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## Paul Rahe: Don Corleone, Multiculturalist Study Guide

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# PAUL RAHE: DON CORLEONE, MULTICULTURALIST STUDY GUIDE, 1997-2005

## Steven Alan Samson

### Key Ideas

Don Corleone's personal, patriarchal brand of justice is an expression of an ancient concept of friendship  
 He rejects America's concept of a blind, impersonal justice in a contract-based civil society as an illusion  
 The ancient Roman family under its *paterfamilias* was regarded as a bulwark of civil liberty  
 Greek tyrants were defined by their jealousy of competing friendships  
 Modern political thought devotes little attention to friendship in favor of a utilitarian "politics of distrust"  
 Modern liberalism presupposes an underlying "conflict of interests"  
 The resulting pluralism cautions that alliances (allegiances) should be for strictly defined, limited purposes  
 Free government is founded in jealousy, not in confidence (Jefferson); it is not a *deditio in fidem*  
 Dependency, whether on the *beneficium* of a patron or a government, remains a problem [cf. Minogue]

### Outline

- I. OPENING SCENE (1-3)
  - A. Vito Corleone Is Holding Court Following His Daughter's Wedding.
    1. Everyone came to him for help; they were never disappointed
      - a. Corleone can deny no one's request. Puzo stipulates that he is a generous man [cf. the *clementia* of Julius Caesar; Clamence in Camus's *The Fall*].
      - b. In return, the supplicant must proclaim his **friendship** and that he is in Don Corleone's debt [*quid pro quo*], a debt that he may be called upon to redeem at some time.
  - B. Amerigo Bonasera Speaks Glowingly of America But a Problem Has Presented Itself: His Daughter Was Beaten during an Attempted Rape
    1. Consequence: "She *trusted* people and now she will never *trust* them again."
    2. Complaint: "I went to the police like a *good American*."
    3. Conclusion: "We must go to Don Corleone for *justice*."
    4. Corleone: "Why didn't you come to me at the beginning of this?"
    5. Bonasera's request:
      - a. Corleone's reply: "That I cannot do."
      - b. Bonasera persists, imploring him' "I will pay you anything you ask."  
 Corleone reacts to this very American request this as he would to an insult [friendship is not bound by a cash nexus].
  - C. Don Corleone Speaks Frankly about Friendship and Respect
    1. "You spurned my friendship. You feared to be in my debt."
    2. "You found America a paradise. . . you thought the world a harmless place . . . You never *armed* yourself with **true friends**."
    3. "Now you come to me and ask, 'Don Corleone, give me justice.' And you did not ask with respect."
  - D. Don Corleone Next Speaks about Justice
    1. **American-style justice**: "The judge has ruled. America has ruled. . . After all, this is not a serious affair. . . put aside this madness. It is not American. Forgive. Forget. Life is full of misfortunes. . . The court gave you justice."
    2. Bonasera: "No. They gave the youths justice. They did not give me justice."
    3. Bonasera says what he means by justice: "An eye for an eye."
    4. Corleone replies: "But you asked for more. . . Your daughter is alive." He turns

