

MACHIAVELLI: HIS THINKING ON POLITICAL POWER AND RULING A NATION

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Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niccolo_Machiavelli and CDN article by KKS Perera appearing in CDN dated May 9, 2024



Machiavelli, portrait by Santi di Tito, c. 1550–1600

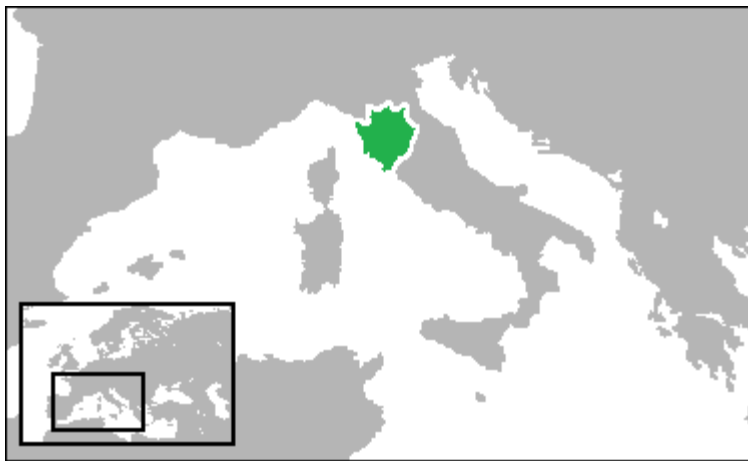
Introduction

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (3 May 1469 – 21 June 1527) was a Florentine diplomat, author, philosopher, and historian who lived during the Italian Renaissance*.

* The Italian Renaissance was a period in Italian history covering the 15th and 16th centuries. The period is known for the initial development of the broader Renaissance culture that spread across Western Europe and marked the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity.

For many years he served as a senior official in the Florentine Republic* with responsibilities in diplomatic and military affairs.

* Florentine Republic was a medieval and early modern state that was centered on the Italian city of Florence in Tuscany, Italy.



The Florentine Republic in 1548

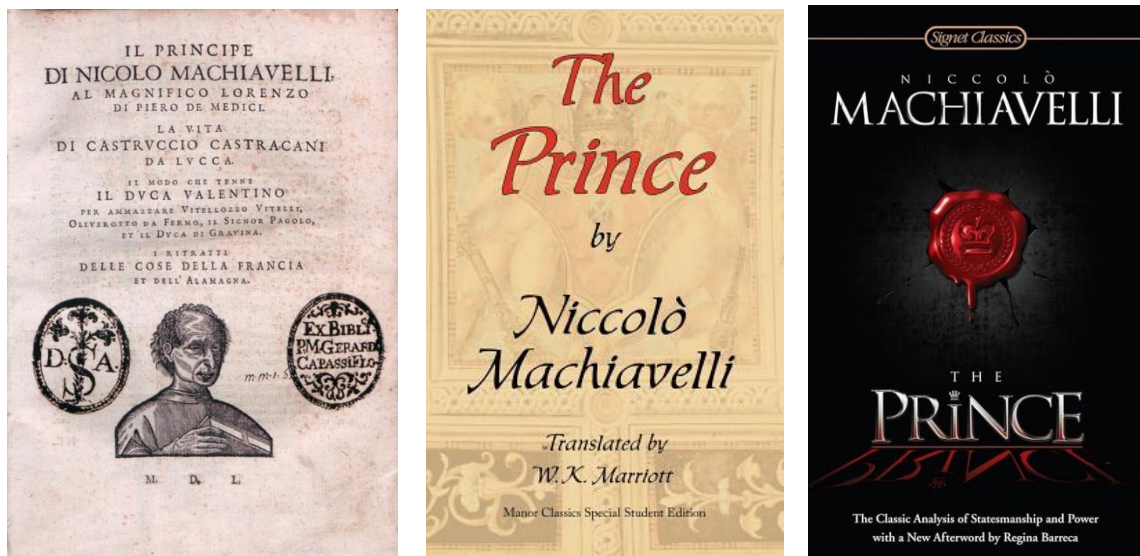
He wrote political treatises such as *The Prince* (*Il Principe*) and *Discourses on Livy* (*Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, or the *Discourses on the First Ten of Titus Livy*), comedies, carnival songs, and poetry.

He is best known for his political treatise *The Prince*, written around 1513 but not published until 1532, five years after his death. He has often been called the father of modern political philosophy and political science. After his death Machiavelli's name came to evoke unscrupulous acts of the sort he advised most famously in his work, *The Prince*.

