

The Machiavellian Pragmatism in Bacon's Essays: Power, Policy, and the Art of Survival

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Abstract—This paper examines the deep entanglement of Machiavellian political thought and Baconian pragmatism in Francis Bacon's Essays (1597, 1612, 1625). Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) lays out a blunt architecture of political power — cunning, concealment, self-preservation — as open doctrine. What Bacon does is subtler: he transplants much the same philosophy into the English moral essay, giving it a veneer of ethical respectability that the original never bothered with. Through close readings of 'Of Great Place,' 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation,' 'Of Cunning,' 'Of Negotiating,' and 'Of Faction,' this paper argues that Bacon's rhetoric of power is, at its core, a survival manual — and that its structural kinship with Machiavelli's instrumentalism runs deeper than most readers have acknowledged. The argument is situated within the intellectual contexts of Renaissance humanism, Tudor-Stuart statecraft, and the growing discourse of political realism in early modern Europe.

Index Terms—Francis Bacon, Niccolò Machiavelli, political realism, Renaissance essays, dissimulation, statecraft, pragmatism, power.

I. Introduction

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is an awkward figure in the literary canon — celebrated as the father of empirical method, the champion of inductive reasoning, yet also the author of prose saturated with the cold mechanics of power. His *Essays*, first published in 1597 and expanded through two subsequent editions, present themselves as ethical reflections on how to live well in the world. Read that way, they seem modest, even wise. But there is another way to read them — as a treatise on political survival, dressed up in the language of moral counsel.

This second reading is, frankly, more interesting. And it connects Bacon to a tradition most forcefully represented by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), whose name had become, by the late sixteenth century, a byword for political ruthlessness across England. 'Machiavell' haunted the Elizabethan stage — from Marlowe's chilling prologue in *The Jew of Malta* to the scheming villains of Jacobean tragedy — but the more serious engagement with Machiavellian ideas was quieter, happening in the minds of men who actually worked in government. Bacon, who served as a high officer of state under both Elizabeth I and James I, was surely among them.

This paper proceeds from a single core claim: that Bacon's *Essays* constitute not merely a literary exercise but something resembling a political manual, one that shares a structural and philosophical kinship with *The Prince*. The comparison is organised around three concerns that both texts return to repeatedly — the ethics of power and public office; the politics of dissimulation and cunning; and the practical art of negotiation and

faction management. The goal is not to reduce Bacon to a disciple of Machiavelli. It is, rather, to identify a shared political grammar — rooted in Renaissance realism and in the bitter experience of courtly life — that makes their two projects speak to each other across genre and language.

II. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The method here is essentially comparative, combining close reading with historicist contextualisation. Three intellectual traditions provide the scaffolding. First, the history of political ideas — particularly the tradition of reason-of-state (*ragion di stato*), as traced by Quentin Skinner in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978). Second, New Historicism, which treats literary texts as sites of ideological work embedded in specific structures of power. Third, rhetorical analysis — because both Bacon and Machiavelli are, above all else, strategic rhetoricians, and the forms they choose are not incidental to what they argue.

The primary texts are Bacon's *Essays* (1625 edition) and Machiavelli's *The Prince* (c.1513, published 1532). The comparative method is applied not to establish direct source influence — a question that scholarship has never fully resolved — but to trace homologous structures of thought. What did these two men, working in different languages and different centuries, independently arrive at? That is the question that animates the reading.

III. Bacon and Machiavelli: Historical and Intellectual Context

Any comparison of these two thinkers has to start by acknowledging how different their situations were. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a mirror-for-princes — an instructional text addressed to a specific ruler in a specific crisis, the fragmentation of the Italian city-states. Bacon wrote for a very different readership: the courtiers, gentlemen, and men of affairs navigating a centralised monarchical state. These are not the same political world.

And yet. Both men shared something that may matter more than their differences: both had been inside the machinery of power and had felt it break them. Machiavelli was imprisoned and tortured after the fall of the Florentine republic. Bacon was disgraced, fined, and stripped of office following his conviction for bribery in 1621. They wrote — at least in part — from the perspective of men who had lost. That vantage point produces a particular kind of clarity.

