Dune: (Political) Science Fiction

I ARE DUNECAT

I CONTROLS THE SPICE,
I CONTROLS THE UNIVERSE.
When I was first asked to come up with a lecture on Dune and politics:

– Frank Herbert, *Dune*
Then I Felt Stupid....

• “You mean that book about all those major powers that clash over a biological byproduct buried under the sand? Doesn't sound very political to me.”
  – A Facebook friend
Politics in Fiction

• While religion is a huge theme in *Dune*, politics is also given prominence.

• *Dune’s* politics is the politics of the fiction epic, though.

• The -fiction isn’t only science-, it’s also political-
How to get Paul Atreides to Arrakis?

• Politics don’t take long to appear in the book
• The plot must get Paul to Dune; how?
  – Politics!
    • “Observe the plans within plans”
  – In this, we see that Herbert thinks politics work along Machiavellian lines:
    • “No enterprise is more likely to succeed than one concealed from the enemy until it is ripe for execution.”
Machiavelli and Politics

• Cunning duplicity is so associated with Machiavelli’s *The Prince* that the term “machiavellian” means “using clever lies and tricks in order to achieve something”

• Here’s the problem: machiavellian’s definition probably represents the failure of Machiavelli to be “machiavellian”

• *The Prince* was *satire*
Does Herbert Believe His Own Ideas?

• One could argue that Herbert doesn’t believe what he writes
  – How do things work out for the Harkonen?
  – How do things work out for the Emperor?
  – In the later books, how do things work out for Paul and his progeny?

• On the other hand: Herbert tells us that we’re far in the future. (10,191 and later)
  – So, “instabilities” should have worked themselves out by then
Returning to the Politics...

• *Dune’s* politics also suffers from *Green Lanternism*, to a degree
  
  – Great...now I get to talk about how I’m using one science-fiction-based term in modern political science to talk about politics IN science fiction!
    » Talk about your plans within plans!
  
  – *Green Lanternism* is the idea that a politician could succeed if they only WANTED it enough
    
    • *Green Lantern’s power flows from his willpower; he can create ANYTHING he can imagine, provided he has the will to do so.*
So......

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[Image of two rings]
Not Quite

• However, note that Paul becomes Muad’Dib mostly through force of will
• He becomes the charismatic great leader who can fix all of society’s ills
• This is natural: he is the hero
What if Herbert was Pulling a Machiavelli on us?

• Herbert later wrote: “*Dune* was aimed at this whole idea of the infallible leader because my view of history says that mistakes made by a leader (or made in a leader's name) are amplified by the numbers who follow without question.”

• In this light, the politics in *Dune* are really a MacGuffin
  – Great, now I’ve made another reference I have to explain
MacGuffins

Plot devices that serve as a goal with little narrative explanation

OK, so politics in the Empire aren’t that, but they ARE a plot device to get Herbert to the subject he REALLY wants to explore: charismatic leadership
Does Charisma Matter?
Political Science Answer

• Charisma might predict who will lead a faction
• It does a much worse job predicting whether they will be successful

• It turns out, people are somewhat rational
• Or, as one of our (supposedly) more charismatic presidents put it:
  – “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?”
    • That’s the democratic version, but a similar question helps with non-democracies.
    • People want what they think is in their best interest
In a short talk, I’ll leave off here

• Herbert uses politics to set up the central plot arc
  – These politics are machiavellian, and pretty unrealistic because of that

• Different politics are also the central plot arc (the pitfalls of a charismatic hero leader)
  – Also a fantasy
  – Green Lantern isn’t coming to save (or ruin) the day