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NICCOLÒ MACHIABELLI

1469 - 1527



The Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli is notorious for his blunt advice that a ruler interested in maintaining and increasing his power should make use of deceitfulness, cunning, and lies, combined with a ruthless use of force.

Denounced by many as an unscrupulous scoundrel, praised by others as a hard-headed realist who dared to describe the world as it really is, Machiavelli is one of the few writers whose works have been closely studied by philosophers and politicians alike.

Machiavelli was born in 1469, in Florence, Italy. His father, a lawyer, was a member of a prominent family, but was not well off financially. Throughout Machiavelli's lifetime—the height of the Italian Renaissance—Italy was divided into many small principalities, in contrast to such relatively unified states as France, Spain, and England. It is therefore not surprising that in his day Italy was militarily weak, despite the brilliance of her culture.

During Machiavelli's youth, Florence was ruled by the famous Medici ruler, Lorenzo the Magnificent. But Lorenzo died in 1492, and a few years later, the Medici were driven from Florence. Florence became a republic, and in 1498, the twenty-nine-year-old Machiavelli obtained a high position in the Floren-

tine civil service. For the next fourteen years, he served the Florentine Republic and engaged in various diplomatic missions in its behalf, traveling to France, to Germany, and within Italy.

In 1512, the Florentine Republic was overthrown, and the Medici returned to power. Machiavelli was dismissed from his office, and the following year, he was arrested on suspicion of being involved in a conspiracy against the new Medici rulers. He was tortured, but maintained his innocence and was released that same year. Afterward, he retired to a small estate at San Casciano, not far from Florence.

During the next fourteen years, he wrote several books, of which the two most famous are *The Prince* (written in 1513) and the *Discourses Upon the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*. Among his other works are *The Art of War*, a *History of Florence*, and *La Mandragola* (a fine play, still performed occasionally). However, his principal fame rests upon *The Prince*, perhaps the most brilliantly written and certainly the most easily readable of all philosophical treatises. Machiavelli was married and had six children. He died in 1527, at the age of fifty-eight.

The Prince may be considered a primer of practical advice for a head of state. The basic point of view of the book is that in order to succeed, a prince should ignore moral considerations entirely and depend upon strength and cunning. Machiavelli stresses heavily the importance—above all else—of a state being well-armed. He emphasizes that only armies conscripted from a state's own citizens are reliable; a state that depends on mercenary troops, or upon the troops of other states, is necessarily weak and endangered.

Machiavelli advises the prince to gain the support of the populace, since otherwise he will have no resource in adversity. Of course, Machiavelli understands that sometimes a new ruler, in order to secure his power, must do things that displease his subjects. He suggests, though, that, "...in taking a state the conqueror must arrange to commit all his cruelties at once, so as not to have to recur to them every day... Benefits should be granted little by little, so that they may be better enjoyed."

To be successful, a prince must surround himself with capa-

ble and loyal ministers; Machiavelli warns the prince to shun flatterers and offers advice on how to do so.

In Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses whether it is better for a prince to be loved or feared:

The reply is that one ought to be both feared and loved, but...it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be wanting...for love is held by a chain of obligation which, men being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purposes; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.

Chapter 18 is entitled "In What Way Princes Must Keep Faith." Machiavelli states that "...a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest..." He adds, "Nor have legitimate grounds ever failed a prince who wished to show excuse for the non-fulfillment of his promise," for, "...men are so simple and so ready to obey present necessities, that one who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived." As a natural corollary of such views, Machiavelli advises his prince to be suspicious of the promises of others.

The Prince has often been called "a handbook for dictators." Machiavelli's career and his other writings indicate that in general he preferred republican government to dictatorship. But he was appalled by the political and military weakness of Italy, and he wished for a strong prince who would unite the country and drive out the various foreign invaders whose armies were injuring the land. It is interesting to note that although Machiavelli advocated that the prince adopt a cynical and ruthless practicality, he himself was idealistic and patriotic, and was not very adept at the deception that he recommended.

Few political philosophers have been so vehemently denounced as Machiavelli has been. For years, he was condemned as virtually the devil incarnate, and his name was employed as a synonym for duplicity and cunning. (Not infrequently, the most vehement denunciations came from those who practiced what Machiavelli preached—a hypocrisy of which Machiavelli might approve, in principle!)



Bust of Niccolò Machiavelli by an unknown Florentine sculptor.

Criticisms of Machiavelli on moral grounds do not, of course, indicate that he has been uninfluential. More pertinent in that respect is the objection that his ideas were not particularly original. There is some truth in such a claim. Machiavelli stated repeatedly that he was not suggesting a new policy, but rather was pointing out the techniques that many successful princes,

from time immemorial, had already used successfully. In fact, Machiavelli constantly illustrates his suggestions by giving striking examples from ancient history, or from more recent Italian events. Cesare Borgia (whom Machiavelli praises in *The Prince*) did not learn his tactics from Machiavelli; quite the reverse, Machiavelli learned from him.

Although Benito Mussolini was one of the few political leaders ever to praise Machiavelli publicly, there is no doubt that a large number of prominent political figures have read *The Prince* with care. It was said of Napoleon that he slept with a copy of *The Prince* beneath his pillow, and similar remarks have been made concerning Hitler and Stalin. Still, it does not seem clear that Machiavellian tactics are more prevalent in modern politics than they were before publication of *The Prince*. That is the principal reason why Machiavelli has not been ranked higher in this book.

But if the extent of Machiavelli's effect on political practice is unclear, his influence on political theory is indisputable. Earlier writers, such as Plato and St. Augustine, had intertwined politics with ethics or theology. Machiavelli discussed history and politics in purely human terms, and simply ignored moral considerations. The central question, he implies, is not how people *should* behave, but how they actually *do* behave; not who *should* have power, but how men *actually* achieve power. That political theory is discussed today in a far more realistic manner than formerly is to no small extent due to Machiavelli's influence. He is rightly considered to be one of the principal founders of modern political thought.