



# The Rise of Machiavellian Realism in the Time of Covid-19

By Anton M. Pillay

**T**he theories of liberalism and realism have for approximately half a millennium provided those wanting to understand human behaviour with a 'lens' to view the world. Both of these theories translate superbly into theories

of International Relations, because the same rationality used to interpret or predict human behaviour can be applied to states.

At the most elemental understanding, liberalism presumes that humans are inherently good-

natured and seek to help each other. Realism, on the other hand, contends that individuals are egocentric and always search for their own benefit. This juxtaposition is framed in the ‘Hobbes vs Kant’ paradigm, which places the work of two prominent political philosophers against each other.

The German Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that idealism and morality ultimately shape human interaction, with the question of ‘what ought I to do?’ taking precedence. Kantian theory, also known as ‘deontological ethics’, translates into ‘goodwill is humanity’s duty’. In his most popular work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposed a moral law called the ‘categorical imperative’ — an unconditional obligation often known as the principle of universalizability or the ‘universal principle’. According to it, human interaction should be based on the world which one would hope to live in. That is, a person should treat other people as having intrinsic value, and not merely as a means to achieve one’s end.

The values and virtues of liberalism translated at the state level equivocate to the quest to establish patterns of rules, norms and procedures amongst states. The rationale is that bringing states together under an umbrella of laws and customs makes states more confident in complying with international rules. Kant thought that the civilized state depended upon the application of the rule of law to achieve a state of perpetual peace, not only within nation states but also between them (Kant, 1795). Thus, the liberal worldview emphasises that states should band together to induce the mutual benefits of cooperation via the techniques of free trade and capitalism as the path towards peace and prosperity (Lamy, 2001).

On the other side of the debate, realism appears to be the opposite of liberalism. The Englishman Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), in his books *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*, contended that man’s selfishness forces him to create laws. Without laws, man would experience a ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short life’. To Hobbes, each person must eventually rely on themselves, on their own strength and intelligence. Hobbes claimed that ‘the original of all great and lasting societies consisted not in the mutual goodwill men had towards each other, but in the mutual fear they had of each other’ (Robin, 2006). Hobbes argued that whatever people deem to be good, their self-preservation is the

---

**“If one sentence could summarise the Hobbes vs Kant debate it would be ‘the ends justifies the means’, with the realist focus on the ends and the liberalist focus on the means.”**

---

precondition for their pursuit of it.

State-level realism is summarised in the ‘three S’s’: Statism, Self-help and Survival. These three S’s all speak to the focus on the individual, selfishness, and self-preservation. To Hans Morgenthau, the contemporary architect of realism, the analogy of state behaviour to human nature is that states seek power and dominance at all costs.

If one sentence could summarise the Hobbes vs Kant debate it would be ‘the ends justifies the means’, with the realist focus on the ends and the liberalist focus on the means. In the centuries since both Hobbes and Kant have passed on, their two theories continue to compete, as states adopt one or the other in order to navigate the difficult waters of international affairs.

South Africa is a good example of a state which was formerly a key proponent of the liberal world order. Between 1994–2008, South Africa’s bold and assertive liberal vision commanded greater international respect and stature amongst states. South Africa backed up its vision not only with words but also with ‘duty’, becoming a respected peacemaker and conflict mediator, as many states recovering from war sought its guidance in the field of truth and reconciliation. In 2007, for example, it was listed as the UN’s 8<sup>th</sup> largest troop contributor (Landsberg and Kondlo, 2017). In Liberia, Burundi, the DRC and Sudan, South Africa led the way for credible peace and post-war reconstruction. Outside of Africa, South Africa played a pivotal role in the Lockerbie case, mediating in Northern Ireland and Timor Leste.

