

The Stability of New Principalities in The Prince: A Perspective from Weber

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Abstract: Scholars have argued that new princes in Machiavelli's *The Prince* only have a certain “short-term perspective” and therefore can only rule with no long-term stability. This paper adopts Weber's conception of domination and legitimacy to illustrate this problem, and the result is that new principalities are ruled directly by the prince with his own army with the help of a charismatic aura, but this kind of rule indeed lacks routinization and stability. To achieve this kind of rule, new princes are required to try their best to downplay the role of administrators and the greats/nobles in rule the state. In the end, this paper proposes three conjectures about Machiavelli's attitude toward this problem. Either new principalities can acquire new legitimacy by expanding into a territorial country, or new princes can learn from the book of *The Prince* to keep controlling their army and maintaining their charisma, or he just doesn't care about stability at all.

Keywords: Machiavelli, Weber, Stability, Domination, Legitimacy

1. Introduction

The Cambridge school scholar Pocock famously argues that the new princes as the protagonists of Machiavelli's *The Prince* adopt a certain “short-term perspective” [1]. They are thrown out or consciously leap outside the stable tradition and face the ever-changing currents of *fortuna* directly. Therefore, they need to keep their focus on the present, aiming to respond promptly to potential risks. Pocock's interpretation implies that, in general, *The Prince* lacks a solution for long-term political stability.

Clearly, this explanation is not without room for questioning. For instance, the main characteristic of *fortuna*(fortune) in *The Prince* does not necessarily seem to be the continuous and elusive, unpredictable changes that Pocock highlights (*fortuna* often amounts to external forces). Nevertheless, Pocock astutely recognizes a particular, non-traditional "temporality" in new princes. New princes may not necessarily confront a capricious fortune at any moment, but they do seem to face numerous short-term contingencies, seemingly lacking any long-term institutional planning. According to Weber's classification of the domination, Machiavelli's principalities largely remain patrimonial, with tradition being the source of legitimacy. However, Machiavelli decidedly abandons tradition (in this case, hereditary bloodlines) after the second chapter. In fact, the central position of new princes in *The Prince* is to address issues that hereditary princes adhering to tradition cannot solve (for example, the unification of Italy in Chapter 26 can only be achieved by new princes). Hereditary princes in *The*

Prince are almost entirely silent and passive. So, if the traditional power is absent and legal-rational legitimacy is clearly not available, how can new princes maintain their state?

For the record, Machiavelli does not deny the power of tradition. As the starting point of the typology of princely states, hereditary principalities seem to maintain a level of stability that is still revered. The hereditary princes can easily maintain their states, but when new princes acquire new states, it is hard for them to maintain them, because the former are naturally loved and the latter are easy to be hated. Moreover, in chapters 19 and 24, Machiavelli seems to return to the comparison between hereditary and new principalities, advocating that, if following his guidance, new principalities can achieve and even surpass hereditary principalities in terms of stability (at least in the short term). But how do new principalities achieve this without tradition, and can they truly escape the "short-term perspective" to establish some form of long-term stable rule? The aim of this paper is to illustrate this problem in the light of Weber's ideas of legitimacy and domination. To discuss this, we need to first examine the specific structure of domination in new principalities.

2. Nobles, Administrators, and Military

2.1. Nobles and Administrators

The text of *The Prince* itself seems highly related to a certain, not strictly defined concept of domination. The very first sentence of the first chapter in the definition of the state in *The Prince* seems to include a form of domination ("hold empire" [2]). Interestingly, according to Hexter's classic study, the state (*stato*) in *The Prince* is not only highly related to the prince's person but is often passive in most usages, being something exploited, dominated, or possessed, sometimes resembling property, i.e., a form of patrimony [3]. That is to say, on the one hand, the state may itself be a dominating entity, while, on the other hand, the state itself seems to be the object of domination. But in the opening definition of the state, it is explicitly stated that the object of domination is people. The position of the state here is evidently ambiguous. However, in the subsequent discussions, we can see that the role of the state's institutions or government is rather weak; it mainly involves the relationship between the prince personally (sometimes along with the military) and his subjects, and the territory.

