

Machiavelli on the nature of politics

GV100 Class Slides: week 5

London School of Economics and Political Science



Questions/comments to start the class

Machiavelli's method

“But because I want to write what will be useful to anyone who understands, it seems to me better to concentrate on what really happens rather than on theories or speculations. For many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or know to exist. However, how men live is so different from how they should live that a ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it.” (The Prince, ch. xv)

What does this passage tell us about Machiavelli's method? How does he differ from Plato or Aristotle?

Other assumptions

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- ① That people are naturally bad, greedy, fickle, etc.
- ② That there is a cycle of history in which powers rise and fall, and there is little anyone can do to stop this.
- ③ That political success is viewed as personal success.

How does the concept of 'virtu' differ from the concept of 'virtue' as we normally understand it? What does this tell us about Machiavelli's work?

The wheel of fortune

What is fortuna? How does it relate to virtu? Explain in reference to Machiavelli's claim that a prince should imitate both the fox and the lion.

The permissibility of violence

Under what conditions does Machiavelli think violence is appropriate? How does this reflect his general approach to guiding princes? Does Machiavelli think that violence is an appropriate method for addressing all problems?

The problem of dirty hands

Consider the following scenarios. What do you think should be done? What would Machiavelli think?

- ① ALLY: You get an ally to do your dirty work, then expose him for doing it and have him executed as punishment.
- ② TORTURE: You torture a suspected terrorist in the hopes of stopping an attack.
- ③ ELECTION: You threaten the leader of a foreign country in order to dig up damning information about the son of a political opponent in the run-up to a national election.
- ④ ENIGMA: In order to hide the fact that you have broken the enemy's secret code, you allow your own citizens to die in preventable attacks.