Machiavelli's works circulated in England during the sixteenth century, initially in manuscript and through Italian intermediaries. The first English translation of *The Prince* did not appear until 1640, but this scarcely means the ideas were inaccessible. Bacon read Italian fluently and had studied extensively at Grey's Inn; he moved in intellectual circles where continental political philosophy was well known. Markku Peltonen has argued, in *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought* (1995), that Baconian political thought is deeply indebted to civic humanist traditions that intersect significantly with the Florentine

strand represented by Machiavelli. Brian Vickers, in *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose* (1968), similarly observes affinities between Baconian aphorism and the pragmatic political wisdom of the Italian tradition.

What ultimately connects them most deeply, though, is an epistemological stance — a shared rejection of political idealism in favour of something harder-edged. Both men had little patience for theories of governance that described what rulers should be rather than what they actually are. Machiavelli put this plainly in Chapter XV of *The Prince*, where he declared his intention to concern himself with the effectual truth of things rather than their imaginary representation. Bacon's empiricist ethos moves in precisely the same direction. This shared realism is the deep grammar that links their projects.

IV. The Ethics of Power and Place: 'Of Great Place'

'Of Great Place' is perhaps the most overtly political of the Essays, and it repays close attention. The essay opens with a formulation that sounds like moral wisdom but is, on reflection, something more disquieting: 'Men in great place are thrice servants: servants of the sovereign or state, servants of fame, and servants of business.' This is a portrait of power as a form of entrapment. Authority, in Bacon's rendering, does not liberate — it multiplies obligations. The man at the top of the ladder has, paradoxically, the least freedom.

This insight runs through Machiavelli's analysis as well. The prince's position is never stable; it is a dynamic problem that must be continuously managed. What Bacon adds — and this is characteristic — is a set of precise tactical recommendations for anyone seeking or holding high office. His counsel to avoid undermining those who rank above you sounds, on the surface, like an ethical injunction. But the reasoning is strategic: such manoeuvres are dangerous, and danger is to be avoided. Similarly, when Bacon observes that 'it is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty,' he is making the Machiavellian point that power is always relational, always contingent — never an unconditional possession.

The treatment of reputation in 'Of Great Place' is worth dwelling on. Bacon counsels the man in power to be like a planet that holds its course without wavering — a metaphor that sounds like a commendation of moral steadfastness. But in context, what he is really recommending is the strategic management of consistency: the appearance of predictability, which generates trust, which is itself a form of power. This is not moral philosophy; it is political optics. The parallel in Machiavelli is direct. In Chapters XVII and XVIII of *The Prince*, the prince is advised to appear merciful, faithful, humane, and religious while retaining the flexibility to act otherwise when necessity demands it. Bacon's version — 'Severity breedeth fear, but roughness breedeth hate' — makes the same calculation in a different idiom.

V. Dissimulation, Cunning, and the Art of Concealment

If there is one essay that brings Bacon into direct philosophical proximity with Machiavelli, it is 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation.' Here Bacon offers a taxonomy of concealment — distinguishing between what

he calls 'closeness' (simply keeping quiet about one's affairs, which he regards as generally defensible), 'dissimulation in the negative' (denying what one is without actively claiming the opposite), and 'simulation in the affirmative' (actively impersonating what one is not). His treatment of these distinctions is not a condemnation; it is a calibration of risks.

The Machiavellian genealogy of this framework is unmistakable. Chapter XVIII of *The Prince* is explicit: a successful ruler must know how to use both the lion and the fox — force and cunning — and must be, in Machiavelli's blunt phrase, 'a great feigner and dissembler.' Bacon arrives at the same destination through a more carefully hedged route. He acknowledges that the best policy is a combination of openness in reputation, habitual reserve, dissimulation when the situation demands it, and — 'if there be no remedy' — outright feigning. That parenthetical phrase, 'if there be no remedy,' is worth pausing on. It is the realist's escape clause: the quiet acknowledgement that principle must yield to necessity. In that small phrase, Bacon and Machiavelli meet.