- away when Bonasera again shows disrespect.
5. After a long pause, Corleone asks: "Why do you fear to give your first allegiance to me? You go to the law courts and wait for months. . . . You accept judgment from a judge who sells himself like the worst whore in the streets." [Implication: American justice must be bought -- it is based on a **cash nexus**].
  6. "Years gone by, when you needed money, you went to the banks and paid ruinous interest. . . . But if you had come to me, my purse would have been yours." [marketplace with its cash nexus is here contrasted with friendship].
- E. Bonasera Concedes and Abases Himself [Shows Deference]
    1. "Be my friend. I accept."
  - F. Corleone Graciously Accepts His Profession of Friendship
    1. "Good, . . . you shall have your justice. Some day, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do me a service in return. Until that day, consider this justice a gift from my wife. . . ." [cf. the ancient vassalage or suzerainty treaties]
  - G. The Central Theme: Personal vs. Impersonal Allegiance
    1. The Liberal Idea of a Civil Society [Tönnies's idea of **Gesellschaft**] Is an Illusion [cf. Karl Marx on the class struggle] in the View of Corleone, Who Represents the Ethic of a Traditional, Communal Society [**Gemeinschaft**].
- II. MORAL OF THE STORY (3)
- A. One Cannot Be a "Good American" and Be "Armed" with What Don Corleone Calls "True Friends."
    1. In agreeing to accept Don Corleone's "gift" and to become his "friend," Amerigo Bonasera says good night to America.
- III. APPLICATION TO POLITICAL REGIMES (3-4)
- A. Radical Difference between the Republics of Classical Antiquity and Our Own
  - B. The Difference Turns in Part on the Status of Friendship within the Public Realm [cf. Sir Henry Maine on **Status vs. Contract**; Hierarchical or Territorial or Dominance vs. Federal Organization]
    1. Friendship (**amicitia**) and "patronage" played a role in the public life of ancient Rome [cf. feudalism and the "spoils system" both based on personal loyalty]
    2. Keeping a distance and retaining one's independence is part of what it means to be a "good American." [liberalism based on an impersonal transaction]
    3. Amerigo Bonasera wants to confine his relationship to the *contractual* realm; he wants to pay up front for services rendered; he wants to retain . . . the independence required of a "good citizen."
  - C. In a Modern Republic, When Services Are Exchanged, *Dignity* Is Seen to Depend . . . on the Impersonality of a Relationship Regulated by Contract
- IV. DON CORLEONE AS A ROMAN PATRIARCH (**PATERFAMILIAS**) (3-4)
- A. Don Corleone Insists There Be More at Stake Than the Giving of a Service.
    1. He confers a *favor* [a **beneficium**] and asks for no payment because the favor is rendered as a gift. His services cannot be bought.
    2. Reciprocity is exacted in the expectation that he will be rendered the offices [**officium**] a client [**cliens**] owes a patron [**patronus**], *i.e.*, respect, deference, undying gratitude and its outward signs [homage].
    3. Corleone demands a **editio in fidem**, *i.e.*, Bonasera's *confidence* [surrender into Corleone's good faith or faithfulness] and, thus, his allegiance. Implication: Corleone wields power by divine right.
  - B. Don Corleone's Status as "Godfather" to His Subordinates
    1. Their relationship is moral and quasi-familial rather than contractual.
      - a. In classical understanding, true "friends" (Greek **philoí** and Roman **amici**) are like kin; they are one's own *kind*.
      - b. The **tutelage** of the father (*pater*) or the godfather is retained in the Roman Catholic tradition
      - c. This contrasts with Protestant sects that support a theology that asserts

