

The Art of Deception: Learning to Speak One-Percent

Review of HBO TV Series "Succession" (Contains spoilers)

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"In ancient Rome, at one point, they wanted to make all the slaves wear something so they could identify them. Like a cloak or whatever. But then they decided not to do it. And do you know why? Hmm? Because they realized if all the slaves dressed the same, they would see how many of them there were, and they'd rise up and kill their masters. But the point is, if-if we wanna survive, you and I, then... we need a hell of a lot of little folks running around shitting us data, you know, for the eyeballs, for the revenue, for the scale." ([Succession](#) S03 E09)

Introduction

The popular series *Succession* is nearing its final episodes as the battle for control of a conglomerate heats up. The story centres around an ageing father and his children who are in a battle for succession. The series is well made with sharp dialogue that demonstrates the ruthless attitudes of the Roy family. The use of deception in their struggle for power is straight out of the Sun Tzu and Machiavelli playbooks of old. However, differences arise over who should have access to these playbooks when we examine the political ideas and philosophy of Leo Strauss who has a very different perspective on what the public should know and not know.

"Tom: Greg, this is not fucking Charles Dickens world, okay? You don't go around talking about principles. We're all trying to do the right thing, of course we are. But come on, man! Man the fuck up!" ([Succession](#) S02 E02)

Succession

Succession is into its fourth and final season now and has proved to be a very successful

series showing the life of a billionaire family in the USA. The family is headed up by Logan Roy (“king”) who is aging but cannot decide which of his offspring he wants to take over his position in the company.

Image: Brian Denis Cox in 2016 who [plays](#) Logan Roy



Three of Logan’s children, Kendall, Roman, and Siobhan (Shiv), are employed by the company, Waystar RoyCo, a global media and entertainment conglomerate.

There is also Connor, Logan’s oldest son; Marcia Roy, Logan’s third and current wife; Tom Wambsgans, Shiv’s husband and Waystar executive; and Greg Hirsch, Logan’s grandnephew who is also employed by the company.

The family has an extraordinarily rich lifestyle with ‘PJs’ (Private Jets), helicopters and fast boats taking them to their meetings, offices and houses around the world. They have their every whim catered to and take it all for granted as they maneuver and jockey for position to be the next leader of the company.

Their emotional and physical distance from ordinary people and their own workers is shown by their callous attitudes and obnoxious language that is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the series. The other characters of this series Connor, Tom, and Greg, are shown to regularly vacillate from greed to obsequiousness as they also try to retain their powerful positions in the constantly changing battle scenarios of the corporate wars.

Thus, none of the main characters of *Succession* are sympathetic. The audience may briefly empathise with some of the personal aspects of their lives but then their egoistic behaviour and ruthless attitudes soon destroy what little pity and care they may have aroused in the viewers.

The Roy kids have learned every trick in the book on how to manipulate, deceive, and use divide and rule tactics from their merciless father.

The rich dialogue of *Succession* is full of the language of the one-percent. For example, Roman tries to impress his father in a meeting with a combination of the latest jargon and his familiarity with the methods of elite maneuvering for profit:

“Rom: I actually do have a pitch on this, Dad. Financialization. Float hot. I mean, keep news for political power, for market manipulation capability. But the rest, we play the markets with you and me up in a little pod above the city, fucking start ups and shitting on pension funds. Highly maneuverable, highly mobile.

Logan: And in terms of getting rid of Sandy and Stewy?
Oh, fuck 'em. Scare 'em off.

Logan: As in?

As in, you know...Scooby Doo it, Dad. You just dress up as ghosts in the theme park. Um, you know, we just use the lawyers, the PIs, the honey-trap hookers, all the unpleasant people at our disposal. Call in all the favors. Fucking President Raisin, all the Senate cock sucks who owe us. Fucking kill, kill, kill.”

([Succession](#) S02 E01)

The professionals and unprofessionals that they have ‘at their disposal’ are due to the use of unlimited wealth to determine a positive outcome for their ambitions.

Apart from the obvious bully boy tactics, deception is a major element in their strategies to maintain and grow their influence and power.

For example in the case of Vaulter, a media website that is acquired by Waystar RoyCo, Kendall and Roman are tasked by their father to review Vaulter’s performance. They use different types of deception to learn about the company. Roman ‘slums’ it and goes drinking with some of the staff:

“ROM: Speaking of hiding shit, I took a couple of their staffers out, I got them shitfaced, and apparently, they’re looking to unionize, and fucking soon.

