

Two views on politics: Aristotle and Machiavelli¹

Machiavelli's name has come to be associated with unscrupulous political activity while Aristotle, in trying to analyze how the world of politics works or should work for the greater good of the people, is more easily associated with philosophy. In fact, this characterization is superficial as, if we compare the views of both thinkers, we will find that Aristotle was much more of an elitist than a truly democratic thinker while Machiavelli is much more democratic in his thinking than we might expect. In order to get a clearer view of their political perspectives I will, first, look at Aristotle's *Politics* and then Machiavelli's two works: *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*.

Aristotle's *Politics*

Aristotle builds on the idea that society is organized in a natural way. From the beginning, the idea that man is a political animal is not just a metaphor but transmits Aristotle's belief that nature is behind everything. In other words, politics like animal organizations are natural – the city-state is natural, i.e., it is not a superficial structure imposed from above which is designed to curb man's basic instincts (as Hobbes might have thought). Man is a political animal but what separates him from other animals is his ability to reason and to speak (*logos*). Therefore he can deliberate. Speech allows us to come together, debate what is just and unjust, and decide on the best form of action which will lead to the greater happiness. This ability to reason is, however, limited to free men. Slaves are entirely devoid of the capacity to reason while women, although being able to reason, lack the authority to make decisions. This is unsurprising as the role women of women, in patriarchal Greek society, was confined to taking some decisions in the home.

For Aristotle, government is for citizens by citizens, but not all people are citizens. Women are, technically speaking, citizens if they are on a registry of citizens or if they are

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but we should probably take it to mean that he is excluding men who only occasionally perform good actions depending on the circumstances. It is only in an aristocratic regime that there is a unification of the good man and the good citizen. In the other regimes this is not the case.

If the role of the government is to provide safety for the citizens then those who exercise power must have “the safety of the community as their task” (1276 b 27–28; p. 71). Although Aristotle’s definition of citizenship in *Politics* is not very clear, he seems to consider citizens as those people who have the right to make decisions which affect everybody and also those who should benefit from those decisions. Additionally, Aristotle emphasizes that the best rulers are those who know how to be ruled or, in other words, understand the rules of the game, and this applies to citizens – those who rule and those who are ruled are free and equal citizens (1255 b 19–20; p. 12).

Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*

As Zuckert (2017) and others have pointed out, it is difficult to classify Machiavelli’s thought. “His writings are maddeningly and notoriously unsystematic, inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory” (Nederman, 2022). His two major works – *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy* – might have been written by two different people. So it is not easy to tie down Machiavelli’s views on the participation of common folk in deliberative functions on the basis of these two works. In *The Prince*, we see the Machiavelli whose name became associated with unscrupulousness and gave rise to new words such as *Machiavellianism* – the man who wrote a kind of guidebook for despots. *The Discourses*, however, shows us a much more democratic Machiavelli; someone who believed in a government that had the interests of all of the people at heart.

In order to address Machiavelli’s apparently contradictory views, we first have to look at the works individually to get an idea of what he is advocating in each of them. One of the

problems we face when trying to interpret his views is that we have to question whether we should be taking what he says at face value or whether we should be trying to discover his motivations given the political context in which he found himself. This is particularly true in the case of *The Prince* as there seem to be various interpretations of the author's intentions which result, in part, from doubts as to when sections of the book were written and who was the intended audience. Both works were published posthumously so it is not clear whether they were written simultaneously or sequentially. What seems to be clear is that the audience being addressed is different. *The Prince* is dedicated to His Magnificence Lorenzo de' Medici (Machiavelli, 1994, p. 5) of the all-powerful Medici family. This letter to Lorenzo was, apparently, originally intended for Giuliano de' Medici (*Letter to Vettori*) the brother of Pope Leo X, but, as Giuliano died in 1516, the addressee had to be changed. The conventional view is that Machiavelli was fishing for employment by the Medici in Florence (Wootton, 1994, p. xvii), but Wootton suggests that Machiavelli was giving advice to "a papal brother about to acquire a state of his own" and that he was angling for the job of overall administrator of such a new state (p. xix). Whatever the specifics, the general idea that *The Prince* was designed to show off Machiavelli's grasp of real politics seems to be consensual.

The Prince

There is ample evidence in the letter to *Vettori* that Machiavelli was hoping to get some appointment with the Medici. He writes of his plight with the "wolf at the door", etc. (p. 4), and in the letter to Lorenzo: "I want to offer myself to your Magnificence, along with something that will symbolize my desire to give you obedient service" (p. 5). Throughout the book Machiavelli strives to show how useful he would be to any rulers. It is clear that when he writes of principalities he is referring to territories that are governed by a single ruler – either someone who holds absolute power or someone who has a kind of alliance with barons who, in turn, hold power over others (pp. 14–15). Machiavelli advocates ruthlessness as a

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oppress, and the former not to be oppressed” (p. 32). He emphasizes the importance of any ruler having the support of the populace.

The Discourses

Although his views in *The Prince* are about how people in power should act to maintain their power, in *The Discourses* Machiavelli is concerned about things like freedom, free speech, the “public good”, and the stability of the republic. He praises the Roman system of checks and balances where the plebeians have representation via the tribunes.

His main focus in *The Discourses* is on the problem of good government. By that he means not only a government that will act in the interests of the people at large but also the type of government that will be stable and survive for a long period of time. For that reason he is clearly in favor of the Roman Republic, which lasted for over 500 years. He proceeds, as Aristotle did, by classifying the types of political regimes that have existed and praising or criticizing them. When he refers to “six types of constitution, of which three are inherently bad and three are inherently good” (p. 89) he is presumably referring to Aristotle’s classification. Good constitutions can degenerate into bad ones: monarchies become tyrannies, aristocracies become oligarchies, and democracies slide into anarchy. It is important to note here that Machiavelli’s six constitutions are not identical, in name at least, to those of Aristotle. For Aristotle it is *polity* that can degenerate into democracy – so democracy is a bad thing; in Machiavelli’s classification, democracy is a good thing but it can degenerate into anarchy.

The problem, for Machiavelli is that the pure forms of government (good or bad) do not survive for long – they all contain elements that destabilize them, and that is what seems to worry Machiavelli most. He describes a “cycle through which all states revolve, and power is still passed, as it always has been, from hand to hand” (p. 90): monarchies become tyrannies, aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy which is overturned by “popular

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