

THE RELEVANCE OF MACHIAVELLI TO MODERN POLITICS COMPARED TO THE VIEWS OF POLITICAL CULTURE OF MARX AND WEBER

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ABSTRACT

A political theorist, Niccolò Machiavelli, argues that a new prince must be willing to act immorally to ensure political control. In his magnum opus, The Prince, cruelty and the use of force effectively avoid anarchy. Machiavelli's political virtuosity offers hard truths of misguided ambition, corruption, and power that remain relevant today. Marx similarly discusses social struggle by arguing the existence of conflict between the ruling class (bourgeoisie), which controls production, and the working class (the proletariat), who provide labor to enable output. Through historical materialism, Marx suggests that political culture reflects an underlying culture of economic and social class conflict.

In contrast, Max Weber similarly contends the existence of an interplay between wealth, prestige, and power among the social classes. An idealist, Weber argues that the relationship between value, human action, and the role of Protestantism has led to the rise of capitalism and hard work. Weber associates the spirit of capitalism and Protestantism as a sign of God's blessing.

Keywords: Governance, Political Power, Authoritarianism, Capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Niccolò Machiavelli, Karl Marx, and Max Weber are seminal figures in the study of political theory, economics, and administrative science. Machiavelli, who wrote during the Renaissance in the 16th century, is best known for his work *The Prince*, which promotes a realistic approach to government rule. Karl Marx, a 19th-century political theorist, economist, and sociologist, is famous for his works, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867), involving his critique of capitalism from the perspective of class struggle and economic exploitation. Max Weber, a 20th-century sociologist, is best known for his analysis of legitimate authority, which he describes in his landmark book *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1921).

This paper explores the relationship between power, governance, and political thought through the lens of these three historical figures. Whether Machiavelli's ruling *virtu* of enduring antagonism, Marx's conflict among the ruling and working classes, or Weber's description of the Protestant work ethic as God's blessing for salvation, man can be cruel and complicated.

RELEVANCE OF MACHIAVELLI TO MODERN POLITICS

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) was an author, historian, and philosopher who lived during The Renaissance. He has often been called a pioneer in political philosophy (Parel, 1972, p.

32). Machiavelli's perspective on political power is often described as ruthless and pragmatic. He argues that the ends justify the means, emphasizing the importance of reality over idealism (Machiavelli, 1903). In his political treatise, *The Prince* (1513), Machiavelli argues that a prince must be willing to act immorally to ensure political control. To succeed, the Prince must establish what Machiavelli calls *virtu* and *fortuna* (virtue and fortune). However, unlike the English definition of virtue, meaning "morally good behavior or character" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), Machiavelli's *virtu* means "enduring antagonism" (Harrison, 2011, p. 5). As a political theorist, Machiavelli emphasizes that a prince must be prepared to use immoral behavior, such as dishonesty and killing, to maintain rule. (Machiavelli, 1903). Machiavelli argues that because of the self-centered nature of man, "it is better for a prince to be feared than loved, because love is fickle, while fear is constant" (Harrison, 2011, p. 4).

The Prince is commonly interpreted as promoting ruthless and oppressive rule. Having little faith in the goodness of people, Machiavelli contends that it is acceptable to engage in harsh political rule to avoid anarchy (Cosans & Reina, 2018). Giorgini (2004) interprets this to mean a ruler is forced to "damn his own soul in order to save the State" (p. 2). Considering the extent to which Machiavelli promotes political brutality, Hamilton (2017) concludes that Machiavelli believes that governing is above the law.

In the *Discourses on Livi* (1517), Machiavelli discusses the greatness of Ancient Rome and its harsh political rule. He proposes returning to kingship rule, arguing that only a king can ensure obedience, even if it requires violence (Najemy, 2010).

No discussion of Machiavelli is complete without mentioning the influence of Cesare Borgia (1475-1507). Borgia was a cardinal of the Catholic Church. After conquering Romagna in central Italy, Borgia appointed Ramiro d'Orco as the local affairs minister. A military leader, d'Orco, was expected to bring peace and order to the region. To this end, Borgia had d'Orco cut into two pieces and placed in the piazza to intimidate the populace (Harrison 2011). Machiavelli rationalizes that leaders like Borgia must use cruelty because that is what people expect of a ruler. Leaders like d'Orco and Borgia embody Machiavelli's political virtuosity and offer hard truths of corruption and power that remain relevant today.

VIEWS OF POLITICAL CULTURE OF MARX AND WEBER

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German economist, sociologist, and political theorist. He is best known for his political treatise *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867–1883), arguing that societies develop through class conflict.

