

## NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

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### Abstract

The author reminds readers about the significance of Machiavelli, considered the first politician to discuss sincerely the need for unethical behavior, if a leader of a city, state or a country, wants to be successful. Using deceit, cruelty, even murder when necessary, will help him and the people he leads, survive all kind of dangers.

**Keywords:** *The Prince*, Medici, Cesare Borgia, Machiavellianism.

*Since love and fear can hardly exist together,  
if we must choose between them,  
it is far safer to be feared than loved.*

**Machiavelli**

The Italian historian, politician, diplomat, philosopher and playwright **Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli** (3 May 1469 – 21 June 1527) lived in Florence during the Renaissance. His controversial masterpiece, *The Prince*, was written 500 years ago. On this anniversary, I decided to remind our readers about the great significance of his highly debatable political and philosophical opinions, in which he endorsed a dictatorial system of governing, that, “in certain instances, becomes necessary and must be enforced by a prince if he wants to accomplish an outright control of a city, state, or a country”. *The Prince* was published after Machiavelli’s death in 1532.

In 1494, the Medici family, one of the most influential political dynasties of Italy, which ruled Florence for sixty years, was temporarily removed from power and expelled. The invading French army, led by Charles VIII, approached the city and forced Piero de’ Medici to capitulate. Following his departure, for a short time, Florence fell under the spell of Girolamo Savonarola, a fanatical Dominican friar.

The dream of Florence’s citizens to create a republic led by a democratic government was initially inspired by his preachings but soon after

the Medicis’ abrupt departure, he began challenging the Florentines to accept his religious fanaticism. Savonarola intended to transform Florence into a “Christian City” and impose on its people an ascetic life style. He began calling Florence “The New Jerusalem”. After disobeying repeatedly Pope Alexander VI orders to stop all heretical activities, he was arrested, tortured, and finally, forced to confess that all his prophecies, clamorously proclaimed in churches or public squares of the city, were invented lies and phantasies. He was hanged and burned in the center of Florence on May 23, 1498. Shortly after Savonarola’s execution, just a month later, Machiavelli was elected as head of the second chancery. As secretary of the Dieci di Libertà e Pace, he was responsible for the diplomatic council and the military affairs of the city as well. While appointed to carry out tough and complicated diplomatic missions, he traveled to the courts of Louis XII of France, Ferdinand II of Aragon in Spain, followed by Germany, the Papacy in Rome and the Italian states.

For 13 years, between 1499 and 1512, he became an accomplished diplomat, representing Florence’s interests successfully. Under his eyes took place the brutal policy of state-building methods, employed by Cesare Borgia (1475–1507) and his father Pope Alexander VI. Both were engaged in taking, under the Vatican’s rule and possession, large parts of Italy. Cesare Borgia committed a chain of unspeakable crimes under the pretext that the interests of the Catholic Church must be protected by all means available. During that time, in 1503, Machiavelli was appointed commander of the Florentine army. Instead of mercenaries, he used a citizens’ militia to defend the city. In his book, *The Art of War*, he justified why it made sense to employ an army of locals, even if untrained in warfare. His

