

Exploring Ideas of Humanism in Machiavelli's *The Prince*

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Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to contrast Machiavelli's The Prince and the ideas of humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries together on one plane. At the face value, The Prince may be condemned as diagonally opposed to the 'purer' qualities of humanism like 'virtue' or individual freedom. But this is not always the case. In this paper, I intend to prove that whereas popularly condemned to be intrinsically opposed, Machiavelli's text, in fact, upholds the very philosophical ideas that thinkers of humanism prided upon as the backbone of a renaissance.*

Key Words: *Renaissance, The Prince, Humanism, Machiavelli, Political Science.*

The act of historicising a text is not always as linear as it should appear to be. In terms of simple literary analysis, it usually involves positing a text against its context and drawing out a legitimate flux against which the text can be critically examined. This is truer when proper chronological and political contexts are referred to. But when it comes to philosophical contexts, the act of historicising attains a more contentious ground. This interesting relation is clearly exhibited when any analysis tries to posit Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the ideas of humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries together on one plane. At the face value, *The Prince* may be condemned as diagonally opposed to the 'purer' qualities of humanism like 'virtue' or individual freedom. But this is not always the case. In the following paragraphs, I intend to prove that whereas popularly condemned to be intrinsically opposed, Machiavelli's text, in fact, upholds the very philosophical ideas that thinkers of humanism prided upon as the backbone of a renaissance.

First, let us consider a problem of nomenclature. Ideas of humanism in Europe began as a departure from the eternal servitude towards the Church and the Crown that most of the subjects were bonded to. The concentration was gradually shifted to ideas of liberty, to attain which people began giving importance to anti-scholastic education, moral values, the arts, the classics, practicality and scientific thinking. The overreaching term 'humanism' was applied much later. To quote Eckhard Keblers, "Humanism is an invention of the nineteenth century. It was first imposed to signify a certain concept of general education through the classics and was later adapted to denote the Renaissance as the age devoted to the revival of classical antiquity, providing the means for a new and anti-Scholastic type of learning"(Keblers, 2006). In such a scenario, any text that asserted nationalistic fervour by questioning established and dominant grounds of knowledge would also qualify to fall under the broad definition of humanism.

The Prince, in questioning the discourse of Cicero in major fields of political science accomplished a similar feat. Though immediate reception of the text was close to slander, the

depth of Machiavelli's thought would lay the stage for a political renaissance, first in Italy and then in major parts of Europe. The reservation then and most of the criticism now have a very common ground of morality. It is true that based on moral principles alone, Machiavelli's plan of action for the Prince would garner very low scores, but an alternate view is possible. We may argue the possibility that he thought morality and politics to be closely linked in a way where morality suggests that is needed for the people to be governed to sustain the basic principles of civilisation. It is moral wisdom that validates politics to sustain peace. But the paradox is that if moral principles are implied on politics, it destroys the very condition necessary for moral existence. The problem then is discussible in the domain of ethics, where the dichotomy involves the ability to choose the beneficial over the destructive for public good. This would give the Prince a choice for mitigation and this might come at the cost of moral principles. Therefore, we may argue in favour of parts of *The Prince* which validates qualities like violence and deceit considered in the context of governance. There is space in the liberal spectrum of humanism to sustain such a motive and such a text.

Secondly, let us consider the case of social change. It is apparent from text of *The Prince* that the end result of any ruler following the philosophy of Machiavelli to the last dot would not only consolidate 'his' regime, but also bring about gradual social change and immediate stability in the social organisation. Machiavelli's strong oration in chapter XXVI makes the authorial intent of social change quite clear. What is more important is that this strong call comes at the last chapter to strengthen all previous arguments and also provide for some sort of justification for the ruler in the eyes of the subjects who stand to lose form any foreign threat. Setting aside the author's motive (quite unimportant here), we may suggest the presence of a 'consolidating emotion' that was converted into the stronger force of nation building in Italy after long periods of political and religious conflicts. This 'consolidating emotion' may be seen akin to Benedict Anderson's argument of linguistic forces that have worked in European nation formation processes after the dark ages(Anderson, 1973 (2006)). What Machiavelli was able to do was to identify a string of commonality for the people and earmark a political sphere of influence for the rulers to exercise a free choice of nation formation. This perspective cannot be overlooked by liberal humanism in a hurry.