The capitalist political system, Marx argues, promotes conflict between the ruling class (bourgeoisie), who control production, and the working class (the proletariat), who provide labor to enable output (Marx & Engels, 1847). His theory of historical materialism suggests that improvements in production methods alter economic systems, changing social order and promoting conflict among societal classes. Marx describes this struggle in the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto* when he says, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels, 1847, p. 14).

Marx contends that the bourgeoisie are the wealthy leaders of industry (Marx, 1976). He argues that they are the descendants of the English feudal lords during medieval Europe who enslaved and ruled the working classes to control social order (Marx & 1976). Because he saw gross societal inequality, Marx proposed the need for a cooperative society where all community members receive products and services equally (Marx, 1976).

In capitalism and the free market economy, entrepreneurs produce goods and services for consumers based on supply and demand. Motivated by profits, entrepreneurs rely on the market's pricing system to determine the value of the products they produce. Depending on how successful they are at meeting the needs of their consumers, entrepreneurs expand, merge with other companies, or dissolve.

Marx argues that capitalism's competitive nature promotes social conflict and exploitation of the individual (Marx, 1976). Marx proposes that reducing capitalist conflict requires creating a society of free producers (Marx, 1976). Marx emphasizes that social and economic freedom can only be realized through a socialist society (Tucker, 1978).

Marx proposes developing a socialist economic system composed of independent cooperatives that control property and production as an alternative to capitalism. Unlike the profit motive of capitalism, socialist economies produce products for social good. Rather than the market, the government determines production and distribution decisions through central economic planning. Through central planning, the state determines the output and pricing of all goods and services. Marx contends that, unlike capitalism, a centrally-directed economy benefits all members of society. Through historical materialism, rising class tensions lead to the destruction of capitalism and the creation of a classless and stateless communist society (Marx & Engels, 1847). In *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), Marx argues that communism forms an open association of producers who jointly share capital, land, and labor to achieve economic freedom (Marx, 1976).

Unlike Marx, who argues that class struggles lead to social tension and economic inequality, Max Weber (1864-1920) contends that religion plays a significant role in class and cultural economics. Weber, a German sociologist and political economist, is regarded as one of the most influential theorists in modern Western society. Rijks (2012) suggests that Weber is an idealist primarily interested in the relationship between value and human action.

In his landmark book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber theorizes that the origin of capitalism in the United States is grounded in the Protestant work ethic. According to Weber, Protestantism "nurture[s] stronger preferences for hard work and thriftiness had led to greater economic prosperity" (Basten & Betz, 2011, p. 7). Protestantism encourages self-reliance and limited government intervention in the economy (Basten & Betz, 2011).

Protestantism has encouraged the rise of capitalism by promoting hard work (Basten & Betz, 2011). Weber associates capitalism with hard work and prosperity, saying, "He who will not work shall not eat holds unconditionally for everyone" (Basten & Betz, 2011, p. 11). Therefore, Protestantism regarded work and wealth as a "sign of God's blessing...and surest means to attain certainty of salvation" (Basten & Betz, 2011, p. 11).

Marx argues that there are two social classes: the ruling class and the subject class. The difference between the two is that the ruling class has the privilege of property ownership, whereas the subject class does not. According to Marx, the ruling class's power is based on the ownership and exploitation of the subject class, which in turn promotes conflict. Marx describes this conflict as "two great hostile camps" (Marx & Engels, 1847, p. 15). Weber, in comparison, contends that there are four social classes in capitalist societies, including the semi-skilled working class, wealthy business owners (bourgeoisie), those who perform professional services, including managers and administrative workers (white-collar), and entrepreneurs (Giddens, 1971, p. 165).

Social classes, however, are different from status. Weber argues that class refers to "objective attributes of the market situation" (Giddens, 1971, p. 166), while status is associated with "social prestige or esteem" (Giddens, 1971, p. 166). Weber believes status is essential because it provides common interests among similar social groups (Giddens, 1971). Weber clarifies that while property ownership is a factor in class struggle, "unequal distribution of life chances" similarly contributes to competition for social power (Giddens, 1971, p. 165).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper explored the relationship between power, wealth, and social class through the lens of three very different historical figures. Whether Machiavelli's ruling *virtu* of enduring antagonism, Marx's conflict between the ruling and working classes, or Weber's idealism of the Protestant work ethic as God's blessing for salvation, man can be cruel and complicated.

Thomas Hobbes said man's life is naturally "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Because of his natural self-interests, man has a restless and perpetual thirst for power. Left unchecked, Hobbes warned that the purpose of man is to dominate others and demand their respect.

Based on his natural ways, man is incapable of self-rule. However, whether a cooperative society, the work ethic of capitalism, or the brute force of authoritarian rule, Hobbesian lessons of years past hold that effective government, whatever its form, must exist through a social contract of trust of the people to provide peace, prosperity, and security.

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