- the priesthood of all believers
- d. Wherever one can speak of the *authority* of an interpretive tradition, tutelage retains its place [see Minogue on *auctoritas*, p. 22].
- e. Thus *true friends* are found in the old and the new Rome
- V. THE "POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP" IN CLASSICAL ROME (4-5)
- A. The Patron-Client Relationship
1. Patronage given public sanction by the *decemviri* who ruled Rome while writing the Twelve Table (451-449 BC)
  2. A *patronus* who betrayed a *cliens* was *sacer*, worthy of death [cf. the Biblical sacrifice of animals to atone for sin] [cf. resistance to tyranny]
- B. *Familia* Seen as the Bulwark of Liberty
1. Avenging the **rape of Lucretia** by the son of the Etruscan king, Tarquin the Proud, led to the founding of the republic in 509 BC.
  2. Afterwards Lucius Junius Brutus, the first consul and a nephew of Tarquin, had his sons executed for attempting to restore the king.
  3. The **rape of Virginia** by Appius Claudius, one of the ten lawgivers (*decemvirs*), led to the plebeian secession, restoration of the consulate and, eventually, representation of the plebeians.
  4. Thus the *res publica* (political community) comes into being for the sake of the *res privata* (household), which cannot survive without it
  5. Aristotle: the end or purpose [*telos*] of an entity is prior in the order of nature, but it cannot be cut loose from its origins [the order of Becoming].
    - a. Aristotle's critique of the community of wives and property in Plato's *Republic*
- VI. THE "POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP" IN CLASSICAL GREECE (5)
- A. Greek Popular Ethics
1. Polemarchus in Plato's *Republic*: Justice is helping one's friends and harming one's enemies.
  2. Theme of Sophocles' tragedies
- B. Story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the Tyrannicide Lovers
1. The Peisistratid brothers were overthrown after Hipparchus was murdered by the lovers. Hippias escaped but had the lovers slain and instituted a reign of terror before being forced to abdicate.
- C. Founding Myths [Inventing a People]: If the **Roman Republic** Began as a **Coalition of Families**, **Athens** Was a **Men's Club**
- D. Greek View of Tyranny as an Assault on the Skein of Personal Relations That Made of the City a Men's Club
1. Politics fostered friendship; tyrants were incapable of friendships but envious of those who had them.
  2. To be a "good citizen" was to be armed with true friends.
- VII. CLASSICAL VS. MODERN VIEWS OF FRIENDSHIP (5-6)
- A. Friendship Is Central to the Work of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero
- B. Among Moderns, No Thinker of the First Rank Addresses It Except Montaigne and Bacon [Disregarding Emerson, Pascal, Penn, and Others]
- VIII. MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE ON FRIENDSHIP (6-7)
- A. Obstacles to Perfect Friendship
1. "No trace at all of it can be found among men today."
  2. Inequality between fathers and children renders friendship impossible
  3. **True friendship** is not possible between brothers because in distributing family property, the wealth of one is the poverty of another [**zero-sum game**]. Moreover, the crucial element, **willing freedom**, is missing from kinship Relationships (**consanguinity**).
  4. Similarly, marriage is disqualified as "a bargain struck for other purposes," although it may begin with willing freedom

5. Except with the highest friendships, “the bond is not so well tied that there is no reason to doubt it.”
  6. Adage: “Love a friend . . . as though some day you must hate; hate him, as though you must love him.” Friendship is based on mutual utility.
  7. **“Alliances . . . only get hold of us by one end”** [that is, relationships are for specific, limited, (contractual) purposes]
- B. Implication: **Religious Tolerance and Civility** Can Best Be Sustained by a Society in Which **Utility** Dictates the Pattern of Human Relationships
1. [Historical and Social Context: Montaigne, who served in political offices during the religious wars in France, had a close friendship with Étienne de La Boétie, a young political rebel who died of dysentery in 1563. He was not a soldier. A skeptic in religion, Montaigne supported the Politiques with his pen rather than a sword.]
  2. Montaigne articulates the case for a [liberal] commercial society before Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Adam Smith. [Note Stephen Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis* which associates the Enlightenment project with a reaction against the wars of religion].
- IX. SIR FRANCIS BACON ON FRIENDSHIP (7-8)
- A. Two Discussions
1. Reply to Aristotle in *Of Friendship*: Those who lack friends to whom they may open up are cannibals of their hearts. [The world is a wilderness for those who lack friends; and they are like beasts].
  2. On the other hand [*Of Followers and Friends*]: There is little friendship in the world, least of all between equals. What there is, is between superior and inferior.
  3. Aristotle: Inequality is an obstacle to friendship. Kings tend to be relatively friendless. [cf. Minogue, pp. 37-38, on the distance between rulers and ruled]
  4. Most of the friendships he used to illustrate the first essay – all between superiors and inferiors -- came to a bad end.
- B. Bacon Denies Man the Capacity for *Lógos*
1. Man lacks the capacity for the serene and solitary contemplation he must possess to be capable of friendship transcending utility.
  2. Bacon obliquely shows that miserable solitude is man’s natural state [cf. Thomas Hobbes on the state of nature]. A crowd is not company. [Note his reference to 1 Cor. 13: “talk [is] but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love.”]
- C. Bacon’s Allusion to Machiavelli’s **Critique of the Moral Imagination**
1. Machiavelli dismisses “imagined republics” as useless and ruinous. A prince must learn how not to be good in dealing with subjects as well as friends.
  2. **Political necessity** [reason of state or “policy”: see Minogue] justifies the use of weapons against subjects and friends that Cicero would use only against enemies.
    - a. Like Heraclitus, Machiavelli believed that everything is in flux.
    - b. Human desire or appetite exceeds the power of acquisition.
    - c. Implications: Classical and Christian moral teachings are utopian. The pursuit of moderation is folly. Men will use their natural wickedness to advantage when free to do so.
- D. Machiavelli’s Two Great Principles
1. A man should seek to attain only the appearance of virtue
    - a. A reputation for virtue is helpful, but the use of it impedes.
  2. The politic man must use fear and strive to have everyone “dependent and surrounded by straits and perils.”
- X. MACHIAVELLI’S “POLITICS OF DISTRUST” (8-10)
- A. Machiavelli Rejects the Politics of Friendship by Refusing to Acknowledge Its Possibility
1. The only form of friendship which can be relied upon is the species of association