So, since domination is so important, how is it achieved, or can it be achieved? What are the internal and external conditions? According to Weber, the internal conditions of domination are three types of legitimacy serves as justification, and the external conditions are material resources, especially the obedience of the administrators and their relationship with the rulers, through which the rulers can control the material resources [4]. We can temporarily assume that hereditary principalities rely on traditional legitimacy. What about new principalities?

In terms of external conditions, for the classical triadic relationship of patrimonial domination—nobles, administrators, and subjects, *The Prince* seems to significantly weaken the status of administrators or even administration itself. It can be said that the most important relationships throughout the book are between the prince, the military, foreign leaders, nobles (*the greats*), and the people, while the relationship between the prince and administrators is relatively obscure. It is likely that old administrators, through a long process of identity and hierarchy transformation, will become nobles. Nevertheless, even concerning nobles, Machiavelli's attitude throughout the book is to suppress nobility and elevate the people, attempting to weaken nobility and rarely mentioning rule through nobles. On the contrary, he aims to connect directly with the people, reminiscent of the professional politician in Weber's *Vocation*. Throughout the book, besides the people and the military, the prince seems to have no real loyalty, and it appears that the best solution to any problem for the prince is to take direct action, reducing any possible intermediaries.

The dichotomy of the greats and the people is not limited to the discussion in Chapter 9, which deals with civic principalities, but it runs through almost the entire book. According to Chapter 9's discussion, while it may not be asserted that this dichotomy is a universal feature of human politics, it is at least a phenomenon inevitably present in small-scale city politics, regardless of the system (actually extending beyond city-states, such as France). Machiavelli's attitude is consistent, strongly advocating prioritizing the satisfaction of the people, being vigilant, and weakening nobility (recall the recommendation of eliminating the bloodlines of the previous prince in Chapter 3). The new princes' relationship with these nobles is more competitive than regular patrimonial rule. Since these new princes generally lack a legitimate authority, many nobles, according to Machiavelli's narrative, probably aim not only to gain resources but also to replace the prince. The new princes do not have an absolute advantage against the greats, so they need to be particularly vigilant about the risks they pose, especially in usurping power, which is evident from the frequent assassinations and conspiracies.

However, Machiavelli also acknowledges that a political structure that effectively balances the power between the monarch, the nobility, and the people, like that seen in France, can constitute good governance.

Of course, the issue of administrators is not non-existent. For the monarch to rule over both the people and the nobility, a certain number of administrators is still necessary. But Machiavelli's depiction of these administrators is almost never positive, except in Chapter 22. He recognizes the tendency of officials to drain power from rulers. In many places throughout the text, he expresses extreme caution towards the decentralization of power to administrative officials. This includes the ruler's direct intervention to prevent officials from plundering the conquered lands, the negative view on puppet governments in Chapter 5, and the assertion that officials are likely to be disobedient or disloyal in times of crisis, as seen in Chapter 9. And the most memorable one is that in Chapter 7, Machiavelli mentions how Cesare Borgia's execution of his official Orsini, after having him harshly suppress a newly acquired city and then restoring his reputation by publicly executing him, played an essential role in regaining the support of the people.

2.2. The military problem

However, the structure of domination does not end with the issue of administrators. In *The Prince*, the importance of rulers' military power largely replaces that of administrators, and even Machiavelli's concerns about mercenaries and auxiliary armies seem similar to the problem of administrators in terms of governance structure. Essentially, the most fundamental advice provided to the ruler in *The Prince* is that they should possess their own military forces (related to the concept of *virtu*), which is literally the foundation of the state. Everything else seems to be secondary suggestions. Yet, Machiavelli seems vague regarding how a ruler should build their military force. While some scholars suggest that Machiavelli advocates transforming a city-state into a territorial state, incorporating the surrounding rural areas, and involving rural populations in the citizen militia, the specific textual evidence is scarce (perhaps in Chapter 26)[5]. The text merely mentions that the ruler's army can be composed of "either subjects or citizens or your creatures", and the question of whether this army might betray the ruler is never addressed[6]. Nevertheless, the combination of a ruler and their army constitutes the central component of a successful principality, as indicated by the saying, "where there are good arms there must be good laws"[7].