The companion essay 'Of Cunning' extends the analysis considerably. What Bacon provides here is, in effect, a practitioner's catalogue of tactical stratagems: timing requests to catch opponents off guard; using casual conversation to extract sensitive information; deploying what he calls 'cross-proposing' — the technique of offering two alternatives that both serve your interest; using intermediaries to deliver uncomfortable news while preserving your own good standing. This is the fox's intelligence that Machiavelli commends, translated into the social geometry of the Jacobean court.

A word about Bacon's moral register in these essays: he does not, openly, endorse cunning. He describes it as 'the crooked wisdom of the serpent' and suggests that honest ability is preferable where it suffices. But his very elaboration of cunning's techniques gives the reader a manual for their application, regardless of the hedging commentary. This double structure — descriptive on the surface, prescriptive in effect — is exactly the structural ambiguity of *The Prince*. Machiavelli's ostensible descriptivism, his claim merely to be recording what successful rulers do, functions simultaneously as prescription. Both writers have learned the art of teaching without appearing to teach.

VI. Negotiation, Faction, and the Management of Others

Two further essays illuminate the specifically interpersonal dimensions of Bacon's political pragmatism: 'Of Negotiating' and 'Of Faction.' Read together, they constitute a sophisticated guide to managing the human element of political life — the allies, rivals, and enemies without whose cooperation or neutralisation nothing gets done.

'Of Negotiating' offers a set of experience-derived maxims that have the feel of hard-won knowledge. Bacon's recommendation to prefer speech over letter in sensitive transactions — because face-to-face exchange allows one to read, and respond to, the other person's real reactions — reflects the intelligence of someone who has

sat across the table from powerful men and watched how much information they inadvertently give away. His counsel to know your counterpart's actual ends before proposing terms — their deep interests and fears, not merely their stated positions — is the kind of insight that cannot come from books. And his suggestion that high-status intermediaries are unreliable because they carry their own political weight into any transaction they handle is a piece of sophisticated institutional analysis.

The parallel in Machiavelli is most apparent in Chapters XXII and XXIII of *The Prince*, where the prince is counselled on how to identify reliable advisers, how to prevent flatterers from gaining access, and — crucially — how to use counsel without becoming dependent on it. Both thinkers are working from the same fundamental insight: that in political life, the management of information and human relationships is not a secondary concern but the actual substance of power.

'Of Faction' is in some respects the most sophisticated of the three essays under discussion here. Bacon's counsel on navigating political groupings is characteristically double-edged: factions are useful — they provide organised support and allow the political actor to leverage collective strength — but over-commitment to any single faction is dangerous, because it reduces freedom of manoeuvre and ties your fortunes too closely to a group's rise or fall. The advice is to cultivate the appearance of impartiality while pursuing advantage. One should avoid creating combinations of enemies; one should keep options open. This is the political equivalent of Machiavelli's counsel in Chapter XXI, where the prince is advised to be clearly identified as friend or enemy — never neutral — while simultaneously retaining the flexibility to shift alliances as circumstances change. The tension between these two pieces of advice — commitment on one hand, adaptability on the other — is, for both Bacon and Machiavelli, not a contradiction to be resolved but a permanent condition of political life to be managed.

VII. Fortune, Virtue, and the Art of Survival

One of Machiavelli's most distinctive contributions to political thought is his analysis of the relationship between *virtù* — the prince's active capacity to shape events — and *fortuna* — the contingent force of circumstance. In Chapter XXV of *The Prince*, he suggests that fortune governs roughly half of human affairs, but that *virtù* — courage, intelligence, adaptability — can master the other half. This dynamic, of individual agency operating within the constraints of contingency, is one that Bacon clearly found intellectually compelling.