- that derives from calculations of self-interest [cf. Federalist 10, 51]
- B. Two Implications of This Debunking of Friendship
    1. **Conflict of Interests:** Liberty is born from the **disunion** of the “great ones” (grandees) and the people [cf. Minogue, p. 24]
      - a. Tumults arise from the former’s grand desire for domination (to acquire) and the latter’s desire not to be dominated (or to lose what they have acquired). [cf. Marx on class conflict]
    2. Unhealthy conflict (**factionalism**) arises from seeking reputation through private (e.g., ingratiating oneself by doing favors) rather than public modes (e.g., conquest in battle or governing well). [This is why, as Machiavelli noted, the ancient Romans executed a false “philanthropist” -- see Minogue, p. 109]
      - a. Machiavelli believes that the first breeds sects and partisans, being founded on a private rather than a common good. [cf. Rousseau’s discussion of the general will]
  - C. Consequence of Machiavelli’s Misrepresentation of Rome
    1. He severs the time-honored link between civic virtue and friendship, condemning it as *corruption*, preparing the way for the modern emphasis on impersonal governance and independence.
  - D. Further Explorations of This Theme That Are Worth Pondering
    1. The character of what is excluded from the world of public concern by modern social contract theory, i.e., what is private [religion, race, gender, etc.]
    2. The absence of the theme of friendship in the work of Rousseau and Kant
    3. The preference given to public interest and the good of the country by John Adams and Benjamin Rush
    4. Thomas Jefferson’s attribution of virtue to agriculture and vice to commerce
    5. James Madison’s system of **checks and balances** in a society divided into a multiplicity of sects and special interests
- XI. RAHE’S SERIES OF ASSERTIONS (10-11)
- A. The Quintessentially American Virtue Is Independence
    1. Illustration: Jefferson’s rejection of tutelage
  - B. Virtue of Independence Requires a **Politics of Distrust**
    1. One expression of this “species of public prickliness” may be found in Schopenhauer’s parable of the porcupines.
    2. Jefferson: Man is a wolf to man [*Homo homini lupus*]; “confidence [in man, not God] is everywhere the parent of despotism; “free government is founded in jealousy, and not in confidence” [i.e., not in a **deditio in fidem**].
  - C. The Spirit of Modern Republicanism Requires Impartial Governance
    1. [It rules out as “corruption” Polemarchus’s conception of justice as helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies].
  - D. Impartial Governance Is Virtually Impossible in the Absence of Pluralism
    1. Alliances should “only get hold of us by one end.”
    2. Our unity depends upon an acceptance of our diversity [theme of the one and the many].
  - E. Our Understanding of Civic Virtue Is Inconsistent with Multiculturalism
    1. The “Language of Opposition” [to Liberal Democratic Society] Is Characteristic of Alienated Intellectuals
      - a. Adherents to various group self-identities insist that society recognize their group as exclusively different [see Budziszewski on communitarianism]
      - b. But although it began as a radical, postmodern attack on the spirit of the melting pot, such intellectual and cultural *apartheid* is practically transmuted into a renewed commitment to our modern ethic of pluralism.
- XII. CONCLUSION
- A. We Fall Short of Meeting These Modern Liberal Standards

