

Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli: A Comparison

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DAVID GARDNER, SEP 1 2010

In this paper I will compare the views of realism of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli. For Brown et al. (2002) "(it) is ... Machiavelli, who along with Hobbes, helped to generate the tradition of political realism." [1] In order to compare their views effectively I will first look at the different methods, which they employed, after which I will explain how this difference created the divergent view of human nature. It is this view, which underlies their belief of anarchy, a key realist assumption. I will tackle this aspect from two points of view: morality and self-interest.

The first comparison I feel relevant between Hobbes and Machiavelli is the difference in methods employed by each of these realists. Firstly, Hobbes was a scholar, whose aim was to put politics onto a scientific footing; he therefore employed a strict logical approach to his work. In contrast, Machiavelli was a man of action; he worked, primarily, as a civil servant of the Florentine Republic. He drew conclusions, having made observations of how people actually behaved rather than the way they ought to behave in a hypothetical and intangible world. It is this difference in methodology, which ultimately underlies the differences in political beliefs of these two people.

Hobbes' work was designed to make the analysis of politics more scientific, he believed that if politics was analysed from a scientific perspective one would be able to draw conclusions, which could ultimately lead to the creation of an enduring state of peace. Hobbes' view of science is more prominent in *de Corpore*, than his more frequently quoted *Leviathan*. In *de Corpore*, Hobbes presents his views on philosophical method, mathematics, geometry, physics, and human nature. In his own opinion, the views in *de Corpore* represented the foundational principles of his entire philosophical system and, therefore, of his "science of politics".

Although Hobbes did not consistently describe his philosophical methodology, most scholars agree that he used a "resolutive-compositive" method. [2] According to this method, one comes to understand a given object of inquiry by intellectually "resolving" it into its essential parts and then subsequently "composing" it back into a whole. In this way, Hobbes argued that societies and politics should be analysed at different levels. He first reduced the commonwealth into parts, such as human beings, and then reduced humans further to 'the motions of natural bodies', before taking this to the ultimate hypothetical level of reducing this to the 'state of nature'. After such a resolution, Hobbes recomposed the commonwealth from the abstract investigation of human nature, to the study of human bodies, to finally the examination of political bodies. It is this reductionist methodology, which shows why Hobbes placed so much emphasis on the importance of human nature, which I will discuss later.

In contrast, to this logically structured scientific method, Machiavelli was a practical man: he observed people for what they were and the way they actually behaved rather than creating a hypothetical position in order to explain reality. In both *The Prince* and *Discourses*, Machiavelli tried to draw conclusions from factual observations of what people actually did; the empirical or inductive method. For Walle (2001) Machiavelli, above all else, was a humanistic empiricist who, instead of making unwarranted assumptions about human behaviour, applied the empirical method combined with a humanistic vision in order to analyse people and their actions on their own terms. [3] Machiavelli believed that empirical descriptive study was crucial, and normative conclusions followed straightforwardly.

It was practical observation, from which Machiavelli drew conclusions about human nature. He analysed the way in

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which many people acted, and looked for the common trait in man in order to draw conclusions about human nature. From this Machiavelli asserts that a number of traits are inherent in human nature. Machiavelli agrees with Hobbes to some extent that people are generally self-interested, although their affection for others can be won and lost. They may be trustworthy in prosperous times, but they will quickly turn selfish, deceitful, and profit-driven in times of adversity. Such statements about human nature are often offered up as justifications for the book's advice to princes. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* for the Medici family during the upheaval of the Italian Wars, events that helped to explain his low esteem for human nature. To Machiavelli, humans were "ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, (and) covetous." Machiavelli argued that man had the ability to be good, but he was only good when it was in his own self-interest to do so. My understanding is that Machiavelli realised that men tended to fall into evil. Hobbes' idea of human nature was consummate with Machiavelli's, but, since he was writing in the wake of civil war, he placed more emphasis on man being inherently brutal.

Hobbes, writing *Leviathan* after the turmoil of civil war and unsuccessful attempts at republicanism in England, held an even lower estimation of human nature than Machiavelli. To Hobbes, "(i)f any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies." [4] He argued that individuals living in a state of nature were constantly at war, did not know right from wrong, and lived lives that were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". [5] As a result of his reductionist method, where he took societal analysis to the point of human nature, he concluded with a key realist assumption: anarchy. In this state, each person has a natural right to protect himself from harm or injury.

Thus, Hobbes argues that there are fundamental laws of nature which are necessary to avoid the state of war. Machiavelli does not ruminate to a hypothetical state of nature in the same way as Hobbes. However, he does argue that there is "no hidden hand which brings all ... human activities (into) natural harmony," [6] dismissing the liberal notion of inherent peace.