He claimed that his experience and reading of history showed him that **politics has always involved deception, treachery, and crime**. Machiavelli's *The Prince* has been surrounded by controversy since it was published. Some consider it to be **a straightforward description of political reality**. Others view *The Prince* as a manual, teaching would-be tyrants how they should seize and maintain power.

However, concerning the differences and similarities in Machiavelli's advice to ruthless and tyrannical princes in *The Prince* and his more republican exhortations in *Discourses on Livy*, a few commentators assert that *The Prince*, although written as advice for a monarchical prince, contains arguments for the **superiority of republican regimes**, similar to those found in the *Discourses on Livy*.

The Prince, a guidance for powerful monarchical rule



Title page of 'The Prince' in a 1550 edition (L) and two of the later editions

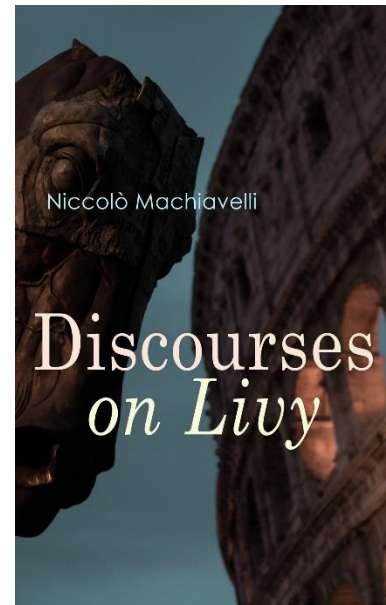
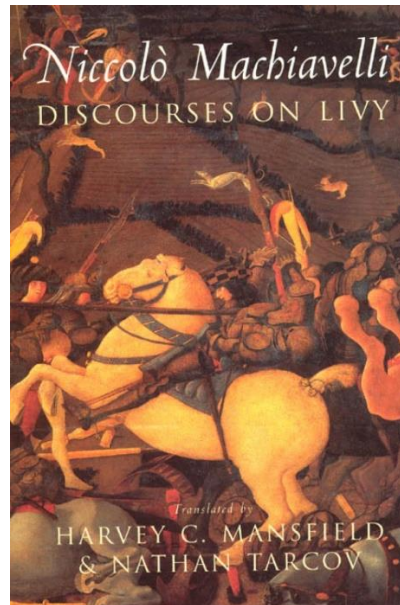
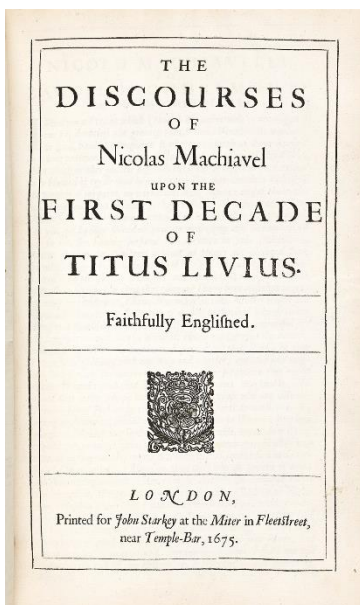
Machiavelli's best-known book, *The Prince* (*Il Principe*) contains several maxims concerning politics. Instead of the more traditional target audience of a hereditary prince, it concentrates on the possibility of a "new prince". To retain power, the hereditary prince must **carefully balance the interests of a variety of institutions to which the people are accustomed**. By contrast, a new prince has the more difficult task in ruling: He must first **stabilise his newfound power in order to build an enduring political structure**. Machiavelli suggests that the **social benefits of stability and security can be achieved in the face of moral corruption**. Machiavelli believed that public and private morality had to be understood as two different things in order to rule well. As a result, **a ruler must be concerned not only with reputation, but also must be positively willing to act unscrupulously at the right times**. Machiavelli believed that, for a ruler, it was **better to be widely feared than to be greatly loved; a loved ruler retains authority by obligation, while a feared leader rules by fear of punishment**. As a political theorist, Machiavelli emphasized the "necessity" for the **methodical exercise of brute force or deceit, including extermination of entire noble families, to head off any chance of a challenge to the prince's authority**.



Portrait of a Gentleman (Cesare Borgia), used as an example of a successful ruler in *The Prince*

Due to the treatise's controversial analysis on politics, the Catholic Church banned *The Prince*. Humanists also viewed the book negatively. As a treatise, its primary intellectual contribution to the history of political thought is the fundamental break between political realism and political idealism, due to it being a manual on acquiring and keeping political power.