conclusion that the city's citizens had genuine reasons to defend their properties and interests, proved to be correct. In 1509, under his command, the army of citizen-soldiers defeated Pisa. However the Medici, in August 1512, at Prato, helped by Pope Julius II, trounced Florence using a large army of Spanish mercenaries. The city-state and the republic were dissolved. In 1512 Machiavelli was removed from office. Shortly after, in 1513, he was accused of conspiracy, arrested, imprisoned and tortured but, at the end of his trial, found not guilty and released from jail. After retiring to his estate at Sant' Andrea, near San Casciano in Val di Pesa, he began writing his political treatises, out of which, some made him famous. Machiavelli wrote also a few plays, performed at Florence's theater, which were loved by his contemporaries. *The Prince* is considered his most famous book. Finished and first distributed in 1513, this so called "masterpiece of cynicism", was officially published in 1532, after his death. In it, Machiavelli promotes a new political doctrine that seems to be extremely provocative. Among the most interesting pages are those where he recommends the manner in which a prince must act, in order to firmly keep under his monolithic control, the citizens of a city, principality or country. "Sometimes, in order to achieve his goals, a prince must display extreme severity, even cruelty when necessary. When a prince comes from outside of a territory, he must, at the beginning, impose severe rules. He cannot achieve his goals unless the citizens of the conquered territory become totally loyal and obedient to his will". The name of the book, in Latin, is *De Principatibus* (About Principalities). The Italian title is *Il Principe*. In reality Machiavelli's ideal form of government was the republic. He understood that governing a city-state or a country by a group of leaders working together for the well being of its citizens, should be the most suitable during times of peace. Nevertheless Machiavelli was aware of the great perils facing Italy due to foreign threats. France and Spain became hegemonic powers and the need for a leader capable of unifying and governing Italy became urgent.

As a consequence, Machiavelli realized that, in spite of his extreme brutality, Cesare Borgia

became "the necessary evil" for that period of time. *The Prince* was inspired by the military and political actions taken by Borgia, who, while being ruthless, proved to be efficient in establishing order and stability. Most of Machiavelli's critics consider his book an example of desperation that shows how human nature can fall into the abyss of immorality. There is an attempt, made by some historians, to have him considered an amoral man, whose doctrine promotes a cruel and unethical system of governing.

Machiavelli was not shy in expressing his distrust of the Catholic Church, the institution that controls the minds of the meek and humble. In his opinion, the Church's main concern was to take care of "so called" God's needs and not the faith of men. His interest was to educate people about the world's events rather than of those taking place in heaven. A great number of historians consider him a humanist, in spite of his disdain toward the "highly moral and ethical compassion for the masses" found in the teachings of the Church. He believed that "a real leader never overdoes the good he renders to his subjects. To be likable does not make a leader great". The political and economical necessities of a state, any state, should be foreseen by its leader. He should be wise and avoid all dangers that may occur while in charge of the well being of the citizens in that state. A positive outcome of a prince's goals require, sometimes, actions that may be considered unfair, even cruel. Christian dogma, by exalting the concept of humility, meekness and never ending patience, weakens the social and patriotic instincts of common people. Machiavelli thinks that preservation of man is more important than his perfection. Moreover, a leader who tries to imitate Christ's compassion for humanity, re-enacting His acts of endless charity, cannot save it from sin and misery. Man needs to control his own destiny and should not expect salvation from outside the real world. Machiavelli separates virtue from politics. In fact he is considered the first European philosopher to honestly proclaim that humanity will survive only if it shows an unbending desire and courage to liberate itself from a dogma that devitalizes it. Christianity is such a dogma. Religion, in fact any religion, does

specifically this: makes humanity obedient to a looming power that is supposed to come from above, from an unnatural world. Machiavelli demonstrates the need for exactly the opposite. A man must use all means available to him to remain in control of his destiny, regardless of morality or certain ethics required by religious beliefs. The example he has chosen is "the Prince", the leader who must decide what kind of life deserves the common and less educated man. Since the Prince's ultimate goal is his, as well as his subjects survival, he must do all that is necessary to accomplish it.

To exemplify best how a prince may achieve uncontested and supreme power by employing unscrupulous brutal force, Machiavelli used the story of Agathoclés, the tyrant of Syracuse, who became the king of Sicily in 304 BC. By displaying extreme cruelty, but also great bravery, on the battlefields of North Africa and Sicily, he gained the respect and obedience of the army under his command. In 317 BC he attacked Syracuse, where his soldiers murdered forty senators, then ravaged the city, killing 4,000 people. Agathoclés would agree to lead only if the city gave him dictatorial authority. Later he consolidated his power by killing countless allies and betraying friends as well. Finally he became a respected king of Sicily, where he died at the age of 72 in 289 BC. The last years of his life were peaceful times for Syracuse and Sicily. He was a great promoter of Hellenistic culture. After his death though, the Carthaginians regained control of Sicily and Northern Africa. Here is a paragraph from Chapter VIII of *The Prince*: "It cannot be called prowess to kill fellow-citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. Still, if the courage of Agathocles in entering into and extricating himself from dangers be considered, together with his greatness of mind in enduring overcoming hardships, it cannot be seen why he should be esteemed less than the most notable captain"... "Nevertheless, his barbarous cruelty and inhumanity with infinite wickednesses do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men".