Due to word constraints, it is not possible to discuss fully the diverging views on governance. However, I will look at this from two intertwined aspects: self-interest and morality. For Hobbes, it was wondering how a society would function without rules. Hobbes felt that people would simply be acting in their own self-interest, and would go to any extreme to meet that end. Another area of contrast in regards to life in the state of nature is about how we should act. For this reason Hobbes makes very bold claims that sound amoral. "To this war of every man against every man ... this also is consequent: nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have no place." [7] According to Hobbes, life is not immoral, but amoral in a state of nature. He further argues that in the state of nature we each have a right to all things, "even to one another's body". [8] Therefore, killing someone, in a state of nature, would be exactly the same as letting someone live. The reason is being anything is permissible, when there is no government to tell people how to conduct themselves, according to Hobbes.

In the view that all men are predisposed to violent action, and naturally achieve a warlike state, Hobbes believed that order must be imposed from above in order to prevent the destruction of man in an anarchic society. In a slightly more pessimistic way than Machiavelli, he sees that the only hope for society is to be ruled by a sovereign power. Hobbes argued that there is no predisposition towards order in man, so no assumptions can be made as to good will, and man is naturally at the lowest possible level of morality. He will kill in order not to be killed, and will suspect all others of trying to take his life. Ultimately, Hobbes believes that man inherently has no morality.

In contrast, when examining Machiavelli's various concepts in depth, one can conclude that perhaps his suggested violence and evil is fuelled by a moral end of sorts. Previous political writing, had focussed on rulers following the higher law of what should be, rather than what really is. In Machiavelli's view, rulers disobeyed convention in order to retain power, and men were naturally vicious creatures that did not wilfully conform to reason. Machiavelli argued that the Prince must be ruthless for no man can ultimately be trusted. Division among the people leads to a weaker state, and the weaker state will be eventually devoured by a stronger one. In that the Prince is the one figurehead of the state; his interests to keep power and order are directly tied to the interests of the state and the welfare of his citizens.

Machiavelli argued that because the Prince's interests are the foremost of the state, he may do anything in order to maintain power, to prevent disorder in the state. This is his reason for the amoral conduct of the Prince. It is fair to

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note however, that it is a Prince's duty to state that gives him the power to do as is necessary, not personal gain or vanity. In removing personal intentions from view, in thinking for the state, the intentions of the Prince are not subject to moral examination as much as their outcome. Hampshire noted this in saying: "Machiavelli argued that it was irresponsible and morally wrong to apply to political action the moral standards that are appropriate to private life ... Machiavelli implied that morality in politics must be a consequentialist morality." [9]

The Prince must govern in the real world with men as they are, and not in some ideal world where men behave as they ought to. This is important to understand because so much of what Machiavelli recommends may seem to us today, in a different political context, to be shocking or immoral, but he sees it differently because he has seen what has happened to men who acted in a "virtuous" way, using the word in the sense in which we use it today. He has seen that these men were not successful. In summary, the Prince rules in world where man is not good, therefore he must to what is necessary in order to succeed.

Hobbes maintains that no one is secure and impenetrable in his anarchic system and people seek a greater standard of living, so he believes that people will be willing to give up their rights to do whatever they wish in favour of a moral system. However, there is no guarantee that if a person behaves morally others will do the same. As a result, people who practise morality, while others don't, in Hobbes opinion, will become easy prey. He does not believe that people will be forced by social convention to behave morally. He argues that it can be to a person's advantage to behave immorally while others act morally so it can't be expected of anyone to behave morally. He concludes that the only way to make society act in a moral manner is for a supreme governance to exist, which can enforce morality through "terror of punishment". In such a system, one could not be guaranteed of being able to get away with acting immorally; therefore it would be foolish for anyone to risk this as such. Therefore, in order to ensure their own preservation and survival in an anarchic system, Hobbes argues that people seek to form commonwealths, where people are forced to follow morality. Ultimately, Hobbes justifies morality on the basis that is promotes self-interest and survival.

In this paper I have compared and contrasted the views of political realism of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli. I have shown how they used different methodologies; resoultive-comositive and empirical methods, respectively. I have also highlighted the resulting similarities and differences in their views of human nature. This was logically followed by a discussion on their view on anarchy, a key realist assumption. After this I compared and contrasted their views on morality and self-governance. Ultimately, I have highlighted and discussed a few key differences in the work of Hobbes and Machiavelli. However, there are many more, which I have not discussed due to constraints of this word limit.

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[3] Walle , A. H. 'Machiavelli, humanistic empiricism and marketing research.' (*Management Decision* 39, Issue 5: 403 – 406).

[4] Hobbes, T. "Leviathan" Chapter 13.3

[5] Hobbes, T. "Leviathan" Chapter 13

[6] Berlin, I. (1971). "The Originality of Machiavelli." In H. Hardy and R. Hausheer (Eds.), "Isaiah Berlin: The Proper Study of Mankind." (London: Chatto and Windus. 1999. pp. 269-326).

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