

The Prince: What Others Have to Say about Machiavelli

We are much beholden to Machiavelli and other writers of that class, who openly and unfeignedly declare or describe what men do, and not what they ought to do. For it is not possible to join the wisdom of the serpent with the innocence of the dove, except men be perfectly acquainted with the nature of evil itself; for without this, virtue is open and unfenced, nay, a virtuous and honest man can do no good upon those who are wicked, to correct and reclaim them, without first exploring all the depths and recesses of their malice.

-- Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*

Machiavelli's intention was not the study or the creation of that particular science which we today call political science. It is important that we should come to his work as historians, not as theorists who hanker after synthesis. The science which he is regarded as having invented is a particular policy that he was commending for adoption by the practical statesman; or it was an element conditioning political action that he was subjecting to analysis. His teaching is a collection of concrete maxims--warnings and injunctions in regard to certain points of policy, rules of conduct for specified emergencies, and expositions of tactical moves.

—Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli*

Supreme among the political thinkers of all time, Machiavelli, in common with the greatest politicians--who, like him, so resemble the artist in that their logic and their dogma are completely subordinate to their intuition--has what may literally be termed initial inner "illuminations," immediate, intuitive visions of events and their significance.

—Federico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*

Free of rhetorical flourishes, the style lays bare the mind at work, a mind impatient of all nuances and shadings of thought, but poised for irony and quick with sarcasm./ Lively and ductile, it is irresistibly attracted to sharp antithesis, aphorisms, and half-concealed images. The pace is hurried, and indeed at times the writer's pen seems in danger of losing its battle to keep up with the headlong rush of ideas as clause follows upon clause. As a consequence, the syntax does not always flow smoothly, and even the grammar becomes shaky. Yet these are only minor flaws. Lacking grace, the expression nevertheless remains lucid, even if we sometimes wish that the diction were more precise and the pace more restrained. Whenever possible, the writer adheres to a simple pattern: every argument unfolds a lesson and comes to rest upon a political axiom, often new and always, in his view, incontrovertible. All in all, the style is in accord with the shape and temper of Machiavelli's thought.

Daniel Donno, "Introduction," *The Prince*

Machiavelli inevitably had a felt need for the formation and expression of the political will of the community. Despite the fact that he lived in and worked for one city-state while spending his leisure time pondering the fate of other city-states, Machiavelli has proven to be vitally relevant to those living in the era of the emergence and spread of the national-state system and the rich and tumultuous development of the internal political life of Western peoples; at least in part because of his insistence upon viewing the political life of a people as the highest expression of its culture.

—Martin Fleisher, Machiavelli, *The Nature of Political Thought*

The Prince has been read as if it were a treatise on political theory, instead of being considered an impassioned answer to a particular historical situation. Admittedly, Machiavelli believed that historical situations repeat themselves, and that good solutions may also be repeated. This does not, however, alter the fact that *The Prince* was written at a time of grave national and personal crisis and must be understood in the light of such events.

—A. J. Krailshmeimer, *The Continental Renaissance*

One significant way in which Machiavelli contributed to the new confidence in man was in his separation of politics from religion and his challenge to the secular authority of the Church. The human activity of politics, Machiavelli believed, can be isolated from other forms of activity and treated in its own autonomous terms. In a word politics can be divorced from theology, and government from religion. No longer is the state viewed as having a moral end or purpose. Its end is not the shaping of human souls, but the creation of conditions which would enable men to fulfill their basic desires of self-preservation, security, and happiness. Religion has the vital function of personal salvation, of serving as an important instrument of social control—a basis for civic virtue rather than moral virtue.

—Anthony Parel, *The Political Calculus*

Then, in 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli, an obscure and discredited diplomatist, wrote an analysis of politics called *The Prince*. It was an electrifying, horrifying work. It treated men as greedy, cruel, pugnacious, corrupt. It set forth the diabolic stratagems (deceit, assassination, betrayal, wholesale murder) by which power can be seized, enforced and extended. It ignored the sanctimonious precepts of tradition. Incisive, epigrammatic, icy in his detachment, Machiavelli reduced politics to problems of “force and fraud.” He replaced morality with self-interest.

--Leo Rosten, “They Made Our World,” *Look* (19 Nov 1963)

Machiavelli totally ignores the orthodox Christian injunction that a good ruler ought to avoid the temptations of worldly glory and wealth in order to be sure of attaining his heavenly rewards. On the contrary, it seems obvious to Machiavelli that the highest prizes for which men are bound to compete are “glory and riches”—the two finest gifts that Fortune has it in her to bestow.

—Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli*

Ever since Niccolò Machiavelli's day *The Prince* has been considered by some to be a diabolical production, and its author's name has been held synonymous with Satan (hence, according to Samuel Butler, “Old Nick”). Passages have been quoted out of context to prove their author depraved and immoral. Although such a practice is unfair and does not do justice to Machiavelli's whole thesis, it must be admitted that he exalts the state above the individual; that the most enthusiastic exponents of his theories have been Napoleon, Bismarck, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin; and that his state is exempt from the obligations of “religion” and “morality.”

—Buckner B. Trawick, *World Literature*