1. **Dependency** is still a problem in our society [cf. Minogue, p. 114]; we tend to place too much confidence in government, which is "jealous" of competing loyalties; favoritism and discriminatory behavior persists.
2. Even so, **social orders** [*ordines or classes*] are mere relics. Our failures are beside the point since we pay lip service to these standards. [Hypocrisy is the compliment vice pays to virtue].
3. We honor those who give meaning to the American adage: live and let live.

### Study Questions

1. How does the undertaker treat Don Vito disrespectfully? In what way does his concept of justice differ from Corleone's? How does Don Vito view the American systems of justice and finance? What kind of friendship does Don Vito offer?
2. In what way was Amerigo Bonasera acting as a "good American?" How do classical and modern commercial republics differ in "the status of friendship in the public realm?" Contrast traditional patronage, a "status" relationship, with the impersonality of a "contract" relationship.
3. Describe the ancient Roman concept of *beneficium* and *officium* [cf. the medieval concept of lord and vassal]. Why does Rahe call the classical Roman "politics of friendship" a "familial politics." Ethically, how does the concept of **patronage** [note the use of the term "Godfather"] reflect the institution of the blood sacrifice? [Here we might note that Julius Caesar, who was known for his *clementia*, was deified after his betrayal and death by his clients].
4. Historically, why was the *familia* conceived of as the "bulwark of liberty?" How did Aristotle conceive of the relationship between the public and private realms? p. 5 -- Res publica depends for its continued existence on the integrity of the res privata. [Thus the family was an instrument of the state; cf. Budziszewski on instrumentalism, pp. 109-11]
5. How does the Greek "politics of friendship" resemble but also differ from the Roman? What is Polemarchus's concept of justice?
6. How does the personal distance and autonomy reflected by the contractual relationship compare with Montaigne's and Bacon's concept of friendship? What is peculiar about the Bacon's examples of ancient friendships?
7. How does Machiavelli see the relationship between reason and the passions (appetite)? Why does he reject the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean as folly? What is his view of human nature?
8. Identify the two great principles of Machiavelli's (and Bacon's) "politics of distrust." What are the implications of Machiavelli's skeptical attitude toward the politics of friendship? What is the relationship between conflict and liberty? What is his attitude toward seeking reputation through "private modes" (factions)? [Here we encounter the tension between republican virtue (*Virtú*) and corruption].
9. How is the politics of friendship excluded from public concern by modern social contract theory? Identify some of the applications of this idea developed by early American patriot leaders. How do they resemble those of modern theorists like Machiavelli? How is the "virtue of independence

expressed in American political life?

10. What connection does Rahe make between the multiculturalism of our "disaffected intellectuals" and that of Don Corleone? Where do we fall short of "our peculiar form of republicanism?" Identify some of the remaining relics of the past? Why are they beside the point?
11. Food for Thought: Why might this politics of distrust tend to undercut traditional institutions, such as families, and silence expressions of religious faith?

### Review

type of justice represented by Don Corleone	ancient Roman "favor" ( <i>beneficium</i> )
Greek concept of friendship ( <i>philo</i> )	
the relationship ( <i>sacer</i> ) between patron and client under the Twelve Tables	
lesson of the story of Lucretia	Montaigne and Bacon on friendship
Machiavelli's critique of the moral imagination	politics of friendship vs. politics of distrust
two diverse humors      jealousy vs. confidence	
pluralism: alliances which only get hold of us by one end	