Machiavelli emphasizes that Princes must find a way to make their subjects depend on them. And to achieve this dependence, the ruler must employ both reward and punishment tactics. The element of reward involves altering the power and interest structure because of the new order introduced by the new prince. There will be beneficiaries within this restructuring, but they are unreliable, and the ruler must secure the support of both the people and the military. Besides rewards, punishment strategies are also essential. The typical new prince seems to have a systemic distrust and control over

nobles and officials. He continuously doubts their loyalty and intervenes directly, using severe measures, if necessary, to execute or replace them. It appears that the new prince is attempting to expropriate and “separate” the nobles and administrators from means and resources [4]. However, what remains unclear is who is executing the primary administrative tasks and how they are conducted. It appears that Machiavelli does not place much emphasis on administrative work. This preference for direct interaction with the people, circumventing administrative bodies, and minimizing intermediaries in governance, seems possible only in smaller-scale rule, a point that will be revisited in the discussion of stability issues.

3. Charisma?

In the first part, we have pointed out that, among the internal conditions of domination, specifically the three types of legitimacy, the domination of the new prince cannot be traditional or legal-rational. So, is there any connection between the new prince and charisma?

Evidently, *The Prince* is filled with elements of charisma, particularly in the portrayal of individuals, especially in the sixth chapter where Machiavelli states that he wants to bring forth the greatest examples, replete with prophets, prophecies, legends, and myths, and Machiavelli's style in this chapter is also somewhat mythical. From ancient figures like Moses and Romulus to modern figures like Savonarola, they are undoubtedly typical figures with charisma. Savonarola's own experiences can serve as a prime example of charismatic domination, affirming his power or mission to the dominated, as discussed by Weber. However, precisely because this chapter is replete with the highest level of examples, it raises questions about whether the structure of charisma still exists in a more realistic analysis of the text. Hence, we need to examine typical new princes, represented by Borgia.

Due to the complexity of the concept of charisma itself, we cannot definitively determine whether the basis of the new prince's domination is some form of charismatic legitimacy, but we can identify some elements of charisma in these typical new princes. For example, new princes clearly possess qualities that go beyond the ordinary, with extraordinary qualities, according to Machiavellian terminology, that allow them to confront *fortuna* with great *virtu*. More evidently, as mentioned in the fifteenth chapter, princes should be able to do what ordinary people cannot. Possessing a kind of political morality that ordinary people lack, this kind of transcendence of the everyday is undoubtedly unique. Their *virtu* may not bring about a sense of moral appeal, but it is sufficient to generate fear, awe, and terror, which is enough to maintain their rule. Their *virtu* is visible largely because their rule lacks intermediaries, and the princes themselves as individuals can be seen by various observers.

But unlike charismatic figures like prophets, these new princes do not have clear goals, tasks, or missions. Instead, they may have a strong and “natural” desire for acquisition (or the calling mentioned in chapter 26), but it is not universal. Moreover, the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of their charismatic position are rather unclear. Their charm obviously does not disappear completely after one failure, nor is it solidified after one success. They seem to need to continually challenge and overwhelm *fortuna* in a series of bold actions, to refresh the impressions they leave on others, whether good or bad but never mediocre (charisma, as discussed in chapter twenty-four, is more focused on present actions; Pocock even uses the term “charisma” when discussing this) [8]. Maintaining their charismatic position seems to depend on their accumulating enough power while continuously and conspicuously acting, in an offensive rather than defensive mode.

