

THE PRINCE THE ORIGINAL CLASSIC

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THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

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The Original Classic

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With an Introduction by
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON



CAPSTONE

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THE PRINCE **1**

AN INTRODUCTION

BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

Machiavelli's *The Prince* has the reputation for being 'bad'. It is said to have been bedtime reading for Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin, and Shakespeare used the term 'Machiavel' to mean a schemer who was happy to sacrifice people for evil aims. Relentlessly attacked by religious figures, it was put on the Catholic Church's index of prohibited books, and was equally reviled by Protestant reformers.

Yet, in contrast to centuries of popular maligning of Machiavelli, recent research has focused on his ethics and the fact that he was a genuine moral philosopher and well-rounded Renaissance man whose overriding wish was to be useful. Indeed, as Yale's Erica Benner suggests, *The Prince* is best seen not as a guide on how to be ruthless or self-serving, but rather as a lens to see objectively the prevailing views of the day, and to open the eyes of the reader as to the motives of others. With this knowledge, the new leader can act in an effective way, making sure their essentially noble goals are kept in sight.

The Prince continues to fascinate, shock, repel and inspire the person of today as much as it did

the reader of the 16th century. Although written as a kind of showcase of its author's knowledge of statecraft in order to gain employment, and very much concerned with the events of his day, the book's timeless insights into the nature of power and human motivation have transcended its original setting.

MACHIAVELLI'S WORLD

To fully appreciate the work we need to get a sense of the times in which its author lived.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in the city-state of Florence in 1469. Of a respectable family, his father was a lawyer who provided him with a good education in rhetoric, grammar and Latin. Yet this branch of the Machiavelli family was never wealthy, and while still in his teens Niccolò began working for the Florentine state.

At this time Florence was ruled by Lorenzo de' Medici, the great Renaissance patron of arts who had made Florence the leading state in Italy. But the city's humanist outlook and wealth brought with it a perception of moral decline, most notably from the outspoken Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola. His urging of the creation of a 'Christian commonwealth', of which God was sovereign, proved

popular, and following the expulsion of the Medici a republic with a fair amount of democratic representation was instituted. Though Savonarola was executed four years later at the instigation of Pope Alexander VI, who saw him as a threat to the church's power, the republic itself continued. Machiavelli's working life spanning 14 years thus began under the powerful but autocratic Medici dynasty and continued in a republic.

At 29, Machiavelli was made Secretary of the Second Chancery of the Republic, and Secretary of the Ten of Liberty and Peace, a foreign affairs and military committee. He was now one of the top civil servants of the republic, a confidant of Pier Soderini, its administrative head, and was constantly deploying and refining his significant rhetorical skills in the preparation of speeches and briefings. He was sent on many diplomatic missions, and able to observe first-hand the most powerful figures of his day including Louis XII, King of France, Emperor Maximilian I and Pope Julius II. He was also part of legations to neighbouring Italian states, which at that time included the Duchy of Milan, the Venetian republic, the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States.

Though Machiavelli relished this interesting work, it revealed to him the limits to Florence's power and

the vulnerability of the Italian states in general. Given this, it is then easy to understand his admiration for Cesare Borgia, the Duke Valentino, who through his military prowess created a new power base in the Romagna region of eastern Italy. Machiavelli spent three or four months at his court, and so gained an estimation of him as the paragon of a 'new Prince'; that is, one who does not inherit a state but creates or takes one. He devotes considerable space in *The Prince* to Borgia. For Machiavelli, it did not matter that Borgia had a reputation for cruelty and brute force. Rather, the qualities he displayed were just what Italy needed if it was ever to become anything more than a collection of smallish states run by corrupt families, or propped up and controlled by foreign powers.

When however, in 1512, the Medicis were restored to power in Florence with the help of Pope Julius II, Machiavelli's career came to a sudden end. He was relieved of all his duties and forbidden to leave Florentine territory, but worse was to come. The following year he was accused of plotting against the new regime and thrown into prison where he was tortured. But he made no confession of guilt and was released in a few weeks. Without a source of income, he retreated to the family farm in Percussina, just south of Florence. There, working

outdoors during the day and retiring to his study at night, he read histories and biographies of the great figures of classical Rome and Athens, and wrote. This study of history, combined with his deep experience in state affairs, he believed could result in a valuable contribution to political philosophy, and it was here that he finished composing *Il Principe*, or *The Prince*.

