

# Niccolò Machiavelli

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# Learning Objectives

- Know the Importance of Machiavelli in Western Thought
- Know the major highlights of his Life and Career
- Know his two Major Works and their major theories and contradictions
  - *The Prince*
  - *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy*

# Importance of Niccolò Machiavelli

- Contributed important discourses in Western thought – Political theory, Italian literature, the principles of warfare and diplomacy
- Writings are unsystematic, inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory
- Impact of his musings has been widespread and lasting
- Term “Machiavellian” used by philosophers concerned with a range of ethical, political and psychological phenomena

# Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)

- Born 3 May 1469 in Florence
- 1498 Second Chancellor of the Republic of Florence
- Next 14 yrs – engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity on behalf of Florence
- 1512 the Medici defeated the republic's armed forces and dissolved the government
- Enforced retirement led him to literary activities:
  - Wrote verse, plays, and short prose, and produced biographical and historical sketches
- 1520 return to Medici favor – composed a *History of Florence* for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici

# Machiavelli's Conflicting Views

- *The Prince*
  - Most people are stupid, irrational and incapable of understanding or exercising sovereignty
  - Only realistic form of government is a monarchy
- *Discourses on The Ten Books of Titus Livy*
  - Ascribes to the masses an extensive competence to judge and act for the public good
  - Favors a republic over a monarchy

# *The Prince*

- Written at the end of 1513 - published posthumously in 1532
- Written for presentation to Giuliano de' Medici
- Common view – there is a relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority
- Machiavelli criticizes this moralistic view of authority

# *The Prince*

- No moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power
- Authority and power are essentially coequal: whoever has power had the right to command
- Goodness does not ensure power
- The good person has no more authority by virtue of being good

# *The Prince*


- Concern of the political ruler is the acquisition and maintenance of power
- Legitimate rights of rulership adds nothing to the actual possession of power
- Goodness and right are not sufficient to win and maintain political office

# Relationship Between Law and Force

*“The chief foundations of all states, new as well as old or composite, are good laws and good arms; and as there cannot be good laws where the state is not well armed, it follows that where they are well armed they have good laws. I shall leave the laws out of the discussion and shall speak of arms.”*

# Coercive Force

- The legitimacy of law rests entirely upon the threat of coercive force
- Fear is always preferable to affection in subjects
- Violence and deception are superior to legality
- People obey only because they fear the consequences of not doing so



*“One can say this in general of men: They are ungrateful, disloyal insincere and deceitful, timid of danger and avid of profit...Love is a bond of obligation which these miserable creatures break whenever it suits them to do so; but fear holds them fast by a dread of punishment that never passes”*

# *The Prince*

- Attacks the notion of any grounding for authority independent of the sheer possession of power
- Authority as a right to command has no independent status
- The ruler who lives by his rights alone will surely wither and die by those same rights
- The methods for achieving obedience are varied – the successful ruler needs special training

# *The Prince - Virtù*

- Personal qualities needed in order to “maintain one’s state” and to “achieve great things”
- Princes of the highest *virtù* are capable of behaving in a completely evil fashion
- The prince above all else must acquire a “flexible disposition”

## *The Prince – Flexible Disposition*

- Capable of varying his/her conduct from good to evil and back again “as fortune and circumstance dictate”
- Knows which strategies and techniques are appropriate to particular circumstances
- Competent in the application of power

# *The Prince - Fortuna*

- Fortuna (Fortune) is the enemy of political order, the ultimate threat to the safety and security of the state
  - Like a destructive river
  - Like women
- Fortuna is depicted as a primal source of violence and as antithetical to reason
- Virtù provides the ability to respond to fortune at any time and in any way necessary

# Morality, Religion, and Politics

- Rulers should avoid the common values of justice, mercy, temperance, wisdom and love of their people in preference to the use of cruelty, violence, fear, and deception
- Christianity saps from human beings the vigor required for active civil life
- Speaks with disdain and admiration about the contemporary condition of the church and its Pope

# *The Prince* – The “State”

- The “state” is literally owned by whichever prince happens to control it
- The character of governance is determined by the personal qualities and traits of the ruler
- In order to “maintain his state” the prince can only rely upon his own personal characteristics to direct the use of power and establish his claim on rulership

# Could Such A Prince Exit?

- Seems to doubt that a human could be psychologically capable of such flexibility in their disposition
- Can point to no single ruler who evinced the sort of variable *virtù* that he deems necessary for the complete control of fortune
- Uses the subjunctive mood: “If it were possible to change one’s nature to suit the times and circumstances, one would always be successful”

# True Meaning of *The Prince*?

## Various Views

- Moral values have no place in the types of decision that political leaders must make (Benedetto Croce)
- Stance of a scientist – distinguishing between the “facts” of political life and “values” of moral judgment (Ernst Cassirer)
- *The Prince* meant to expose rather than celebrate the immorality at the core of one-man rule (Rousseau)
- Supreme satirist (Garret Mattingly)
- Meant to trap the prince (Mary Deitz)

# The *Discourses On The Ten Books Of Titus Livy*

- Published posthumously in 1788
- Demonstrates his republican sympathies
- Framers of the American constitution guided by his republican ideals

# *Discourses - Liberty*

- Liberty forms a value that anchors Machiavelli's political theory
- Only a republic, for which Machiavelli expresses a distinct preference, may this goal be attained
- Contrasts the best case scenario of a monarchic regime with the institutions and organizations of a republic
- Shows that even the most excellent monarchy lacks certain qualities endemic to a republican government - makes the republic more desirable

# *Discourses* – French Kingdom

- Greatest virtue - dedication to law
- France moderated more by laws than any other kingdom
  - Due to the function of the Parlement – who maintains the laws and orders
  - The French king and nobles are checked by the laws of the realm - enforced by the independent authority of the Parlement

# *Discourses* – French Kingdom

- Even such a regime is incompatible with *vivere libero*
- Vast majority of people confuse liberty with security
- In France the people live securely because its kings are bound to infinite laws
- This is the limit of monarchic rule - can only guarantee to its people tranquil and orderly government

# *Discourses* - Disarmament

- A consequence of a secure state is the disarmament of the people and the use of foreign mercenaries.
- A state that makes security a priority cannot afford to arm its populace
- The state is weakened because it must depend upon foreigners to fight on its behalf
- A weapons-bearing citizen militia is the ultimate assurance that neither the government nor some usurper will tyrannize the populace

# *Discourses*

- In France the people are entirely passive and the nobility is largely dependent upon the king
- In a republic both the people and the nobility must take an active role in self-government

# *Discourses – Popular Liberty and Popular Speech*

- Ascribes to the masses an extensive competence to judge and act for the public good
- The “people” are more concerned about, and more willing to defend, liberty than either princes or nobles
- The “people” are not concerned with dominating or controlling others
- Debate is elevated as the best means for the people to determine the wisest course of action and the most qualified leaders
- The republic is governed by words and persuasion – public speech

# Discourses – Character of Republican Leaders

- Republic is better able to adapt itself to diverse circumstances owing to the diversity found among its citizens
- Evolution of Roman military strategy against Hannibal

# Summary

- Contributed important discourses in Western thought
- Writings are unsystematic, inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory
- Impact of his musings has been widespread and lasting
  - Debate still ongoing
  - His ideas on republican thought can be seen in the ideas that guided the framers of the American constitution
- Term “Machiavellian” or Machiavellism” used by philosophers concerned with a range of ethical, political and psychological phenomena