

The Example of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's Prince

Siu-chun Sidney Chu

Abstract

The essay aims at examining the role of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's principles based on the Prince. Relying on the fortune that brought him to power, Cesare erred in his choice that led to his ultimate ruin. As the ancients often wrote about politics with covert meanings, Rousseau's assertion that Machiavelli used the same techniques seems to be valid after the careful examination of the Prince.

Keywords : The Prince, Machiavelli, Cesare Borgia

馬基維利君王論中 CESARE BORGIA 一例之評析

朱 紹 俊

摘 要

本文旨在探討馬基維利君王論中 CESARE BORGIA 一例所隱藏之意涵。CESARE 興於機運卻衰於謬策。馬基維利似藉 CESARE 化爲弦外之音，實爲「反諷」之佳構。

關鍵詞：君王論、馬基維利、Cesare Borgia

I 、 Introduction

This paper purports to examine the role of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's principles based on *The Prince*. Rousseau in *The Social Contract* asserts that Machiavelli's *The Prince* is the book of republicans, with a footnote on his claim that *The Prince* is a deceptive book (SC.bk3,6:88). In reading the Prince, we should thus take seriously Rousseau's assertion that Machiavelli had a self-interest in writing in a devious or deceptive manner with hidden intentions. In chapter seven of the Book, Machiavelli discusses "New Principalities That are Acquired by Others' Arms and Fortune". He presents Cesare Borgia as an exemplary instance of which "I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of his actions" (P.7:26-27). As many commentators, like Pocock, apply the virtue-fortune criterion, it defines Cesare's position as that of one among a number of ideal types, all located along a spectrum of degrees to which virtue is independent of fortune. The legislator's virtue endows him with almost complete independence, but in Cesare we see combined the maximum virtue with the maximum dependence on fortune (Pocock, 1975:173). The essay is going to consider more precisely the possibility that Machiavelli's choice of his fascinated figure- Cesare Borgia- is in itself enough to make manifest his hidden intention.

II 、 Strategic Style: The Example of Cesare Borgia

Machiavelli views human virtue as associated with the ability to control fortune. For instance, if fortune “had been diked by suitable virtue”, war would not have had as serious effect in Italy, or might not have occurred there at all (P.25:99). The two principal types of “new princes” are those who rise to power through “virtue and their own arms” (P.6) or through “fortune and the arms of others” (P.7). Virtue, then, concerns the ability of human prudence, will, and action to control the effects of human nature and history. Since virtue and fortune are not mutually exclusive terms, the amount of luck a man has bears no necessary relation to his personal abilities. It is therefore possible to consider the case of a man unusually indebted to fortune while possessing unusual ability with which to counteract his dependence.

Chapter six makes clear that the highest and most praiseworthy princes gain power through virtue and their own arms, as did Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus. As a result, Cesare would seem to be the highest exemplar of the wrong kind of prince. From the structure of the argument, one might presume that his “example” will indicate something to avoid, not something to be imitated. At first, however, this seems not to be the case:

Cesare Borgia, called Duke Valentino by the vulgar, acquired his state through the fortune of his father [Pope Alexander VI] and lost it through the same, notwithstanding the fact that he made use of every deed and did all those things that should be done by a prudent and virtuous man to put his roots in the states that the arms and fortune of others had given him. (P.7:26-27)

The Example of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's Prince

After stating Cesare's deeds, Machiavelli adds that "the duke had laid very good foundations for his power" (P.7:29) and "he would soon have succeeded, if Alexander had lived" (P.7:30). As we first read chapter seven, it appears that Cesare failed because of events he could not have foreseen or prevented.

But if at the death of Alexander the duke had been healthy, everything would have been easy for him. And he told me, on the day that Julius II was created, that he had thought about what might happen when his father was dying, and had found a remedy for everything, except that he never thought that at his death he himself would also be on the point of dying. (P.7:32)

Fortune cannot always be controlled. Cesare's failure "was not his fault" (P.7:27), or so it would seem. In the next and last paragraph of the chapter, Machiavelli seemingly reinforces the view that Cesare could not have done otherwise and is thus a model to follow:

Thus, if I summed up all the actions of the duke, I would not know how to reproach him; on the contrary, it seems to me he should be put forward, as I have done, to be imitated by all those who have risen to empire through fortune and by the arms of others. (P.7:32)

The astute reader needs to remember that Cesare is called "the duke"; that he rose "to empire"; and above all that he is an example of coming to power "through fortune and by the arms of others". Only with these things in mind is one prepared for the end

of the chapter, for having just said “I would not know how to reproach” Cesare, Machiavelli concludes:

One could only indict him in the creation of Julius as pontiff, in which he made a bad choice; for, as was said, though he could not make a pope to suit himself, he could have kept anyone from being pope. (P.7:33)

And, after explaining in detail why Cesare should have blocked the election of Julius II, Machiavelli comes to the conclusion:

So the duke erred in this choice and it was the cause of his ultimate ruin.

The assertion is flat and uncompromising: Cesare made a mistake in “this choice”, and that mistake- not fortune beyond human control- “was the cause of his ultimate ruin”. After all, Machiavelli does realize something about the reasons for Cesare’s failure. One is thus encouraged to go back to the earlier statement that led the reader to believe that Cesare had no way of avoiding the election of Julius II. Machiavelli tells us that “he told me”; and that he “had found a remedy for everything” what might happen when his father was dying, “except that he never thought that at his death he himself would also be on the point of dying”. In other words, Cesare was either relying on his own last-minute intervention during the conclave to elect a successor to Alexander VI or had concluded that Giuliano delle Rovere, the future Julius II, need not be blocked. Either way, Cesare is twice described by Machiavelli as having made a “choice” and, by not preventing the election of an Italian “whom he had offended”,

The Example of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's Prince

Cesare's failure was his own fault.