For his remaining years he was a man of letters, writing a history of Florence, ironically commissioned by the Medici, and other works including his *Art of War*, the only historical or political work to be published while he was still alive. He died in 1527.

THE ORIGINALITY OF *THE PRINCE*

In the 14th-16th centuries there developed a whole genre of guidebooks for princes, known as *specula principis* ('mirror-for-princes'). These were generally composed for young men about to inherit kingdoms. A notable example, Erasmus' *The Education of a Christian Prince*, published only a couple of years after Machiavelli had finished *The Prince*, exhorted rulers to act as if they were saints, arguing that successful rule naturally corresponds with the goodness of the ruler. Centuries before, Augustine provided a template against which every society

and ruler would be judged through the Middle Ages. Written just after the collapse of the Roman Empire, Augustine's *The City of God* provided a stark contrast to the flawed political structures of man, proposing that the fulfilment of human beings lay in turning inward to God.

When we appreciate the hold that such idealizations had over the medieval imagination it is possible to understand the shock that *The Prince* had created. For not only did Machiavelli not believe that, given human nature, a truly 'good' ruler or perfect state could exist, but in fact he viewed the incursion of religious ideals into politics as *damaging* to the effectiveness of states. While a believing Christian himself, who saw the value of religion in creating a cohesive society, he felt that the direct involvement of the Church in state affairs ultimately corrupted both state *and* Church. There was no better example of this than the Papal or ecclesiastical states, actual bounded lands within Italy which in Machiavelli's time during the reign of Pope Alexander VI became a very earthly, powerful force which could make big states like France tremble. Alexander himself had several mistresses and sired many illegitimate children, grew personally very rich through his conquests, and relentlessly advanced his son Cesare Borgia's military campaigns through

the sale of indulgences (Church dispensations of sin offered at a price). The Pope's corrupt activities fomented a backlash that would eventually come in the form of the Protestant Reformation.

Machiavelli devotes a chapter to these states in *The Prince*, but he weighs his words carefully, noting with some sarcasm that since they are "set up and supported by God himself . . . he would be a rash and presumptuous man who should venture to discuss them." But he does anyway, and the undercurrent of his argument is clear: politics and religion were two different realms, to be judged by different codes. 'The good', while a noble aim, was best left to the private and religious spheres, while the effectiveness of a ruler should be measured by *virtù*, or the decisive strength or prowess (not to be confused with 'virtue') needed to build and preserve a state.

For Machiavelli, the Church had steered horribly away from its divine purpose. What he witnessed in his lifetime solidified his view that the rule of states was essentially a secular project, and the constant efforts by families such as the Medici, Orsini and Colonna to promote their own within the Church hierarchy and intermarry so as to shore up power alliances was a tawdry business. Yet at the same time he was part of this world, and through his subtle

exposure of these goings on still aimed to guide ambitious rulers to effectively make their way in it.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli also had to counter the idealized state that Plato had set forth in *The Republic*, along with the code for principled political action set down by the Roman orator and statesman, Cicero. His conclusion, though, is that a leader could not be effective operating in a Ciceronian way if all about him are unscrupulous or rapacious. To preserve his good aims, the prince, Machiavelli famously says, must learn “how to be other than good”. A ruler has to make choices that the normal citizen never does, such as whether to go to war or what to do with people trying to kill or overthrow him. So, while it is right to want to always be upstanding in one’s actions, to maintain order and peace and preserve the honour of your state it may be necessary to act in a way that, as a private citizen, you never would.

JUSTIFYING FORCE

The usual accusation made of the views expressed in *The Prince* is that they are evil or immoral. Yet Machiavelli is actually better understood as a founder of political science, clinically analysing political situations as they are and providing

prescriptions for action. He sought to minimise upheaval and misery by promoting a strong state that could secure prosperity and security for all within it. Even if the fulfilment of this goal required institutionalised force or violence, it was still an ethical one.

Machiavelli provides an example of his concept. While he was working for the Florentine state, the town of Pistoia was being ravaged by in-fighting. He proposed that Florence take it over to subdue it and bring order. But the public did not have a taste for such an enterprise and washed their hands of it. Left to its own devices, however, there was a bloodbath on the streets of Pistoia. Thus Machiavelli argues:

“ . . . he who quells disorder by a very few signal examples will in the end be more merciful than he who from too great leniency permits things to take their course and so to result in rapine and bloodshed; for these hurt the whole State, whereas the severities of the Prince injure individuals only.”

