6; Shriberg, Lloyd, Shriberg, & Williamson, 1997, pp.

124-137; Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 1997, chap. 14; and Baron & Greenberg, 1990, chap. 12.

approach has led to "contingency theory", in which the objective is to match the style or method of leadership with the situation. I I (Northouse, 1997, chap. 5) In any event, it has become commonplace to assert that the most effective leadership behaviors will depend on a number of variables; there is no one-right-way to lead in all situations. ¹¹Writers today routinely accept the notion that leadership has to be adapted. (e.g. Grint, 1997, II, reprinting Barnard [1948], Stogdill [1948], and Fiedler [1976]) As a result, they reject any advice about the "best way to lead" that fails to consider the variables. ¹²

4. Broader presuppositions in leadership studies help to make the linkage with Machiavelli stronger, like the notion that leaders can make a difference and leadership can be taught. Here are two fundamental propositions where they agree. You and I might uncover a number of other parallels: the follower's over-reliance on appearances and the study in our time of "impression management"¹³ the stability of republics and the movement in our time to "empower" followers 14 the ubiquity of elites and what has come to be called in sociology "elite theory"¹⁵ interpersonal conflict grounded in the underlying interests of the parties¹⁶

¹¹ An approach probably captured best in the work of Hersey and Blanchard regarding Situational Leadership. (1969)

¹² Chemers put it this way: "One would be hard put to find an empirical theory of leadership

which holds

that one style of leadership is appropriate for all situations." (In Wren, 1995, p. 96)

¹³ "When a person deliberately sets out to establish a particular identity in the eyes of others we speak of

impression management or self-presentation [*citations omitted*]." (Tedeschi & MelbuTg, 1984, p. 52;

Greenberg, 1996, pp. 106-108)

¹⁴ See e.g. Northouse, 1997, p. 242f. If it seems contradictory to "empower" followers and also prescribe

ways for a leader to manipulate or overwhelm them, that same tension exists in Machiavelli as it does in leadership studies, although more than one way can be found to reconcile the two claims.

¹⁵ Levine, 1995, chap. 12.

¹⁶ See especially the literature on conflict management. (E.g. Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1981, 1991).

the never-ending emergence of needs, either new needs in place of satisfied needs or the recurrence of needs, a la Abraham Maslow attunement to first principles and the present-day advice to adopt and emphasize vision statements the periodic necessity of an organizational form to be smashed in order to release the frustrated potential of its members and liberate latent vitality, rather like hostile takeovers in the corporate world the vagueness or silence about the ends of leadership, about the reason for trying to lead anyone at all

The fact that they happen to agree on a list of propositions is not conclusive proof of Machiavelli's influence, of course, but it does serve as evidence. And from the accumulated weight of this evidence, perhaps those who never gave Machiavelli a second thought might profitably turn to his works with a newfound appreciation, to see what else the man wrote and what he concluded as a result of his studies.

D.

It was not my sole objective this morning to bring leadership studies to Machiavelli and make them drink, although that strikes me as useful (if for no other reason than the principle that awareness is better than ignorance). It is also my objective to warn leadership studies -- whoever it is that falls within leadership studies -- that if it turns out Machiavelli is their father, then perhaps they need to consider the implications

E.

of their ancestry. By accepting his premises and his methods, knowingly or not, will they also arrive at the conclusions that have left him in such disrepute? I appreciate the guidance, encouragement, and correction of panel members, plus Professors Michael Harvey, Ellis Sandoz, and Steve McVey, despite the responsibility I assume for what appears on these pages.

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