

---

# The Study on the Thought of Realism in International Relations Contained in *The Prince*

**Baisong Wang**

Law School of Shandong University of Technology, Zibo Shandong, 255049, China  
wanggreatpine@163.com

**Abstract:** Realism is a paradigm of international relations theories. For this paradigm, the earliest modern argument in history can be traced back to *The Prince* written by Niccolo Machiavelli in the Renaissance. In this book, he put forward many thoughts of realism in international relations such as theory of evil humanity, supremacy of national interests, power politics, diplomatic trickery and etc. These thoughts have been recognized as the origin of realism of Western international relations, so we should have a deep understanding of them to further study Western realism and foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Niccolo Machiavelli; Realism; Power politics; Diplomatic trickery

*The Prince* written by Niccolo Machiavelli in 1513 was his theoretical summary of centuries of political practice and radical reform in Florence and his own experience in politics. In this book, Machiavelli could get rid of the shackles of moral and theoretical norms and began to summarize the reasons for the gains and losses of state power based on people's experience.<sup>[1]</sup> Correctly speaking, the research of political science has regarded power as the research object, starting point and ultimate goal after the pamphlet. Inspired by Thucydides' parity thought, Machiavelli proposed the thought of international relations such as the theory of evil humanity, supremacy of national interests, power politics and diplomatic trickery in *The Prince*. Therefore, based on studying deeply the thought of realism contained in *The Prince*, it is of great practical significance to grasp the essence of international relations and understand Western realism and foreign policy.

## 1. The main thoughts of realism in international relations contained in *The Prince*

### 1.1 Theory of evil humanity

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli put forward the theory of evil humanity, which has been recognized as a central thesis of realism. For him, the idea about the theory of good humanity is humane, but is absurd in the real political life. Machiavelli reinforces the conception that human nature is malicious and he regards humans as the most pernicious creature on the surface of the earth. "Men in general that are ungrateful, voluble, dissemblers, anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain; as long as you benefit them, they are entirely yours; they offer you their blood, their goods, their life, and their children, as I have before said, when the necessity is remote; but when it approaches, they revolt; but when it approaches, they revolt.<sup>[2]</sup> " Machiavelli could get rid of the shackles of moral and theoretical norms and first introduced the theory of human nature into the field of political science, which is a great progress in history. After *The Prince*, The theory of evil humanity has been accepted as a

---

fixed criterion to think about the international issues by the paradigm of realism.

According to the classical Marxist writers, human nature is the integration of various social relations, so the good or evil humanity should be understood in the context of the society, and the theory of human nature cannot be understood simply or abstractly as Machiavelli.

### 1.2 Theory of power politics

The concept of power is the key to understand international relations. For realism, power and security are the two important factors for all countries to formulate their foreign policies. Machiavelli thought about the question of power politics from the viewpoint of evil nature. For him, the essence of politics is power politics, or is the struggle for power. State power originates from human's pursuit of personal desire which is endless. The ruler must exercise power to keep everyone under his rule to stay in power. The fundamental problem of the state is domination, and politics is the struggle for power, so the ruler should aim at maintaining power. Machiavelli ignores the issue of the end of the state in extrapolitical (ethical, religious, cultural) terms. He assumes that power is an end in itself, and he confines his inquiries into the means that are best suited to acquire, retain, and expand power. Machiavelli thus separates power from morality, ethics, religion, and metaphysics, and sets up the state as an autonomous system of values independent of any other source<sup>[3]</sup>.

In order to maintain the dominance of the country, Machiavelli also pays special attention to the importance of military construction. He affirms that a strong military force is the prerequisite for national unity and prosperity. Meanwhile, it is the backup force for the prince to possess a good army to govern the country with good laws. A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is sole art that belongs to him who rules<sup>[4]</sup>. I conclude, therefore, that no principality is secure without having its own forces<sup>[5]</sup>. Machiavelli argues that the state should establish its own standing army and not use mercenaries or foreign reinforcements to defend the country. His idea of military construction is extremely far-sighted and in line with the interests of the new bourgeoisie and the people. Therefore, it has the progressive significance in history and has been the pioneer which advocates the establishment of modernized national army. Also, Machiavelli's views on power politics have been completely inherited and put into practice by the school of modern Western realism.