The fact is, any ruler, no matter how benign as a person, must face up to the state's use of violence to maintain its own existence. As a political actor, the refusal to do anything that does not seem

'good' will only be your ruin. In his remark in chapter six of *The Prince* that "all armed Prophets have been victorious, and all unarmed Prophets have been destroyed", Machiavelli is referring to Savonarola, whose fatal mistake, he believed, was that he had no forceful means to see his vision of Florence become real. Though a 'good man' by any measure, who tried to bring morality and republican ideals back to the city in contrast to the ruthless Medicis, in the end Savonarola was powerless to stop his own demise.

Of the "two ways of striving for mastery", Machiavelli noted, that changes done within the law was by far the preferable to that of violence, which was the realm of beasts. Yet at the same time, a Prince must be able to act both as man *and* beast, and he introduces the famous analogy of a ruler needing to be both "a fox to discern snares, and a lion to drive off wolves." While noting that, "it is human nature when the sea is calm not to think of storms", Machiavelli saw the wise leader as spending much of his time during peacetime considering various scenarios of war, and working out how the kingdom will respond if the event actually happens. A prince may fool himself into believing that his energies should be spent on other things, but ultimately his role was to protect and preserve the state itself.

But do Machiavelli's thoughts on the use of force give *carte blanche* for rulers to do anything for the sake of maintaining their power? Does 'might make right'? In his analysis of the occasions on which a ruler may justify violence he is subversive and radical, openly admitting that such things may, by any usual standard, be considered evil. And yet, "if it be permitted to speak well of things evil" as he delicately puts it, there is a distinction between violence that is committed for the reason of creating or preserving a good state, and wanton cruelty that is performed merely to preserve an individual ruler's power. He does not condemn, for example, Cesare Borgia's apparent cruelty in allowing one of his subordinates, Remirro de Orco, to be brutally murdered, because it was a step Borgia had to take in order to establish his reign in a particular territory, which itself was a step towards his ultimate aim of unifying the Italian states to make them independent of foreign rule. On the other hand, Machiavelli gives low marks to the Roman emperors Commodus, Caracalla and Maximus, who made cruelty a way of life during their reigns. They became so hated that their premature deaths were inevitable. Therefore, he observes, not only is excess cruelty bad, it is politically unwise.

When it comes to seizing a principality or state, Machiavelli's general rule is that, "the usurper

should be quick to inflict what injuries he must, at a stroke, that he may not have to renew them daily". This is, interestingly, just as Sun Tzu wrote in the ancient Chinese *The Art of War*; that is, if you are going to take or attack something, do it as quickly as possible and with maximum force, so that your foes give up early and, paradoxically, violence can be minimised. In doing so you will be feared, and can later be seen to be magnanimous by your favours. In contrast, a half-hearted coup will allow your enemies to live on, and you will forever be fearful of being overthrown. The key with force is to be *economical*.

Amid such justifications of violence the modern reader may raise the example of Gandhi, whose moral authority alone forced the mighty British Empire to back down. For a study in power, *The Prince* does not properly take account of such 'soft power', or influence not backed by actual force. Yet Machiavelli was confining his analysis to actual states and their leaders, (Gandhi never had to actually run a state) and to understand him you must appreciate the political context in which he was writing. The Italy of his time, he laments, "has been overrun by Charles, plundered by Louis, wasted by Ferdinand, and insulted by the Swiss", a state of affairs which would have been prevented if its rulers had had strong national armies. Indeed, if he were

to be born again in the 21st century, Machiavelli would perhaps not be surprised to learn that those states considered most powerful are also backed by the largest armies or firepower (the United States, China, Russia still).

In his naked justification of force Machiavelli realised it was sometimes necessary to “go against religion”, yet as Machiavelli scholar Maurizio Viroli rightly points out, Machiavelli never says to actually go against God. In fact, it can be right to go against the prevailing moral laws set down by the Church, because ultimately God is in favour of the laws and order that a strong state can bring. Rather than power for power’s sake, Machiavelli’s purpose is the establishment of a state that is robust enough to allow the private economy to flourish, that works according to laws and institutions, and that preserves culture. In this belief that God would want a strong and united Italy which was able to bring security to its people and their prosperity, with a flourishing national culture and identity, *The Prince* is, from its author’s standpoint, a work with a clear moral foundation.