For a superficial reader of his books, the doctrine of Machiavelli denies the relevance of morality in political affairs and holds that craft and deceit are justified in pursuing and

maintaining political power. As a consequence, the employment of subtle cunning, duplicity, or bad faith, may become necessary. In other words ..."the end justifies the means". Machiavelli is the first politician to honestly divorce statesmanship from moral ethics. Should we call him a cynic? Or, rather recognize his clear understanding of man's barbaric impulses to survive!

"The end justifies the means" comes to mind especially when Machiavelli uses the story of Romulus, the killer of his brother Remus. For the greatest of all goals, the creation of a new city, the beginning of a new era, Romulus becomes immoral committing a despicable crime!

Virtue, but also immorality, must be employed by a Prince, based on certain necessities and circumstances of a particular moment. The events will shape the need for one of these "qualities" to be used, one at the time or, concomitantly. In majority of these situation a Prince "must appear to be just and acting with fairness toward his subjects even if in reality he uses cruelty, necessary for inspiring fear, that will allow his will to be imposed on a occupied territory". These recommendations for the princes of the future, were accepted and applied by so many of the world leaders during the past a few centuries, and, as a reality, right now, in our times.

The disdain for the Church and its teachings, found in Machiavelli's works, could not be left without a response. For more than two centuries his books were banned by the Catholic Church, which described him as a diabolical man. Not only Catholics hated him but Protestants as well. The Night of Saint Bartholomew's Massacre (1572) was, according to the Huguenots, inspired by his book, *The Art of War*, in which he promotes a doctrine that allows cruelty to be employed, when necessary, for achieving military or political victories.

In complicity with the Holy See, Catherine de' Medici ordered the massacre. Between 50.000 and 100.000 people died that night and in the days that followed, in Paris or other parts of France. In *The Art of War*, Machiavelli writes that a leader should not wrongly hope or expect to be unconditionally loved when in pursuit of dominant power. "A leader cannot expect to rule based only on love from his subjects. Fear is also needed, because men are evil and, only when



afraid of severe retribution, in case of disobedience, they will listen and do what that leader wants them to do". The brutality of this doctrine caused great discomfort even among Machiavelli's defenders. His concept of governing, considered by his critics as being cynical, bordering amorality, can be described by the noun born out of his name, known as "machievellism" or "machievellianism", that embodies the dark triad of personality (narcissism, psychopathy and machievellism itself), which are interpersonally aversive. The definition of aversive? According to Thesaurus and Encyclopedia: "Causing avoidance of a thing, situation, or behaviour by using an unpleasant or punishing stimulus, as in techniques of behaviour modification". Some authors consider Machiavelli a philosopher who favours atheistic tyranny.

The Greek historians Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon, believed that man's fortune is decided by Gods. The Olympus legends motivated theirs, as well as others' great writers and philosophers conviction, that man alone cannot control his destiny. The outcome of wars, people's faith, the existence of all beings, were decided by the Olympian Gods, or Goddesses capricious will. Machiavelli did not agree with this concept about man's destiny. He decided to continue a humanistic path that started with Leonardo Bruni, 1370-1444, and later was followed by Francesco Guicciardini, 1483-1540. All of them were critical of the biblical view regarding people's existence, allegedly under God's control, found in the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. Machiavelli's books, *The Prince*, *The Art of War* and *The Discourses*, caused reverberations throughout Europe. The French Innocent Gentillet, 1535-1588, accused Machiavelli as being an evil man who inspired the vices and corruption of political life in France. Christopher Marlowe, 1564-1593, based on false assumptions, disseminated false rumors about the Italian philosopher's "amoral ideas", as representing all that is harmful for British society. Frederick the Great of Prussia, in 1740, helped by Voltaire, wrote his well known *Anti-Machiavel*.