-Oh, yeah?

ROM: Pay transparency, bargaining rights. Just nasty, tangly shit. And it’s not a body pit, whatever the fuck a body pit is. It’s a fucking muesli pit, and doesn’t fit with our core, you know... values. So now I’m thinking we just shutter the fucker.”

([Succession](#) S02 E02)

Ken pretends all is fine to Lawrence Yee, the founder of Vaulter, but then suddenly announces to the floor his real intentions:

“KEN: Yeah. You’re... You’re all fired. So, if you can leave your laptops where they are, and hand in your passes, security will be coming around now. I’ve been through everything you’ve shown me. Food and weed, those are the only two verticals driving revenue, so we’re folding them in and, uh, yeah, you’re all free to leave.

-This is a joke.

KEN: You have 15 minutes to gather your belongings and exit the building. Separation agreements will be handed around shortly. One week of severance per year served, with full non-disclosure. Post your little videos. You get three days.

-What the f...

KEN: Unused vacation days will not be reimbursed. Health benefits will be terminated at

the end of the month. That's it. I'd like to thank you all for your hard work.

YEE: What the fuck is going on?

KEN: Yeah, sorry about the, uh, cloak and dagger. I just needed some time to untangle all your shit, find the profit centers, keep the union off our back. We're already fully operational on seven.

YEE: Why?

KEN: Because my dad told me to."

([Succession](#) S02 E02)

Suddenly the real side of Kendall is exposed as his familiarity with the language of corporate tricks and laws rolls off his tongue. The patriarchal, hierarchical aspect is interesting to note as he tells Yee he did it because his dad told him too.

Reporting his deed back to Logan, he discusses his deception of the Vaulter staff and dealing with press coverage:

"KEN: Okay, it's done. Vaulter's dead. Four-hundred and seventy-six off the payroll, full-timers, freelance... I, uh, negotiated an early break from the lease and hired an editor and five interns for the two remaining verticals, the rest will be user-generated, reviews, upload pics, all that stuff.

Also, I harvested a ton of ideas from the Vaulter staff before they left. IP and start-up ideas. Most of it's, you know, bullshit but... you never know.

Logan: We'll say you tried to keep it alive. Valiant efforts, *et cetera*.

KEN: I'm good. I'll wear it."

([Succession](#) S02 E02)

All in a day's work, with very little consideration of the disastrous effects that sudden unemployment could have on the Vaulter staff. The consolidation of profit and power is primary, and the ruthlessness of the process does not enter into the minds of Logan and Kendall.

Thus, we are shown how the one percent operate and any empathy with the characters is pointless. Some reviewers criticised the series because there were no sympathetic characters, missing the point that *Succession* is a kind of exposé of contemporary elite behaviour, similar in some ways to Machiavelli's sixteenth century book, *The Prince* (1513).

"In his loafers made from the skin of... I don't know, what is that? Human rights activists?" ([Succession](#) S02 E06)

Niccolò Machiavelli

Image: [Portrait](#) of Machiavelli (1469-1527) by Santi di Tito



Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469–1527), was an Italian diplomat, author, philosopher and historian who lived during the Renaissance. He wrote *The Prince* (*Il Principe*) around 1513 as a political treatise on how to gain and retain [power](#).

Machiavelli's advocacy of fraud and deceit in the process of gaining power ensured his fame as a ruthless advisor to the elite classes. However, while many would see Machiavelli as a self-serving immoral opportunist, this may not have been the case. Erica Benner [writes](#):

“Just a year before he finished the first draft of his “little book”, the Medici swept into Florence in a foreign-backed coup after spending years in exile. They were deeply suspicious of his loyalties, dismissed him from his posts, then had him imprisoned and tortured under suspicion of plotting against them.”

She notes [that](#) “Machiavelli's writings speak in different voices at different times” and that “Francis Bacon [1561–1626)], Spinoza [1632–1677] and Rousseau [1712–1778] – had no doubt the book was a cunning exposé of princely snares, a self-defence manual for citizens. “The book of republicans,” Rousseau dubbed it.”

Machiavelli emphasized the importance of deception in the tactical toolbox of the power-hungry elites. He urges [never](#) to **“attempt to win by force what can be won by deception”** and that the “vulgar crowd always is taken by appearances, and the world consists chiefly of the vulgar.”