Critic James Hankins, contributing for *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, writes that there are two classes of reformers; first those who believe in the reform of individuals by reforming institutions and second, those who believe in the reform of institutions by reforming individuals(Hankins, 1996). It does not take long to estimate Machiavelli's implications and place him in the latter category. The one individual that Machiavelli sought to reform came with the added baggage of the state. Unlike the thinkers of these days, who are almost free from the influence of political authority, the humanists had to work under the censorship of patronages and a sharp critique of the existing order was not advisable. In return, the expressions mostly took the tune of moral admonitions and judgements had to be toned down. In such a case, Machiavelli not only uses the existing moralities to his own advantages, he also gives a futuristic guide book. His model can as well be used in case of a republican body and not one individual alone, as suggested by Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. The commonality of the address differs only at the level of addressee and therefore it makes more sense that we consider the work as a model for social implication and not as a model for the progress of one individual alone.

Thirdly, let us consider the power relations involved within the creation of such a political text. There are two facets to this argument, and in a sense both are contradictory. Both arguments, in any case uphold the display of humanism within the text of *The Prince*. Initially, we must take into account the position of composition. This means that we have to locate the author in the middle of a regime that has ended violently and another regime that sees the author as a residual part of the previous empire. Though it is apparent from the letters of Machiavelli that he sought no position in reward from the new regime (Viroli, 2008), we can still make out strong display of knowledge of the court. This may suggest the display of knowledge to gain attention of the ruling class at certain points, but this also forces the addressee to look closely at warnings that have been enumerated in the text. The warnings related to internal power politics, mostly concerning the Prince's dealings with nobles and soldiers of the state are a part of the knowledge system already in existence. The formulas of power would not have been new to any prince. It is with the validation of the power struggle with the church that is more important to note.

By indicating in a widely circulated text that the prince in fact faced a powerful threat from the church, Machiavelli had exposed an open secret long feared and experienced by the people but never popularly expressed. His position was among the people and he had voiced a concern of the people. Moreover, he had, in his text, advised the prince to act against the tyranny of religion. This had accomplished a significant implication of demystification of power struggles and at the same time given a logical justification to resist the church. What is important to note here is the fact that Machiavelli does not question God or Christianity at any point. He questions only the institution of established religion and endorses opposition to religion, not God. This qualifies the idea of religion as a structure of power and removes it from spiritual beliefs. Just like the government as a system is constructed by the text, it also deconstructs religion as a system, separated from God.

Secondly, many critics are of the opinion that by systematically explaining the functioning of a government in a published book, Machiavelli had not given the Prince a gospel, but had in fact given the people a working manual of the way the power functions. This becomes clearer in the words of Rousseau, "While appearing to instruct kings he has done much to educate the people. Machiavelli's *Prince* is the book of Republicans." (Viroli, 2008). This argument suggests that Machiavelli was in reality performing a subversive act all the while. By demystifying the very source of political authority and positing this authority against the other pillar of power- religion, Machiavelli was in fact empowering the people in their pursuit of personal freedom. On the basis of application, he had definitely bought out the angle of 'questioning'- irrespective of the fact that he was either guiding the princes or arousing the people or doing both at the same time.

In both the cases elucidated above, the humanist agenda is by definition followed and applied upon. One of the chief implications of the humanist movement was to enable the people to question the existing structures of power by virtue of free thinking. This had later come down to be followed as the agenda for republicanism and nation formation based on popular alliances across Europe after the Renaissance. It can also be argued that the roots of democracy trace back to this very idea of humanism. By putting Machiavelli's text in this critical perspective, we can argue that instead of subverting the norms of humanism, Machiavelli was in fact setting up a significant norm by his own right.

Lastly, there must a mention of the style of narration that Machiavelli followed and the implications it has had in the discourse of humanism. Politics, in the free thinking times of Machiavelli was seen more as an accomplishment of oratory skills. Oration and eloquence was supposed to be a powerful tool of persuasion, one that could bring in order as well as direct attention to matters of interest. As described by the Roman masters of the rhetoric, eloquence was supposed to begin with a proper *exordium* that serves the purpose of making the listener take attention for the rest of the speech(Violi, 2008). Further, the orators are supposed to furnish their arguments with examples that make it easier for the following to perceive the importance of the matter. The orator is supposed to end on a high note to make the gravity apparent. Machiavelli does just that with his dedicatory letter before the text, the rich examples of the text and by ending the text with high cry for defence against foreign 'invaders'. The accomplishment is noteworthy as this style has enabled the text to navigate beyond negative criticism and get the readership it desired. Wheatear the eloquence enabled the prince to move beyond moralistic predicaments or it enabled the people to grasp the spectre of power structure, or both, the fact remains that the eloquence was able to carry the tone and ideas of humanism beyond the intended recipient of the text.

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