South Africa’s commitment to ‘duty’ and ‘goodwill’ is a stark contrast to the behaviour of states like Israel, Taiwan, Morocco, or Venezuela, who have always viewed their state as the ultimate actor in international relations. These states’ commitment to self-help and survival reveals an insular approach which is referred to as the

“ Within the chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virtues of liberalism are taking a metaphorical backseat in the greater scheme of the ‘Hobbes vs Kant’ debate. In fact, states which had previously strongly advocated for the liberal agenda are reverting to classical realism to navigate through our current crises.”

‘primacy of realpolitik’.

Within the chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virtues of liberalism are taking a metaphorical backseat in the greater scheme of the ‘Hobbes vs Kant’ debate. In fact, states which had previously strongly advocated for the liberal agenda are reverting to classical realism to navigate through our current crises. At both individual and state levels, the selfishness and greed which are tenets of realism have become shockingly clear. The spread of Covid-19 around the world brought fear, irrationality and the global phenomenon of ‘panic-buying’, with the ethos of ‘every man for himself’ demonstrated in the hoarding of hundreds of rolls of toilet paper.

In England, the football clubs Liverpool and Tottenham – which last year made a combined profit of \$160 million – furloughed many non-playing staff, while opting for a government job retention scheme which uses tax money to pay the furloughed workers 80% of their wages. The Beckham empire – with a combined fortune of \$420 million – looked to the government to pay 30 staff. South Africa, the world’s third-largest exporter of citrus fruits, saw many stores double the price of these fruits, though they were in season. The American company Amazon had face-masks going for \$0.04 in January 2020, but as of April 2020 had hiked this price up to \$11.25.

These are examples of the shameless profiteering that we have witnessed worldwide during this pandemic. The ethics and morality of capitalism have also been exposed. In Germany, the Neumünster Zoo announced that with disrupted supply chains and steep revenue declines, it was considering turning some of its residents into food. Virgin Atlantic, whose headquarters were purposely set up in a tax-haven, began to beg the UK government for bailouts. In China, African immigrants became the target of xenophobia,

with China seemingly looking for a scapegoat.

At the state level, countries immediately sealed off their borders as antagonisms and finger pointing increased in intensity. The situation became so evident that the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, King Abdullah II of Jordan, President Halimah Yacob of Singapore, President Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia and President Lenin Moreno of Ecuador co-wrote an article asking states to work together instead of leaving every country to fend for itself. Despite the wisdom behind this sentiment, this has not materialised. For example, on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, a Chinese cargo plane loaded with masks destined for Paris was rerouted to the US after the Americans paid triple the price that the French had paid. France was notably silent on the issue, given that they had also confiscated masks destined for the UK. In another case, a shipment of 200,000 Thai masks intended for Germany was diverted on the tarmac of Bangkok to the US at the last moment. This ‘modern piracy’ led Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to express concern that masks were being diverted from Canada. Likewise, Brazil’s Health Minister remarked that attempts by his government to buy masks from China were fruitless, given that the US had sent 23 cargo jets to that country. Similarly, Turkey banned the export of protective gear and reneged on foreign sales of masks already paid for. In the case of Kenya, 6 million masks bound for Germany vanished into thin air at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Even more deceptively, Italy received an invoice from China on 11<sup>th</sup> April for masks and supplies that the latter had previously ‘donated’.

Beyond the hoarding of protective gear, states are exhibiting anti-social and suspicious behaviour towards each other. Russian aid to Italy was declared by a top Italian newspaper as ‘useless’. In various Italian circles, the Russian army presence was denounced as a military intelligence operation. Kazakhstan, a major flour and wheat producer, halved the quantity of its normal exports and Vietnam, the world’s third largest rice exporter, suspended exports altogether. Serbia also moved to block the export of medicines and sunflower seed products. These export bans are more likely a way of reassessing contracts, with the aim of future massive price hikes. On 26<sup>th</sup> March, Mexico – which has long benefited from illegal immigration

– demanded that their side of the border should be closed to Americans. On April 10<sup>th</sup>, Mexico shut down an American factory for refusing to sell its hospitals ventilators which were being made on site.

