

THE ANGRY PEASANT: Deciphering the Trump Phenomenon

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In 1532, Machiavelli wrote these words regarding how a Prince might effect change in a newly conquered land: “For he who innovates [referring to government] will have for his enemies all those who are well off under the existing order of things, and only lukewarm supporters in those who might be better off under the new. This lukewarm temper arises partly from the fear of adversaries who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who will never admit the merit of anything new until they have seen it proved by the event. The result, however, is that whenever the enemies of change make an attack, they do so with all the zeal of partisans, while the others defend themselves feebly as to endanger both themselves and their cause.”

The assessment of the human dynamics in play when a new prince comes along is quite accurate if incomplete. Machiavelli explains that those who are well off under the old rule resist change vehemently. This makes sense because change – any change – threatens their position of comfort, power, and complacency. An alteration of existing conditions may not be a personal disaster, but it will diminish the status of the already successful.

The second group of people are those who are not so well off but are also not well-visioned enough to see that the future for them might be better should the changes be made. This is the “devil you know” condition in which a person accepts hardship and fails to pursue change because making the change will be hard in itself and the end result is not guaranteed; they might even be worse off.

Machiavelli, through no fault of his own, failed, however, to consider the third group: the angry peasant. In the angry peasant, fear of reprisal has been overcome by dissatisfaction with the ruler. In the angry peasant, dying is preferable to living under the existing conditions. Machiavelli’s failure to consider the angry peasant is understandable, for the lifespan of an angry peasant in 1532 was not long enough to make his position worth considering.

In America, however, our Constitution protects the angry peasant, if only up to a point. Trump, Cruz, Carson, Paul, Sanders, and a host of others have tapped into the swelling masses of the angry American peasant. Those who have become comfortable and complacent in the existing system are fighting hard to maintain their livelihoods and their powers. But in America, the angry peasant only becomes even more angry when the powerful resist their chosen saviour.

Trump has been able to stir the anger and fear more deeply than the others and leads the pack.

Machiavelli goes on: “But to get a clearer understanding of this part of our subject, we must look whether these innovators can stand alone, or whether they depend for aid upon others.”

It is this statement, almost a footnote in the original text, that clearly separates Trump from the others. Trump can stand alone. After all, as he has told us many times, he’s got lots of money.

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