Of course, Machiavelli acknowledges that even without charisma, one can be a decent prince. But for these new princes whose positions are not yet secure, valor and continuous aggression are a better choice. According to *The Prince*, these new princes can eventually stabilize their positions through such a strategy, and even achieve more stable rule than hereditary princes. This seems like a kind of success. However, the question that follows is, just as Weber extensively discusses, how can such

domination with charismatic elements be institutionalized, or more directly, how can it be inherited? Therefore, we return to the issues of the "short-term perspective" and sustainability.

4. Conclusion

If we compare Weber's theory of Charisma with Machiavelli's the most obvious difference is that there is no routinization of Charisma in *the Prince*, which is showcased by the fact that the issue of inheritance is largely overlooked in it. Machiavelli focuses on the first-generation entrepreneurs, but rarely mentions whether their ventures can be inherited. The most obvious problem is that *virtu* is so crucial for the prince, but obviously, *virtu* cannot be guaranteed to continue through generations. According to the most likely interpretation within the text, the second-generation inheritors would automatically become hereditary princes, thus inheriting the state relatively smoothly. However, even aside from the issue of generational transition, the stability of hereditary rule in *The Prince* is itself in doubt. Unlike traditional hereditary legitimacy in Weber's sense, hereditary rulers' stability in chapter two does not come from any divine bloodline, but is merely a matter of forgetting the original sin over time. Thus, it seems that the beginning of the rule in any prince's state is inherently sinful and lacks any sacredness. Consequently, even whether there exists a strictly legitimate authority in Weber's sense is questionable within this world, as everyone's motivations seem to be reduced to temporary interests, and they can turn against the people they serve at any time. However, in the sarcastic chapter on the church and Christianity, he seems to admit that religion indeed holds a kind of sacredness among the believers, but he himself is apparently not one of them. In chapter twenty-four, he explicitly mentions that many hereditary princes have been overthrown recently, so in any case, mere transformation into hereditary and tradition by time seems to be too simplistic, and maintaining the rule of a hereditary principality is not that simple.

Pocock's solution is rather straightforward; he directly claims that there is nothing within "The Prince" that could provide institutionalization and stability, it doesn't offer a long-term perspective. Therefore, people need to turn to *The Discourses* for a long-term perspective and solutions. Such an explanation arbitrarily assumes a hierarchy within the text and the author's intent and doesn't pay attention to the integrity of the text itself. According to his interpretation, we would have no way of understanding why Machiavelli wrote about such relevant topics so vaguely in two separate books, almost without giving any hints in this regard.

The twenty-sixth chapter is most likely to provide an answer to this problem. If the Medici family could unify Italy, they would undoubtedly have an utter shift in legitimacy, structure, or even ideology. They could use the power of patriotism, the traditions of Rome, and so on to address the issue of rule's sustainability. However, this would introduce a significant break before and after the text. If a new prince indeed unified Italy and became a ruler of a large-scale territorial state, he would inevitably require a vast administrative apparatus, and might even form a French-style aristocracy. But in the preceding twenty-five chapters, what Machiavelli teaches is a kind of direct rule and domination by a prince who is personally involved in a small-scale city state.

Furthermore, *The Prince*, aside from advising the Medici family, is a serious theoretical work, and Machiavelli analyses many other principalities that cannot unify Italy so they seem to have no way out. Maybe in the end, Machiavelli may not need to provide any real solutions to them. Without caring about stability, Machiavelli, in his ruthless and impartial analysis, probably doesn't care about the life or death of these non-Florentine city states, and let his world become a world where new princes just emerge and extinguish constantly. Or maybe, the book of *the Prince* itself can become a helping hand Machiavelli lends to new princes and their successors as a way of longevity and salvation, since it is a "mirror of the prince". But in this sense, every succeeding prince will need to learn to be a ruthless new prince that lives in insecurity, and there is no safehouse of traditional

legitimacy that they can return to or establish, since Machiavelli also alludes to the fact that even hereditary principalities are not as stable as he once claimed to be.

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