Discourses on Livy, a guidance for republican rule



Early and a later edition of *Discourses on Livy*

The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius, written around 1517, and published in 1531, often referred to simply as the *Discourses* or *Discorsi*, is nominally a discussion regarding the classical history of early Ancient Rome, although it strays far from this subject matter and also uses contemporary political examples to illustrate points. Machiavelli presents it as a series of

lessons on how a republic should be started and structured. It is a larger work than *The Prince*, and while it more openly explains the advantages of republics, it also contains many similar themes from his other works. For example, Machiavelli has noted that **to save a republic from corruption, it is necessary to return it to a "kingly state" using violent means**. He excuses Romulus for murdering his brother Remus and co-ruler Titus Tatius to gain absolute power for himself in that he established a "civil way of life". Commentators disagree about how much the two works agree with each other, as Machiavelli frequently refers to leaders of republics as "princes". Machiavelli even sometimes acts as an advisor to tyrants. Other scholars have pointed out the aggrandizing and imperialistic features of Machiavelli's republic. Nevertheless, it became one of the central texts of modern republicanism, and has often been argued to be a more comprehensive work than *The Prince*.

"Machiavellian"

Scholars often note that Machiavelli glorifies instrumentality in state building, an approach embodied by the saying, often attributed to interpretations of *The Prince*, "The ends justify the means". Machiavelli held that **fraud and deceit as necessary for a prince to use and violence may be necessary for the successful stabilization of power and introduction of new political institutions. Force may be used to eliminate political rivals, destroy resistant populations, and purge the community of other men strong enough of a character to rule, who will inevitably attempt to replace the ruler**. Machiavelli has become infamous for such political advice, ensuring that he would be remembered in history through the adjective, "Machiavellian".

Machiavelli's works are sometimes even said to have contributed to the modern negative connotations of the words politics and politician. More obviously, the adjective **Machiavellian became a term describing a form of politics that is "marked by cunning, duplicity, or bad faith"**.

While Machiavellianism is notable in the works of Machiavelli, scholars generally agree that his works are complex and have equally influential themes within them. For example, J. G. A. Pocock (1975) saw him as a **major source of the republicanism that spread throughout England and North America in the 17th and 18th centuries** and Leo Strauss (1958), whose view of Machiavelli is quite different in many ways, had similar remarks about Machiavelli's influence on republicanism and argued that even though Machiavelli was a teacher of evil he had a "grandeur of vision" that led him to advocate immoral

actions. **Whatever his intentions, which are still debated today, he has become associated with any proposal where "the end justifies the means".** For example, Leo Strauss (1987, p. 297) wrote:

*Machiavelli is the only political thinker whose name has come into common use for designating a kind of politics, which exists and will continue to exist independently of his influence, a **politics guided exclusively by considerations of expediency, which uses all means, fair or foul, iron or poison, for achieving its ends – its end being the aggrandizement* of one's country or fatherland – but also using the fatherland in the service of the self-aggrandizement of the politician or statesman or one's party.***

* Meaning of aggrandizement is to make great or greater (as in power, wealth, or reputation).

Machiavelli notably argued that **a ruler, whether establishing a kingdom or a republic, should be pardoned for resorting to violence and other controversial deeds if they ultimately serve the greater good.**

One of the most significant contributions of “The Prince” to the history of political thought is its establishment of a clear dichotomy between political realism and political idealism. By offering practical advice on acquiring and maintaining political power, Machiavelli diverged sharply from idealised visions of governance presented by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, who advocated for the pursuit of an ideal society as a guiding principle for rulers. Machiavelli emphasised the importance of understanding and navigating the harsh realities of political life. **He rejected the notion that an imaginary utopia should serve as a model for governance, asserting instead the rulers must prioritise practical concerns and adopt their strategies to the exigencies of the political landscape.**

Conclusion

Despite the classical precedents, which Machiavelli was not the only one to promote in his time, **Machiavelli's realism and willingness to argue that good ends justify bad things, is seen as a critical stimulus towards some of the most important theories of modern politics.**

Firstly, particularly in the Discourses on Livy, Machiavelli is unusual in the positive side to factionalism in republics which he sometimes seems to describe. For example, quite early in the Discourses, (in Book I, chapter 4), a chapter title announces the disunion of the plebs (general body of free Roman

citizens) and senate (highest and constituting assembly of ancient Rome and its aristocracy) "kept Rome free". That a community has different components whose interests must be balanced in any good regime is an idea with classical precedents, but **Machiavelli's particularly extreme presentation is seen as a critical step towards the later political ideas of both a division of powers or checks and balances, ideas which lay behind the US constitution, as well as many other modern state constitutions.**

Similarly, the **modern economic argument for capitalism, and most modern forms of economics, was often stated in the form of "public virtue from private vices"**. Also in this case, even though there are classical precedents, Machiavelli's insistence on being both realistic and ambitious, not only admitting that **vice exists but being willing to risk encouraging it**, is a critical step on the path to this insight.

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