

Evaluating Historical Figures in the Context of Specific Background

-- Taking Columbus and Machiavelli as examples

Yang Xiao

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu 610100, China

Abstract: Columbus and Machiavelli are important historical figures in the history of the West and global figures who have had an impact on the world. The former is known for the discovery of the New World. What people say about him is actually what they say about his contributions. While some scholars find that he not only contributed considerably to the entire Old World, but also played a significant role in destroying the New World. Machiavelli has always been criticized as a symbol of using power tactics, and the Machiavellian that derives from him is disliked by people, but there are also those who regard his ideas as classics. This paper will briefly outline their merits and demerits as well as give the author's own assessment of them in the context of the times in which they lived so that we can evaluate them from a new perspective.

Keywords: Columbus, Machiavelli, Evaluation of Historical Figures.

1. A Brief Introduction to Christopher Columbus and His Navigation

1.1. Background

As a result of the Ottoman monopoly of trade between Europe and Asia in the 15th century, European monarchs desperately sought overseas sources of raw materials, and the Queen of Spain was one of these monarchs. In addition, Columbus loved to read Marco Polo's novel "The Travels of Marco Polo" from a young age, from which he learned that the Oriental countries like China and India were so rich that they were "covered with gold and full of spices^[3]". The wealth of the ancient Orient depicted in the book were what Columbus longed for, and he looked forward to forming a fleet of ships to bypass the Ottoman Empire and reach the place of his dreams. Columbus's dream and the Queen's need coincided, and with the general European belief in the Spherical Earth, he got support from from the Queen of Spain.

1.2. Merits and Demerits

Columbus's first voyage of exploration and voyage to the Americas is of great significance in the history of geographical development. Columbus and his crew reached two large islands in the east-central part of the Americas, namely, Cuba, Haiti and other small islands in the Indies, thus started the discovery of the New World. Columbus and his crew also opened a new route from Europe to the Americas and back safely, thus closely linking the Americas and Europe. In other words, he linked the Old World and the New World. He made a more detailed record and depiction of what he saw in the "West Indian region", so that people in the Old World had a preliminary knowledge and understanding of the area. The discovery of the New World has many political and economic significance, which the author will not mention one by one here, but we cannot only see the merits of the discovery of the New World. What cannot be ignored is that, for the colonized "New World", the colonists, in order to plunder the gold and other resources, disregarded their Catholic beliefs and ethics, and committed all kinds of crimes

in the Americas like looting and pillaging. They massacred large numbers of innocent Indians, for example, there were about 300,000 inhabitants in the pre-conquest Cuba island, but in 1548, they was no survivor, and the 250,000 inhabitants of the island of Spain, by 1542 there were only 200 left.^[4] It was only in the latter part of the colonial period that such horrendous massacres began to reduce. In order to obtain more gold, these colonialists, whose ambitions were constantly expanding, enslaved, mistreated and killed the Indians, and whose crimes, judging from the historical facts of the time, are too numerous to mention. In conclusion, the discovery of America by Columbus was a epoch-making event in world history, which brought about significant changes in world history and became an important turning point in the course of human history. It broke the primitive isolation of the Americas, expanding the space for human, and thus contributed to the formation of world history. In Chinese and foreign history field, historians have different views on Columbus' discovery of the America. When it comes to the "merits" of his discovery of America, most of them focus on his outstanding contributions to world history and mostly on its positive impact, which have already been mentioned above; for the "demerits" of this event, it is undoubtedly centred on the catastrophe brought by the European colonialists to the indigenous people of America.

2. A Brief Introduction to Machiavelli and His Book

2.1. Background

Machiavelli, was born in Florence-a federal state of Italy. He spent a relatively peaceful period here until he began to take part in politics. The first half of his life was in the golden age of Florence, the heyday of the Renaissance, and the second half of his life was in a time of war when countries such as France and Spain were jockeying for position in Italy. Florence also turned from prosperity to the Pope's capture, from a republic to a monarchy. Machiavelli lost all his positions and was thrown into prison in 1513.

2.2. People's Comments on Machiavelli

Machiavelli has been described as the Han Fei of the West, and Tang, S. J and Guo, Y. Y described his book *The Prince* as the “The Western Equivalent of Houheixue”.^[7] About 500 years ago, the Italian statesman and thinker Machiavelli wrote the classic work *The prince*. Since its publication, this book has been regarded as the must-read for European monarchs of all times, the supreme guide for politicians, and the principle of governance for the ruling class to consolidate rule. It is regarded as the most original and incisive dissection of the techniques of political struggle ever written by mankind, and its pessimistic view of human political relations has become an object of discussion in political field for 500 years. *The Prince* has been ranked by Western critics as one of the ten works that have influenced human history, along with the Bible and *Das Kapital*.