### 1.3 Theory of diplomatic trickery

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli puts forward a set of political foreign trickeries as the core of "Machiavellianism", including deceit and upholding the weak and against the strong. For Machiavelli, the prince should deny the relevance of morality in political affairs and hold that craft and deceit are justified in pursuing and maintaining political power. In a word, the end justifies the means in the arena of power. According to Machiavelli, power (the lion) and deception (the fox) are the two essential means for the conduct of foreign policy. "A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.<sup>[6]</sup>" So the prince must be the combination with both the lion and fox.

For the advantages and disadvantages and their results of aligning one state with others in international relations, Machiavelli puts forward the policy of upholding the weak and against

---

the strong. “It will always happen that the one who is not your friend will want you to remain neutral, and the one who is your friend will require you to declare yourself by taking arms. Irresolute princes, to avoid present dangers, usually follow the way of neutrality and are mostly ruined by it. But when the prince declares himself frankly in favor of ones side, if the one to whom you adhere conquers, even if he is powerful and you remain at his discretion, he is under an obligation to you and friendship has been established...but if your ally loses, you are sheltered by him, and so long as he can, he will assist you; you become the companion of a fortune which may rise again.<sup>[7]</sup>” To speak more correctly, Based on the core premise of national existence and national security, Machiavelli’s policy of balance of power should be in the national interest.

The policy of strength is at the heart of his diplomatic trickery. Machiavelli felt that a weak nation has no diplomacy in his long diplomatic career, which can only deepen his desire for the prosperous country and national independence. Thus, national strength can not only better guarantee the existence and security of the country, but also enable it to maintain the initiative in diplomacy.

## **2. The influence of *The Prince* on the development of Western realism**

### **2.1 Origin of realism of Western international relations**

The thought of realism contained in *The Prince* has been inherited by realists to varying degrees. Classical realism has two iconic figures, one is E. H. Carr with *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* in 1939, the other is Hans Morgenthau with *Politics among Nations* in 1948. To a greater extent, the two scholars inherited Machiavelli’s basic thought and analytical tradition about the state of nature, and put forward a series of important ideas of realism starting with the theory of evil humanity. For example, human nature is selfish, and the relationship between the state is a special kind of power relation etc. Thus, realists’ expressions on power and interest do not deviate from Machiavelli’s theoretical framework on the relationship between power and national interest.

### **2.2 Source of wisdom provided for the humanist scientific research methods of cotemporary realists**

Machiavelli gets rid of the shackles of feudal theology on the concept of state and writes *The Prince* empirically to draw out the natural law of the state from reason and experience. He pays more attention to the study of real political life to deduce the norms of political action. The humanist scientific research method contained in *The Prince* has provided the source of wisdom for contemporary realists. Therefore, a group of Western scholars pays more attention to rationality and advocates science on the basis of traditional research methods of international relations in the late 1970s. Focusing on state power and national interest, they start to make important revisions to classical realism and so form the school of neo-realism. Kenneth Waltz, a principal representative figure of neo-realism, published *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, which marks the emergence of neo-realism in Western international relations. For Waltz, states are power-seeking and security-conscious not because of human nature but rather because the structure of the international system compels them to be that way<sup>[8]</sup>. Neo-realists analyze the characteristics of power and international relations from a structure-function perspective, Synthesizes the research methods of traditional realism and scientific behaviorism, and absorbs properly some

---

research methods of natural science. So neo-realists, who pursue rationality and scientific spirit, are inseparable from Machiavelli's humanistic research spirit.

