**Important Political Theories**

**Aristotle *384 BC – 322 BC***

An ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle is revered as the father of political science, and thought deeply about who should have the power to rule. Aristotle was motivated by an interest in ethics, or proper conduct. This led him to an examination of many possible forms of government.

Aristotle categorized governments along two lines. One was how many people are involved in governing – one powerful ruler, a few upper-class aristocrats, or the mass of common people. The second was their motivation in making decisions. Ideal rulers care about the common good. Corrupt rulers care only about advancing their own selfish interests.

As a philosopher, Aristotle liked to consider ideal forms. The ideal form of government, he reasoned, was a monarchy led by a single, virtuous ruler. Aristotle also prided himself in being a realist. Rule by a single person, he knew from experience, could easily lead to the abuse of power. He admitted that “we should consider not only what form government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable by all.”

In the real world, Aristotle wrote, rule by the well-intentioned many would suit most societies. He called this kind of government a polity. In a polity, he argued, the best-qualified citizens, whether rich or poor, would dominate government.

**Niccolo Machiavelli *1469 – 1527***

An Italian political philosopher who rose to a high government position in the city of Florence was faced with the question of how the wealthy city could best defend itself against enemy attacks.

After leaving government, Machiavelli studied the question more deeply. He examined the behavior of leaders, good and bad. From this, he developed ideas about how best to win the power struggle game.

In his famous book, *The Prince*, Machiavelli described strategies that a prince, or ruler, could use to acquire power, create a strong state, and keep it safe from attack. In it he urged rulers to take a hard look at the world as it is, not as it ought to be. During his life, Italy was plagued by political corruption, mercenary armies, and backstabbing politicians. Given this reality, a prince could not afford to look to morality as their guide to action. As Machiavelli put it, “how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather bring about his own ruin than his preservation.”

To play the power struggle game, Machiavelli wrote, a ruler needed to be as smart as a fox and as strong as a lion.

As a player in this game, a prince had to be prepared to do whatever was necessary for the survival of their state. “in the actions of men, and especially of Princes,” Machiavelli wrote, “the end justifies the means.” He wrote that a prince must not hesitate to “destroy those who can and will injure him” and instill fear in others, even if this costs him the love of the people. “it is safer to be feared than loved.”

*The Prince* is still widely read today. Moreover, we often describe politicians who use cunning tricks and amoral tactics in the power struggle game as Machiavellian.

**Thomas Hobbes *1588 – 1679***

An English philosopher who developed the notion of a social contract between rulers and their subjects, he thought that people were too selfish to govern themselves and needed the protection of a strong ruler. He wrote, “All mankind [has] a perpetual and restless desire of power… that ceaseth only in death.”

Hobbes was the first to introduce the idea that government was the result of a social contract between people and their rulers. Hobbes theorized that people had once lived in a state of nature. This state was an imaginary time before any governments had been formed. People living in this mythical time were free to do as they pleased, without laws or other restraints. Because some people used their freedom to prey on others, however, the result was a war of “every man against every man,” For most people, Hobbes wrote, life in this time was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

To escape from this misery, Hobbes argued, people entered into a social contract. This contract obliged the people to give up some of their freedom by agreeing to obey an absolute ruler. In exchange for this pledge of obedience, the ruler agreed to bring peace and order to society. Hobbes did not promote democracy in his writing, but his social-contract theory did lay the groundwork for the idea that government was formed by the consent of the people.

**John Locke *1632 – 1704***

An English political theorist and philosopher whose ideas helped lay the foundations for democratic government. Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that people formed governments to protect their rights, not to save them from themselves. “The end [purpose] of law is not abolish or restrain,” he wrote, “but to preserve and enlarge freedom.”

Locke took the idea of a social contract between the people and their rulers a step further. Locke argued that in the state of nature, all people were equal and enjoyed certain natural rights, or rights that all people have by virtue of being human. These rights include the right to life, liberty, and to the ownership of property produced or gained through one’s own labors.

Locke agreed with Hobbes that it was in people’s self-interest to enter into a social contract that exchanged some of their freedom for the protection of government. He went on to argue that this social contract was provisional. If a ruler failed to protect the people’s life, liberty, and property, then the people had a right to overthrow that ruler and establish a new government.

The idea that the purpose of government was to protect the rights of the people exerted a powerful influence on colonial thinkers. Eventually this idea would be used to help justify the American Revolution.