Machiavelli’s stance on power remains relevant to the leader of today. Each of us must make decisions which may not be welcomed by or which may even hurt, those in our charge. Yet we act for the benefit

and long-term well-being of the body that we administer, whether it be a business, some other organization or even a family. In this respect the leader's role can be lonely, and bring with it great responsibility. Such is the nature of power.

OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE

Though Machiavelli's view of human nature was dark, he also believed that a successful state could bring out the best in people, providing a stage on which individuals could find glory through a great act. As political philosopher Hannah Arendt noted, *The Prince* is an "extraordinary effort to restore the old dignity to politics", bringing back the classical Roman and Greek idea of glory to 16th century Italy. In it Machiavelli admires the self-made men who rise from humble private stations by their deeds, such as Hiero of Syracuse, risking all for public esteem and the chance of power.

Yet how does this adulation of strong individual action fit with the Republican ethos that runs through Machiavelli's other writings (*Florentine Histories*, *Discourses*), and in fact his lengthy experience working for a republic?

As Viroli argues, *The Prince* is largely a manual for *founding* a state, a great enterprise which is

inevitably the inspiration and work of a single person. Machiavelli discusses four ancient examples, Moses, Romulus, Theseus, and Cyrus, who almost single-handedly forged a new nation for their peoples. In his own time, he believed a similar heroic figure was needed to draw together the various kingdoms, duchies, and city-states of the Italian peninsula, founding a single powerful state which, in time, might become a republic governed by the rule of law. Once established, the ruler's power would then be properly checked and balanced by an array of democratic institutions.

Machiavelli believed people were free agents, not swayed easily. Therefore, there was a qualitative difference between a tyrant who rules by force alone, and a prince who rules by a combination of public support and fear. The conventional wisdom, he notes, is that “he who builds on the people builds on mud”. This was very much the view of the Medici, who in their wars preferred to pay for mercenaries than entrust their own population with weapons. Machiavelli went the other way, strongly advocating a national militia composed of a state's own citizens. The benefits of this were twofold: first, it would create a new sense of patriotism united under the command of the new prince; and if war came, these soldiers would be strongly motivated to win,

because they were fighting for their homes, families and nation.

Machiavelli was acutely sensitive of the delicate dance of power between the ruler, noble class and people. In chapter nine he states his wariness of a prince ever depending for his power on the nobility, since they will want many favours for installing you, or want to replace you altogether. The support of the people, on the other hand, may be more fickle and less able to be controlled, yet in difficult times it is worth much, providing a source of legitimacy. Indeed, in chapter three he notes, “For however strong you may be in respect of your army, it is essential that in entering a new Province you should have the good will of its inhabitants.” Later he tackles the issue of how a Prince can control a state that has previously lived under its own laws. One option is to destroy it utterly and bring in your own system. However, “a city accustomed to live in freedom, if it is to be preserved at all, is more easily controlled through its own citizens than in any other way.” He notes that the people, no matter how long they are subverted, will not forget the freedoms they once enjoyed or the laws and institutions that made them a proud state. Here Machiavelli veils his republican sympathies thinly, noting that despite the apparent power of usurpers and conquering rulers, the rule of

law and democratic freedoms, so conducive are they to the natural state of man to be able to act as a free agent, have an abiding power that is not easily forgotten or extinguished.

In summary, the ideal state is one that is open enough for remarkable individuals of any station to strive to fulfil their ambitions, yet these largely self-ish motives can in fact lead to good outcomes for all, since these special individuals, to succeed over the longer-term, must shape their designs in a way that also satisfies the natural wants of the people.

MACHIAVELLI'S SUCCESS LAWS

The Prince is usually read as a political tract or a work of history or philosophy, but if you look closer it contains a number of generic success laws that today's leader or manager can profit from.

The key difference between Machiavelli's manual and other princely guides of his time is that they were nearly all written for rulers who had inherited their kingdoms. *The Prince*, in contrast, is aimed at the upstart who had seized power of their own devices, and who had to now keep and legitimize that power. This need to gain credibility and shore up support is what makes the book still highly relevant today, since the chances are that you, too, owe your