### **3. The influence of *The Prince* on the realistic foreign policies of Western countries**

#### **3.1 Immoral diplomacy applied in foreign policies**

As long as nation-state exists, national interests should be the criterion for their diplomatic actions. The thought of realism such as national interest and power interest contained in *The Prince*, in particular, "Machiavellianism", has its own reason as the diplomatic principle. The strategic thought of balance of power in international relations, to some extent, is the inevitable result of the application of "Machiavellianism" in the field of Western diplomatic strategy. For Stanley Hoffmann, balance of power is an art of power that emphasizes the use of nonviolence to maintain intentional tensions, so it is the art of showing not using force<sup>[9]</sup>. However, the balance of power strategy refers to strategic means and methods used to maintain (or break) the balance of international relations. In the history of international relations, the balance of power strategy has bundled many outstanding Western thinkers, diplomats and politicians. Metternich, a well-known Austrian diplomat, was a scheming and mercurial man who used diplomacy at the expense of others. Bismarck, a iron-fisted prime minister, used all kinds of despicable means to reap the benefits of Germany's continental policy to ensure its hegemony in the European continent. The British parity diplomacy is no different. The motto on "not always the enemies, no permanent friends and only permanent interests" has been accepted by British diplomats in the later nineteenth century. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the two great American masters of parity, inherited the mantle of the balanced diplomacy of Metternich and Bismarck, interpreted the international strategy of the balance of great powers again and wrote a new chapter of parity theory under the new multi-polar international environment in the nuclear era. The trend of economic globalization and political multi-polarization has become more and more apparent, the connections between countries have been more closely and in addition to politics and military affairs, the economic and ethical issues have also become increasingly prominent since the end of the Cold War. So many new theories have emerged to explain them. However, the balance of power is still one of the principal models to maintain the stable international relations, ...it is of positive significance to re-study the parity strategy under the new situation<sup>[10]</sup>.

#### **3.2 Influence on the realistic foreign policies of Contemporary Western great powers**

Its influence on the history in Europe and the world has been immeasurable since the publication of *The Prince*. In history, many European emperors, politicians and diplomats, to some extent, have absorbed the essence of world governance from Machiavelli's political thought, but Machiavelli's political theory has been embezzled, transformed and used by the reactionary ruling class in practice. For example, Mussolini and Hitler, the two fascist leaders, regarded Machiavelli's political theory as a treasure and distorted its basic principles, then put violence into practice, and eventually launched the world war, which brought endless disasters to the world. Based on Machiavelli's theory of realism, the later realists have thought more deeply about this kind of thought of realism which worships the power of extreme utility, and concluded that that egoism and power politics will be always throughout human history. In this case, international conflicts cannot be fundamentally resolved, but every state should control and reduce conflicts by adjusting its national interests appropriately.

---

Different countries' pursuits of their own national interests will inevitably lead to the continuous expansion of national power and even the outbreak of war. In order to avoid international conflicts and wars, every country should define its own national interest in light of the international reality of economic globalization and political multi-polarization, and oppose the formulation of zero-sum national interest policies.

Throughout the history of international relations, great powers have tended to expand their spheres of influence, but realists maintain that great powers should learn from history, make and adjust their foreign policies at any time based on their national interests, and oppose the overextended foreign policies that endanger national interests. Take the United States as an example, realists emphasize that the main purpose of diplomacy is to safeguard peace. The starting point of American diplomacy should be national interests rather than abstract moral principles, and the principle of balance of power should be used to guide diplomatic practice. Therefore, it is often the realist scholars who oppose overseas expansion and get involved in other countries' civil wars for no reason. During the Vietnam War, many contemporary realists represented by George Kennan believed that the war would not make the United States gain more, and the use of war means would certainly make it pay a high price, which was not worth the effort. On the issue of the Iraq War, professor John Mearsheimer who is a well-known master of offensive realism firmly opposed the United States to use force in Iraq, believing that the use of force to defeat Saddam was not desirable. He advocated a vigilant containment of Iraq and was against the preemptive strategy. In brief, we can see that the thought of realism contained in *The Prince* can find some traces in American realistic foreign policies from the above examples.

In *The Prince*, in fact, Machiavelli can be full of patriotic passion, face up to reality and demonstrate his valuable political thought profoundly, especially some insights on national interest, power politics and diplomatic trickery are still of great practical significance for today's in-depth study of Western realism and foreign policy.

## References

- [1] Datong Xu, *The History of Western Political Thought*[M]. Tianjin: Tianjin Education Press, 2006, 97.
- [2] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince* [M]. New York: Bantam Classics, 1984, 61.
- [3] William Ebenstein, Alan Ebenstein. *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the present*[M]. sixth edition, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2004.284-285.
- [4] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*[M].<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince14.htm>.
- [5] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*[M].<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince13.htm>.
- [6] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*[M].<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince18.htm>.
- [7] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince* [M].  
<http://maartens.home.xs4all.nl/philosophy/machiavelli/prince/chatper21.html>.
- [8] Robert Jackson, Georg Sorensen. *Introduction to International Relations*[M]. revised

---

and expanded edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003,51.

[9]Shi Xiong, *Theory of Contemporary Western Strategy*[M]. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1989, 73-74.

[10] Aifen Xing. *International Relations Theories Influencing the World Situation* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2001,138.