But deception is only part of the strategy, it is also important [that](#) “people should either be caressed or crushed. If you do them minor damage they will get their revenge; but if you cripple them there is nothing they can do. If you need to injure someone, do it in such a way that you do not have to fear their vengeance.”

In *Succession*, the careful planning of the Roy boys is climaxed with a sudden *coup de grace* ensuring that the Vaulter staff are reeling and have no avenue left open for action.

“Logan: Will you sit out front today, Kerry? I need to know what the temperature is amongst the shit-munchers.” ([Succession](#) S03 E05)

Sun Tzu

Machiavelli updated elite strategies that had been around a long time. For example, writing in *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu declared [that](#) “All warfare is based on deception.”

Image: Qing-era [representation](#) of Sun Tzu



Sun Tzu [was](#) a Chinese military general, strategist, philosopher, and writer who lived during the Eastern Zhou period of 771 to 256 BCE.

He is traditionally credited as the [author](#) of *The Art of War*, “an influential work of military strategy that has affected both Western and East Asian philosophy and military thinking. Sun Tzu is revered in Chinese and East Asian culture as a legendary historical and military figure.”

While there has been much debate over the historicity of Sun Tzu, there is no doubt over the influence of *The Art of War* over the centuries on generals and theorists like, for example, the influence it had on Mao’s writings about guerrilla warfare.

Sun Tzu’s advice on deception is [comprehensive](#): “Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.”

Whoever Sun Tzu was, he was writing at a time when knowledge was pretty much the monopoly of the elites. Machiavelli, on the other hand, lived during a revolutionary time for knowledge dissemination. For [example](#), “before the invention of printing, the number of manuscript books in Europe could be counted in thousands. By 1500, after only 50 years of printing, there were more than 9,000,000 books.”

This was why the philosophers of the The Scientific Revolution (c16-c17) and the Age of Enlightenment/Reason (c17-c19) saw *The Prince* as ‘a cunning exposé of princely snares, a self-defence manual for citizens’.

However, this exposé did not go down well with Leo Strauss, the most popular twentieth century philosopher of the new conservative elites.

“CONNOR: Oh, no, no, no, no. I can pull out the old megaphone anytime I want and I can say, “Hey! Guess what? I recall my father was a nasty, racist, neglectful individual. What was it that they used to say around here? No Blacks, no Jews, no women above the fourth floor.” ([Succession](#) S03 E04)

Leo Strauss

Image: [Photo](#) of Leo Strauss (1899–1973)



Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was a German professor who emigrated from Germany to the United States where he wrote many books on philosophy, and taught classical political philosophy, mainly at the University of Chicago. His conservative ideas struck a chord with many public intellectuals, politicians and think tank professionals, some of whom were ex-students of his. His work has been the subject of much debate on his ideas and intentions.

For example, Shadia Drury, analyses his work and style of writing as intentionally obscure to ensure that his ideas on political power would only be understood by the few. In *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Drury writes that Strauss was “an atheist and moral nihilist who advocated the use of religion, morality, and family values as useful political tools by which to placate and manipulate the masses [and] believed that the best form of government is the absolute but covert rule of a ‘wise’ elite independent of the law”. [1]

To do this Strauss [called](#) for “a reconsideration of the “distinction between exoteric (or public) and esoteric (or secret) teaching”. He argued “that serious writers write esoterically, that is, with multiple or layered meanings, often disguised within irony or paradox, obscure references, even deliberate self-contradiction.” He believed that this protected the philosopher from “the retribution of the regime”, but it could be argued that it was more likely to protect the philosopher from the retribution of the masses – as Drury sets out to show.

Drury notes that Strauss is critical of Machiavelli because “by abandoning the esoteric nature of philosophy, Machiavelli undermines philosophy itself” and turns “it into an object of mass consumption”. [2]

This opened the way to the Enlightenment which Strauss is critical of because

enlightenment leads people to think for themselves and this is not good for the powers-that-be. Drury writes:

“Machiavelli’s dissemination of philosophy to the masses opens the way to the Enlightenment, nay, it is identical with the Enlightenment. Enlightenment is ‘the project’ of modernity *par excellence*: its goal is to fight against the Kingdom of Darkness. It believes falsely, that mass enlightenment is the solution to man’s political dilemmas. Moreover, this modern project is conceived as a conscious and heroic effort on man’s part to take control of his destiny and to master Fortuna. According to Strauss, Machiavelli replaces the biblical God with Fortuna, and the Christian idea of providence with the modern idea of not trusting to chance, and taking one’s fate in one’s own hands.” [3]

