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# The Past from the Present: Comments on the Social Construction of Machiavellianism

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**Abstract.** This article presents different meanings of the term Machiavellianism and posits a mechanism of social construction to explain these differences.

As with poetry and prose, the first conceptualizer of the term Machiavellianism was not its coiner nor the first to set down a description of what would become one of its meanings. As with Richard Christie (1970), the social psychologist who initially developed the psychological construct of Machiavellianism, one may find meanings and consistencies with one's own preconceived meanings in the writings of Machiavelli--viz., *The Prince* and *The Discourses*--but in much earlier writings--e.g., the *Arthashastra* and the *Chan ku'o Ts'e*--and in surmises about political behavior before recorded history as well. And not just among today's theorists--lay and formal epistemologists--but among those of any time in human history; one's present vantage point colors perceptions of the past, the seeming commonalities and divergencies alike.

Today, the Machiavellian concept and Machiavelli's writings are viewed as repositories of manipulation and evil--especially by the common observer who may have read fragments of a secondary source, less likely read portions of a primary text, and most likely heard views on the writings, Machiavelli himself, or the concept in social conversation or in entertainment vehicles, e.g., movies. This view is in stark contrast to the actual texts which clearly describe political issues, problems, strategies, and tactics and which express concerns for liberty and the rights and responsibilities of those who politically lead and follow. This view also contrasts with the man himself who was not a serial murderer, nor a ruler without mercy, nor a political magician or Rasputin, but a political bureaucrat and consultant with a checkered history of success. Yet this view remains, so that some of Shakespeare's most remembered characters--Cassius from *Julius Caesar*, Iago from *Othello*, Edmund from *King Lear*, and Richard III from the play of the same name--are frequently termed Machiavellian by avatars of literary criticism and interpretation.

An approach that resulted in products more in tune with the spirit of Machiavelli himself and his writings was Christie's research in developing the Mach IV and Mach V. The Mach IV and Mach V are psychological inventories that seem to assess a Machiavellianism concept comprising a cool, analytical approach to the opportunities and threats in social situations and an orientation towards task success, information processing, and self-defined goals. Christie's research also suggests that the behavior of the Machiavellian differs depending on whether the social situation at hand is loosely or highly structured. As opposed to the Machiavellian of Shakespeare's literary attenders, who is an amoral, merciless seeker of profit, Christie's Machiavellian has a specific cognitive style with behavior dependent on situation and may be moral, immoral, or amoral--morality is not relevant to the conceptualization.

A more recent psychological approach using the Mach IV (Shepperd and Socherman, 1997) posits a more negative ascription for the Machiavellian concept: one referring to people who are manipulative and domineering--so domineering that these people may find it very difficult to display or feign low ability in the effort to induce an opponent to reduce effort or lower one's guard. This psychological approach appears to misread some earlier reviews of the psychological constructs of Machiavellianism and domineering styles (e.g., Gurtman, 1992; Wilson et al, 1996), use a less psychometrically sound

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measure of Machiavellianism--the Mach IV instead of the Mach V--, and not address the ease with which both of these measures can be easily faked towards high or low Machiavellianism. However, if valid, it would seemingly be less adaptive than the approaches attributed to Shakespeare's characters, to Christie's psychological type, and by Machiavelli to the Prince.

The different social constructions of Machiavellianism subsume variants of an odd but common causal model--the present coloring the past. This model has been in vogue throughout the course of movements variously called postmodern, deconstructive, relativistic, and the like, and it typifies the concept of zeitgeist as a contaminator of historiography. The past's subversion by the present may be the true essence of Machiavellianism. (Christie, R., & Geis, F. (1970.) *Studies in Machiavellianism*. NY: Academic Press; Gurtman, M. B. (1992.) Trust, distrust, and interpersonal problems: A circumplex analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62, 989-1002; Machiavelli, N. (1940.) *The Prince and The Discourses*. NY: The Modern Library; Shepperd, J.A., & Socherman, R. E. (1997.) On the manipulative behavior of low Machiavellians: Feigning incompetence to "sandbag" an opponent. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1448-1459; Wilson, D.S., Near, D., & Miller, R.R. (1996.) Machiavellianism: A synthesis of the evolutionary and psychological literatures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 285-299.) (Keywords: Machiavellianism, Postmodernism, Typology.)