'Of Fortune' moves in a precisely analogous direction. Bacon observes that fortunate men are characterised not by luck but by 'the observing of times and opportunities' — a practical intelligence that reads circumstances and acts decisively when the moment arrives. He quotes the saying that fortune is like a market: if you wait, prices will fall. This is presented as financial wisdom, but the deeper application is political.

Opportunities in political life have their seasons and their windows; the successful actor combines patience with decisiveness, who knows when to hold and when to strike.

'Of Adversity' develops the complementary theme: the capacity to survive and recover from political misfortune. Bacon's well-known maxim — 'Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; Adversity is the blessing of the New' — uses theological language to make a fundamentally pragmatic argument. Adversity builds the qualities — resilience, self-knowledge, strategic patience — that comfortable success never demands and never produces. This is, in effect, a theory of political survival, and it resonates very directly with the personal histories of both writers. Bacon was disgraced in 1621; Machiavelli was imprisoned and excluded from power after 1512. Neither of them is writing in the abstract about how the successful prince manages misfortune. They are, to some degree, writing from experience.

VIII. Critical Perspectives and Counterarguments

The reading proposed in this paper has not gone unchallenged, and the objections deserve serious consideration. Jerry Weinberger, in *Science, Faith, and Politics: Francis Bacon and the Utopian Roots of the Modern Age* (1985), argues that the pragmatic surface of the Essays conceals a fundamentally Christian humanist ethics incompatible with Machiavellian amorality. On this reading, Bacon's moral hedges and qualifications are not tactical camouflage but genuine intellectual commitments — real constraints on what he will and will not recommend.

This is a serious objection. It is true that Bacon never abandons the language of virtue and obligation, and that essays like 'Of Truth,' 'Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature,' and 'Of Envy' engage with ethical questions in ways that go beyond strategic calculation. It is also true that the essay form itself — with its roots in Montaigne's introspective, humanistic practice — imposes certain generic expectations that distinguish it from the political treatise.

And yet the critical tradition that reads the Essays primarily as a guide to political conduct has substantial grounding. As Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne have noted in their Cambridge edition of Bacon's political writings, his contemporary readers approached the Essays chiefly as practical guides rather than as philosophical or ethical meditations in any traditional sense. The social circulation of the text — among courtiers and men of affairs — tells us something important about what it was understood to be doing. Furthermore, the structural logic that this paper has been tracing holds even when full allowance is made for Bacon's different ethical register: in both the Essays and *The Prince*, the deep grammar is one of interest, calculation, and the careful management of appearances. The moral vocabulary does not contradict this logic; more often, it provides its cover.

IX. Conclusion

Bacon's Essays, read in the light of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, reveal themselves as something more complex and more interesting than a collection of moral aphorisms. They are, beneath their diplomatic surface, a sustained guide to political survival — encoded in the genre of the moral essay precisely because that genre allowed ideas too dangerous for direct statement to pass into circulation under the protection of apparent respectability.

The parallels traced in this paper — the pragmatic ethics of office in 'Of Great Place,' the calculated use of dissimulation, the tactical intelligence of negotiation, the navigation of faction, the art of surviving misfortune — point to a shared political grammar rooted in the Renaissance tradition of political realism. This grammar does not belong exclusively to Machiavelli, and Bacon did not simply copy it from *The Prince*. But both men arrived at it independently, through their own reading, experience, and disillusionment.

To acknowledge this is not to reduce Bacon to a Tudor Machiavellian or to flatten the genuine complexity of the Essays. Bacon's empiricism, his engagement with classical learning, and his real attentiveness to the moral texture of social experience give the Essays a range that goes well beyond the narrowly political. But the Machiavellian current runs deep in his thought, and to read the Essays without acknowledging it is to miss something central about how they work.

There is, finally, something quietly ironic about the form Bacon chose. The essay — ostensibly a space for private reflection and moral improvement — was itself the ideal vehicle for the kind of double-coded political counsel he wanted to offer. To embed a prince's manual in a gentleman's handbook: that, one might argue, is the most Machiavellian gesture of all.

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