The "fortune" that brought Cesare to power was the ambition of his father, Pope Alexander VI.. Later Machiavelli describes Cesare as merely the "instrument" of his father; indeed, it was Alexander who "did all the things I discussed above in the actions of the duke" (P.11:46). Having always been dependent on his father, Cesare did not know enough to have made the correct choice. Furthermore, the parallels between the situation of Cesare Borgia in 1502-1503 and Lorenzo de' Medici in 1513-1519 are underscored by the concluding lines of the dedicatory letter to Lorenzo, in which Machiavelli expresses "my extreme desire that you arrive at the greatness that fortune and your other qualities promise you" (P.DL:4). Both Cesare and Lorenzo are examples of rulers who came to power through fortune; i.e., both are ultimately bad examples for anyone who wants to found a lasting state. Cesare is indeed an outstanding example of something the new prince should avoid.

III 、 The Praise of Cesare's "virtue"

The "example" of Cesare Borgia in chapter seven is complex. The specific deeds of Duke Valentino, which had generated his reputation as a totally unscrupulous and violent man, are not at issue for Machiavelli. The spirit and boldness to use force as a means to create a new regime are identical to the actions of the praiseworthy founders described in chapter six; without such actions, it is impossible to conquer fortune. While in this sense Cesare's actions illustrate political virtue that is the absence of the correlative goal of establishing "good laws". He illustrates the problem of treating fortune as a woman without also building "dikes and dams" against the flood.

To be an “entirely new prince”, Cesare Borgia would have had to come to power with his “own arms” and with “virtue”. His defect might be attributed to a lack of understanding on politics and his failure to establish an “entirely new principality”. These faults reflect Cesare’s dependence on his father and his failure to combine “good laws” with the use of force. It was reported that Alexander VI told the Venetian ambassador that he planned to have Cesare succeed him as pope: “I will see to it”, Alexander is reputed to have said, “that one day the Papacy shall belong either to him or to you [the Venetian ambassador]”. Is Machiavelli’s praise of Cesare due to Duke Valentino’s secret goal of killing his father and becoming pope himself, with the aim of secularizing the states controlled by the Church and annihilating the papacy? If so, Machiavelli’s subtle criticism of Cesare might concern the way the plan was bungled. We should note that Alexander’s plans contradict Machiavelli’s own judgment that Cesare needed to ensure that his father’s successor was a Spaniard or, if that were impossible, the French Cardinal of Rouen(P.7:33). John T. Scott and Vickie Sullivan (1994) have considered the possibility that Machiavelli’s discussion of Cesare is intended to teach the need for action of precisely this nature, combining patricide with the destruction of the Church as a secular power.

The true founders, deserving of the highest praise, combine both force and law. Moses, Romulus, Cyrus, and Theseus were all willing to kill or deceive if need be, but the result was a lasting regime. Only such leaders are “great men” who provide the “greatest examples” (P.6:22). Such founders, like “armed prophets”, not only “remain powerful, secure, honored, and prosperous”, but they are “held in veneration” (P.6:24-25). The discussion of Cesare Borgia in chapter seven can only be understood in the context of the praise of Moses, Romulus, Cyrus, and Theseus in the preceding

The Example of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's Prince

chapter-and Cesare's failure to succeed in creating a new order equivalent to the Mosaic Law or the Roman republic.

IV 、 Conclusion

According to the foregoing account of the role of Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli's principles based on *The Prince*, there are several concluding remarks as follows:

- 1 、 Machiavelli reminds his readers that the ancients wrote about politics with covert meanings; as soon as his works are carefully read, Rousseau's assertion that Machiavelli used the same techniques becomes evident.
- 2 、 Relying on the fortune that brought him to power, Cesare failed to make the correct choice which caused his own defeat.
- 3 、 Cesare Borgia was in the same situation as Lorenzo de' Medici. *The Prince* is dedicated to a close relative of the pope; and it was the pope, Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici), who had designs to use Lorenzo to establish a central Italian state.
- 4 、 The outcomes or results of a political leader's actions-not his goals or aims-are the only reasonable criterion for judging him.
- 5 、 Machiavelli could be highly ironic when he says "I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of his actions" (P.7:27). Cesare is indeed a good example of something the new prince should avoid.

Reflection on Machiavelli's account of human leadership leads one to wonder. He speaks of the need to "pick" modes of behavior, but this advice to actual or potential leaders is needed because, most of the time, humans do not effectively choose what they

do. If Machiavelli's theory has had a persistent fascination, it is because the erroneous choices of leaders, symbolized by Cesare Borgia's mistake (P.7:33), remind us of this fact. If you doubt it, read the newspaper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A 、Primary Sources

Machiavelli, Niccolo

P: The Prince. tran. Harvey C. Mansfield. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques

SC: Social Contract. ed. Roger D. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.

B 、Secondary Literature

Pocock, J.G.A.

1975 The Machiavellian Moment. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.

Scott, John T. and Vickie Sullivan

1994 "Patricide and the Plot of The Prince: Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli's Italy", American Political Science Review 88: 887-900.