Even though Strauss rejected revelation he did not want to undermine religion because “religion is necessary to maintain order by ensuring that citizens obey the laws”. [4]

For Strauss religion and philosophy are two opposites with very different aims:

“[I]n Strauss’s view religion and philosophy are opposites that cannot and should not be reconciled. The life of faith is the life of blind unquestioning surrender, whereas the life of philosophy is that of free enquiry. The faithful are steeped in delusions whereas the philosophers rejoice in the truth. Religion prohibits contemplation because it knows as soon as one reflects, one will recognize that religion is a fraud. However, if one reflects further, one will realise the necessity of such swindles and the wisdom of the prophets who create them for love of mankind. Realizing this, the philosophers must keep their atheistic truth hidden; they must live a dual life endorsing publicly what they know is a noble fiction. [...] [T]his dual life causes them no grief; on the contrary it fills their life with laughter, inside jokes, subtle winks and pregnant pauses.” [5]

Thus, it seems that while Machiavelli wrote to reveal power, Strauss wrote to conceal power. Strauss criticises Machiavelli for making public the strategies of the elites, risking the enlightenment and possible revolt of the people.

Strauss liked to keep it simple. Adam Curtis shows in his [documentary](#), *The Power of Nightmares*, that Strauss liked the TV series *Gunsmoke* [because](#): “The hero has a white hat; he’s faster on the draw than the bad man; the good guy wins. And it’s not just that the good guy wins, but that values are clear. [...] Good and evil.” [Professor Stanley Rosen, Pupil of Leo Strauss 1949]

Strauss also liked *Perry Mason*, the TV series [about](#) a lawyer: “The extremely cunning man who, as far as we can see, is very virtuous and uses his great intelligence and quickness of mind to rescue his clients from dangers, but who could be fooling us—because he’s cleverer than we are. Is he really telling the truth? Maybe his client is guilty!” [Rosen]

Therefore the masses could be taught to [unite](#) “against a common evil, and set about creating a mythical enemy”, which in the USA, for example, under Reagan was the Soviet Union, while at the same time never really knowing if what they are being told is the full story.

Drury argues that Strauss teaches [that](#) “perpetual deception of the citizens by those in power is critical because they need to be led, and they need strong rulers to tell them

what's good for them".

The creation of myths that divert the anger of the masses away from their own elite perpetrators is balanced by positive myths that puff up the nation's pride in the very same elites. This is the rule of the wise, and revealing its inner workings was frowned upon by Strauss.

"ROM: Hail, my fellow toilerman. I have returned from real America, bearing the gift of sight.

SHIV: How was summer camp?

ROM: Hmm? What's that? Didn't catch that. I've been down in the salt mines so long with my fellow Johnny Lunchpails, I no longer speak One-Percent."

([Succession](#) S02 E05)

Conclusion

Succession is one story about the real America. It shows the workings of a society at its highest levels. It is self conscious in that it has no illusions about the American Dream. Instead it shows a society that is brutalised by its own successes that are leading to a greater disparity between wealth and poverty. It shows the growing distance between the masses and the elites that has developed over the last few decades, the contradiction between the idea of the nation and its reality. The ideal nation promoted by the elites is being split apart by global agendas that are consuming more and more of the nations resources to the detriment of its citizens:

"SHIV LAUGHS: Okay, big picture... we're at the end of a long American century. Our company is a declining empire
- inside a declining empire.
- Amen, brother."

([Succession](#) S03 E02)

Nobody knows where this is all leading but one can be sure that the wise men are working on it in a race to stop the masses from becoming completely fed up and taking matters into their own hands.

The verdict on *Succession*? Machiavelli would probably have loved it; Strauss would most likely have hated it.

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Notes

- [1] *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* by Shadia B. Drury (Palgrave Mcmillan, 2005) p. ix
- [2] *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* by Shadia B. Drury (Palgrave Mcmillan, 2005) p. 130
- [3] *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* by Shadia B. Drury (Palgrave Mcmillan, 2005) p. 131
- [4] *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* by Shadia B. Drury (Palgrave Mcmillan, 2005) p. 52
- [5] *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* by Shadia B. Drury (Palgrave Mcmillan, 2005) p. 60

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