Sadly, his critics ignored "The Discourses", in which Machiavelli promoted a return to democratic ideals of ancient Greeks. Most likely,

no writer in European history was more vilified and misunderstood than this great Italian political visionary. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Machiavelli was sincere and truthful ... "by exposing, rather than celebrating immorality"! Rousseau concludes that there is no shadow of immoralism in Machiavelli's doctrine. In reality, his realistic pragmatism stirred up new concepts of governing. He is the founder of modern political science. Francis Bacon and Spinoza were inspired by Machiavelli. The same can be said when referring to Montaigne and Montesquieu. Benedetto Croce, 1866-1952, believed that Machiavelli was a realist who decided to disclose the plain truth about political leaders of his time. (Early in his life, Croce was a supporter of Mussolini's fascism; later he became a severe critic of the dictator's regime and wrote his famous "Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals", exposing fascism as a "malaria morale", that is, moral illness). "The Prince" by Niccolò Machiavelli and "The Communist Manifesto" by Karl Marx are considered by many to be two of the most widely read books of all time. Machiavelli's deification of the merely "human" is the unembellished meaning of humanism; it is the true source of Individualism and Capitalism, of Socialism and Communism, of Fascism and Nazism" (Eidelberg). This is an absolutely splendid summarising of Machiavelli's influence on the politico-philosophical evolution of the Western World.

No one can state firmly that Shakespeare read Machiavelli's works. However, the Italian writer became known in Elizabethan England. Characters such as Richard II and Richard III were most likely inspired by Machiavelli's books. Among the most vicious heroes of Shakespeare's plays is Iago (*Othello*). His depraved and infamous mind, stirring Othello's irrational actions, makes him a villain par excellence. No other hero, in the history of literature or theater, comes to mind as being more machievellian than this one. But, let's not forget Hamlet, who, with cynical wisdom, displays extraordinary shrewdness and conniving "qualities", used cleverly in his pursuit of revenge. He also exhibits extreme cruelty when killing "by mistake", Polonius, an almost innocent observer and commentator of the

Court's events. At the end of the play we don't like him anymore. Hamlet's bizarre metamorphosis into a playfully malicious man begins to exhibit the dark side of a tormented soul. My opinion of the Danish prince, most likely, contradicts the traditional point of view that renders relentless accolades to his ability for subtle and intense reasoning. There is an obvious inconsistency between Hamlet's beautiful mind and his obsessively antagonistic behaviour. Nevertheless, we freeze in perplexity observing how this character's cold logic and capacity to analyze intertwine with an unmitigated desire to destroy all that surrounds him. How sad it is, that this hero, so much admired for his profound questioning the meaning of life, becomes unrecognizable due to his soul's anguish. Finally, stress and increased mental agony change his behaviour, and, at one point, yes, Hamlet becomes machiavellic! We have no choice but to bend over in admiration of Shakespeare's genius and instinct to create such an extraordinary character that unfolds in so many opposing facets.

During the last few hundred years the term machiavellic was used, in most instances, with a pejorative intention.