According to Leo Strauss, “Machiavelli’s work, *The prince*, make political philosophy break with the Greco-Roman tradition, and in particular with Aristotle, and it manifested an entirely new character.” Marx, K. and Engels, F. also noted that “Machiavelli’s views in his book drive the theoretical view of politics away from morality and make power as the basis of law, thus shifting the basis of political science from morality to power.”^[9] This is unprecedented in the history of human political thought.

At the same time, however, we have to face the fact that this classic work has always been accompanied by a mixed reputation, and the Machiavellianism that it inspired has become synonymous with the use of any means to achieve one’s goals. How should we understand Machiavelli and his book, and how should we view the influence of this work on future generations?

Many people consider Machiavelli to be a despicable politician who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals. Some of the classical political principles explained in his books have been reduced to synonyms of “means” and “conspiracy”, and Machiavellian ideas have evolved into the “Machiavellianism”, which deserves nothing but detestation. Shakespeare called him “Machiavelli the Barbarian”, and Marx saw him as a contemporary teacher of evil and a symbol of political power. Machiavelli was outspoken about the shortcomings of human nature. He openly declared that “it is impossible for a monarch, and especially for a new monarch, to observe all those rules which are supposed to be the duty of a good man; for in order to stay in power, he is often compelled by necessity to be perfidious, unkind, inhuman, and contrary to Divine Law.”

But Engels called it the “Great Renaissance”. According to Engels, “Machiavelli was a statesman, historical codifier, poet, and at the same time the first noteworthy modern military writer.” Bacon saw him as a pioneer of humanism. Machiavelli’s unflinching scalpel-like insights revealed the laws of survival of the land and gave a handbook on how to grow up to be a respectable king. During the Italian Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Machiavelli was known as “Machiavelli the Patriot”. Steven B. Smith also believes that Machiavelli is the founder of modern political science, whose modernity is characterized by the rejection of all traditions.^[2] Why so many people have praised Machiavelli? This question will be briefly analyzed later.

3. How to Evaluate Historical Figures?

From the above, we can find that different people have

different views on Columbus and Machiavelli, so did their merits outweigh their faults or their faults outweigh their merits? Zhan L. said, before evaluating a historical figure, we should first understand what the historical figure has done, that is to say, we should understand the deeds of the historical figure.^[10] When evaluating historical figures, first of all, we should adhere to the principle of historical evaluation, that is, we should evaluate historical figures in the light of the historical conditions and background at that time, and we should not hold historical figures to the standards of the present. Because, any historical figures are subject to certain historical conditions, and they should be put in a certain historical scope. Here the author want to say something about their merits and faults in the context of the times in which they lived.

4. Evaluating Them in the Context of Their Times

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, in Europe, Columbus and Magellan were trying to discover the true boundaries of the world, and Machiavelli was trying to find the truth about human life and politics. 16th century was called the “Iron Age” and was filled with bloody wars and brutal religious struggles between Catholics and Protestants. Three world-changing events occurred in Europe in the late Middle Ages: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and Columbus’s geographic discoveries, and they were not in isolation but inextricably linked.

The Renaissance reshaped the humanistic spirit of Europeans, so that Europeans gradually came out of the theocracy and began to pursue happiness in the present world, and they believed that they could realize their individual values by virtue of their personal struggles and endeavors, so Columbus’s geographical discovery was inspired by the spirit of the Renaissance. Columbus believed in and adhered to the spherical earth theory, and insisted on the truth that sailing to the west would enable him to reach the east.^[8] Additionally, merely expressing indignation at these ugly and inevitable historical phenomena in history will not solve the substantive problem. So we should also seriously examine the causes of this tragedy. Columbus is a representative figure in the period of primitive accumulation of capitalism, and what hid behind him was a group of people: new bourgeoisie who was eager to find more resource, and his actions reflected the will and interests of this new class. It was the law of economic development of the time that governed and manipulated the will and interests of the emerging bourgeoisie, and this was also the inevitable product of the historical development of the time. Even if Columbus had not discovered America in 1492, the next “Columbus” would have been nurtured by the times, and the rich America would have been exposed to the world. Therefore, it can be said that the unfortunate Indians at that time were the victims of the times. They were mercilessly crushed by the turning wheel of history. Again, from the point of view of historical development, Columbus’ discovery of America was of great progressive significance. It was from his time onwards that all countries and peoples of the world came out of their closed and isolated lands and opened themselves to the world, and exchanged information with each other. It changed the history of the Americas, the history of Europe, and even the history of the world. He dared to take the path that no one dared to take before him. His spirit of adventure, pioneering and belief in science fully embodied

the humanistic spirit of scientific experimentation and exploration that emerged during the Renaissance. It can be seen that the Renaissance had a strong influence on Columbus' navigation activities and the discovery of America.^[8] Put Columbus's voyage in the context of the Renaissance, we can find that Columbus' discovery of America occurred in the process of the European Renaissance and Columbus' great discoveries coincided with the spirit of the Renaissance^[6]. Columbus's discovery of the Americas is not a fortuitous historical event, but rather, it is an inevitable event of the development of the European history.