Here in South Africa, the question of ventilators is also a cause for concern. According to sources in the Health Department, South Africa has approximately 6,000 ventilators. The South African Emergency Ventilator Project made an urgent appeal on humanitarian grounds to Penlon, a UK-based company, to share their blueprints for ventilator production. Penlon's response was direct: they had no time to be busy digging around for old schematics while they were trying to meet the demand of the British healthcare system.

The story of India, the US and hydroxychloroquine showcases the adage that 'in politics there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, but only permanent interests'. At around the time that many – including President Trump – were touting the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a remedy to fight Covid-19, India banned its export. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, the ban was overturned as Trump warned of 'retaliation' if India did not resume the export of the drug. This undiplomatically strong language was in stark contrast to the great friendship the two countries had displayed a little less than two months earlier, during Trump's visit to India.

All of the cited examples are textbook instances of the tactics theorised by the Italian diplomat Niccolo Machiavelli. Born in 1469 in Florence, Italy, Machiavelli is considered one of realism's founding fathers. His discourse on leadership and a reputation for evil and cruelty has garnered his work to be labelled as the 'handbook of realism'. His fame spread across Europe, with the phrase 'Old Nick' becoming an English term for the Devil.

Today, the adjective 'Machiavellianism' is given to the doctrine that the end justifies the means.

In such a theory, neither intentions nor ideals are important, except insofar as they allow persons or nations to reach their goals. The term represents a form of politics that is marked by cunning, duplicity, and bad faith.

In his famed work *The Prince* (banned by the Catholic Church and rumoured to have been brought into battle by Napoleon Bonaparte and read in bed by Adolf Hitler), Machiavelli recommends that state leaders must be cunning and at times cruel if they are to maintain power. More specifically, he contended that the safest option was to annihilate one's enemies and that abuses should be sudden and severe to make victims incapable of revenge. As an advisor to princes in the early 1500s, Machiavelli urged leaders to deploy deceit when necessary, and to not depend solely on moral values and ethics to influence their decisions. To Machiavelli, 'he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation'.

According to Kaplan, Machiavelli emancipated politics from theology and moral philosophy. He simply described what rulers actually did, and thus anticipated what was later called 'the scientific spirit', in which questions of good and bad are ignored, and the observer attempts to discover only what really happens (Kaplan, 2005).

In conclusion and going forward, Covid-19 speaks to the lack of disaster planning by many states. A growing trend globally is to look to China for help. China, however, is too busy exporting ventilators and protective gear to the Dollar, Euro and Pound economies. Similarly, it is only natural that companies seek profit in times of crises. They cannot be expected to take the altruistic road. Overall, states should take this moment in time as a lesson in naivety if they thought that the virtues of Western liberalism were coming to save them. ■

---

“Today, the adjective ‘Machiavellianism’ is given to the doctrine that the end justifies the means. In such a theory, neither intentions nor ideals are important, except insofar as they allow persons or nations to reach their goals. The term represents a form of politics that is marked by cunning, duplicity, and bad faith.”

---

#### References

- Kant, I. (1795). 'Perpetual Peace.' In *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, translated by T. Humphrey. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, pp.107–143.
- Kaplan, J. (2005). *Political Theory: The Classic Texts and Their Continuing Relevance*. Prince Frederick, Md: Recorded Books.
- Lamy, Steven L. (2001). 'Contemporary mainstream approaches: neo-realism and neo-liberalism.' In Baylis, John and Smith, Steve, (2001), *The Globalization of World Politics*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, p.189.
- Landsberg, C. and Kondlo, K. (2007). South Africa and the 'African Agenda'. *Policy: issues & actors*. Volume 20 (13). Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies. [online] Available at: [https://media.africaportal.org/documents/pia20\\_13.pdf](https://media.africaportal.org/documents/pia20_13.pdf)
- Robin, C. (2006). *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.