There are interesting similarities between Machiavelli and Nietzsche. Like Machiavelli, Nietzsche disputes God's input into the affairs of the world and believes that man must fight for himself to attain his dreams of a more beautiful and satisfying life. Machiavelli's opinion was that "Christianity glorifies humble and contemplative men". Nietzsche disliked Christian teachings because they promote a shallow and gloomy dogma which debilitates humanity. There are though, profound differences between the two. Nietzsche never advanced the thought that killing disobedient citizens, betraying one's friends, being merciless, may become the only paths for gaining political dominance. *Zarathustra* never teaches his pupil, the *Übermensch*, to be cruel or tyrannical. I must underline, that in his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli bequeaths to the politicians of Europe a different view, about a more democratic, still elitist form of governing. His style of writing is straight, dignified, sometimes rhetorical, while Nietzsche's is witty, in many instances, poetic, with an animated

manner of phrasing that unfolds his brilliance and extraordinary erudition. The following paragraph is from Machiavelli's letter to Francesco Vettori, dated 13 December 1513. In it he describes his life during that period, explaining the methods and motives in writing *The Prince*.

"The evening has come, I return home and go to my study; at the entrance I pull off my peasant-clothes, covered with dust and dirt, and put on my noble court dress, and thus becomingly re-clothed I pass into the ancient courts of the men of old, where, being lovingly received by them, I am fed with that food which is mine alone; where I do not hesitate to speak with them, and to ask for the reason of their actions, and they in their benignity answer me; and for four hours I feel now weariness, I forget every trouble, poverty does not dismay, death does not terrify me; I am possessed entirely by those great men. And because Dante says, "Knowledge doth come of learning well retained, Unfruitful else", I have noted down what I have gained from their conversation, and have composed a small work on 'Principalities,' where I pour myself out as fully as I can in meditation on the subject, discussing what a principality is, what kinds there are, how they can be acquired, how they can be kept, why they are lost: and if any of my fancies ever pleased you, this ought not to displease you: and to a prince, especially to a new one, it should be welcome" ...

Compare these two opinions about Machiavelli:

"Machiavellianism pur, sans mélange, cru, vert, dans toute sa force, dans toute son âpreté, is superhuman, divine, transcendental, it will never be achieved by man, at most approximated" Nietzsche.

"The Prince, as a handbook for gangsters." Bertrand Russell.

Well, what else should we expect? It is the same Russell, again and again, showing his bias for all thinkers who challenged the plebeian aspiration for a democratic system of governing, based on numerical majority. Here is Nietzsche's opinion on the subject: "European noblesse-of feeling, of taste, of manners, taking the word, in short, in every higher sense- is the work and invention of France; European vulgarity, the plebeianism of modern ideas, that of England" (*Beyond Good and Evil*). These lines explain why Russell disliked Nietzsche.

In his infamous speech, delivered in 1945, Russell, in bad faith, "creates" a connection between the Übermensch and Nazi thinkers of the Third Reich. When referring to Machiavelli's books, in his "obese "A History of Western Philosophy", Russell fakes objectivity and tries to inject some conciliatory accolades, indicating still, his lack of awareness for their timeless significance.

I close with some of Machiavelli's famous quotes:

The end justifies the means!

Before all else, be armed!

If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not to be feared!

The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him!

Politics have no relation to morals!

A prince never lacks legitimate reasons to break his promise!

It is double pleasure to deceive the deceiver!

It is not titles that honor men, but men that honor titles!

It is much more secure to be feared than to be loved!

God is not willing to do everything, and thus takes away our free will and that share of glory which belongs to us!

Never was anything great achieved without danger!

Men are so simple and so much inclined to obey immediate needs that a deceiver will never lack victims for his deceptions!

Hatred is gained as much by good works as by evil!

There is no other way of guarding oneself against flattery than by letting men understand that they will not offend you by speaking the truth; but when everyone can tell you the truth, you lose their respect!

Here is a list of Machiavelli's political and historical works:

1502 - A discourse about the provision of money

1502 - Portrait of the affairs of France

1508-1512- Portrait of the affairs of Germany

1513 - The Prince

1517 -The Discourses on Livy

1519-1520 - The Art of War

1520 - A discourse about the reforming of Florence

1520 - A summary of the affairs of the city of Lucca

1520-1525 - Florentine Histories

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