When Columbus discovered America, it was not only the Queen of Spain who rejoiced, but also the radical Christian missionaries. They are happy for a very simple reason: it is surprising that so many Indians on such a vast American continent do not believe in Jesus Christ. It is a vast market, and the Indians must be naturalized with Christianity. From 1500 A.D., all kinds of Christian churches in Europe have been organized to go to the Americas for missionary work, and the radical missionaries from Spain and Portugal disregarded the waves of the Atlantic Ocean, and they crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas one after another, and they risked their own lives to preach to the Indians with piety. Therefore, at that time, Columbus' voyage was inseparable from the social environment at that time.

Machiavelli's pessimistic views in his book must be understood by placing them in the context of the era that the author lived in and his experience. Firstly, the Renaissance movement shifted people's attention from focusing on God to man, and began to focus on the needs of the individual human being. Therefore, in this context, Machiavelli broke the restriction from theology and ethics, and he was the first person who propose the separation of politics and morality, paving the way for political science and jurisprudence to move towards independent disciplines, advocating the supremacy of the state, and making the power of the state as the basis of law. Secondly, Florence, in which Machiavelli spent the second half of his life, was in a time of division, with serious internal partisanship and powerful external enemies. Italy was divided into five states, Naples, Florence, the Republic of Venice and the Papal States, and a fragile balance was maintained between the five states. In the face of Italy's political, moral and religious crises, Machiavelli's works reveal a strong sense of patriotism, a strong desire to end the fragmentation of Italy and to build a strong, united country. This work was written at the most tragic time in Machiavelli's life, at that time, he was politically demoted, subjected to imprisonment, torture and exile. Machiavelli's book, when readers viewed in a historical context, and viewed out of a historical context, will have quite different feelings. At that time, Italy, as Zhuge Liang said in "Chu Shi Biao": "Today, the empire is still divided in three, and our very survival is threatened". There were strong enemies of France, Germany and Spain outside, and endless civil wars between various city-states and the Papal States inside. As Machiavelli writes bitterly at the end of his book, "Italy is now facing an unprecedented desperation, not only without a chief, but also without order, at the mercy of whippings, ravages, and suffering." Lastly, the question why Machiavelli is still praised by people has to do with the condition has mentioned above. Describing the dangers of mercenaries in Chapter 12 of the Prince^[5], Machiavelli deplores the current state of Italy: "The royal power is beginning to be rejected, while the pope has gained a greater strength in secular matters, and Italy has

been divided into more states." Meanwhile, with the continuing antagonism between the republic of the citizens and the state of the Church, mercenary leaders such as Alberigo da Cornio, Braccio became "masters of Italy". They were enjoying the political "dividends" brought by Italy's fragmentation". To solve this problem, in the last chapter of the Prince Machiavelli "counsels the liberation of Italy from the barbarians" and bluntly proposes that a new monarch should hold political power in Italy. This new monarch who could unite Italy could only be a secular monarch because "God does not do everything." Machiavelli also argue that only a secular monarch, free from religion, could gain the submission of all Italians in an Italy "much ravaged by foreign nations". The ideal new monarch must familiar with all the past and current experiences of the triumph, maintenance and collapse of political power, and even with all the political acts such as bribery, violence, deception and opinion manipulation^[1]. This ideal new monarch is a political actor who raises the banner of unity, and he is what Althusser calls (l'homme d'action). He endeavors to bring about a situation in order to be able to achieve the goal, rather than passively waiting for the right moment. So his words was born in a particular era and started from the point of view of solving the country's crisis. Machiavelli was simply speaking the truth that many people were afraid to speak, and his work was a product of a particular time.

5. Conclusion

When we try to know historical figures and judge their merits and demerits, we should not look at them from a one-sided perspective and we should both look at their contributions and faults. No one is perfect, everyone has merits and demerits, and we cannot entirely negate their values because they did something wrong. Columbus opened up a new route, connecting the New World with the Old World and rewriting human history. However, the opening of this route also brought the slave trade, which brought deep disasters to the colonized people. Machiavelli, as well as his book, and the Machiavellianism derived from his ideas, has been criticized as a symbol of power and recklessness to achieve one's aims. But his book needs to be seen in the context of specific conditions. Italy at the time did need such a man to wake up the tortured land. We need to focus on the main contributions of the historical figures while maintaining a dialectical point of view. In conclusion, the author believes that their contributions to history are greater than their faults.

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