

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***The Prince*** (published 1532, written 1513) Niccolo Macchiavelli. (1469-1527)

### *Transition*

With Macchiavelli we enter a cultural ambience which Erasmus would have understood, though it would have perplexed, at the least, Ficino and Pico. It is not just a question of changing economies and geopolitical jockeying—for we are, with all three men still in the small state Florentine culture which had been so richly confident during the fifteenth century. But where Ficino and Pico worked out of and from that small state culture, Macchiavelli worked in it as a professional diplomat, and devoted his thought to the way the state worked. He was a hard-headed and practical sociologist of his time and place, and a cold blooded analyst of power politics within a world of sophisticated mini states. The resultant mind shift, from the Florentine Neo Platonist to the Florentine sociologist, was sudden and fruitful. Did it bear promise of a new way of thinking, the first glimpse of a modern mindset? While Macchiavelli was a man of god and of order, he embraced effective guile, and political infighting—if it brought victory. Here is a fragment of the modernization of the European mind, devoted not to penetrating the mysteries of the cosmos, like Ficino, but to the adjustment of power and influence within the state.

### *Background*

Macchiavelli spent his years of formative thought as a senior diplomat in the Florentine Republic, at a time when the most dramatic cultural and political developments of the Italian Renaissance were making of the many Italian city-states the cultural centers of the early modern world. From 1498 to 1512 Macchiavelli worked as secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence. Thanks to a wide range of writing—dramas, poems, investigations in political practice and theory—Macchiavelli attracted wide attention in his mature work; ultimately, reaching to our own day, virtually worldwide attention for his brilliant and sometimes puzzling work in political science. It was this latter work, much of it seeming to bear a dark and cynical cachet, which had already in Niccolo's own time made his name synonymous with self-interested and strategically questionable politics.

### The Text of *The Prince*

The political world of Machiavelli, as expressed in his master text, *The Prince*, was one of several smallish city states—think back to the ancient Greek polis, that self-sufficient, independent, political unit which became the repository of so much of ancient creativity, in politics and the arts. The great Italian city-states—Florence, Milan, Perugia, Rome, Siena—were centers of painting, philosophy, and of great universities, some of the foundational institutions of the increasingly influential tradition of higher education which contributed so greatly to the shaping of the modern world. The competitive artistic fervor, and rapid growth of early capitalism all contributed to the daring ideas of the intellectual milieu, in which Macchiavelli lived and worked.

### *Macchiavelli in retirement*

*The Prince* plunges us into many of the thoughts Macchiavelli formulated after retiring from active political life. (In a letter to Francesco Vettori he describes the ease with which he typically shifted into the end of the day and into his other life, the world of the past, and of its meaning. 'I enter the ancient courts of rulers who have long since died...I feed on the only food I find nourishing and was born to savor...' From those succulent feasts of ancient Greek and Roman culture, and from his vast reading and experience in the culture of his own just post classical world, Macchiavelli formulated an original and often startling theory of ruling, dealing with one's enemies and with one's peoples, and guaranteeing the independence and security of one's own governing environment.

### *The initial premise*

There are old fashioned principalities, in which a governed body traditionally inherits a static ruling system passed down from an hereditary ruler to his descendants. This is the classical form of principality, governed in succession by members of the same family. There is also a new kind of principality, which Machiavelli will characterize in his booklet about *The Prince*. This new type of polity brings to the ruler's job perspectives which vary greatly from those of, say, the *principes* of ancient Greece or Rome, which were by and large gatekeepers of a certain tradition of state-sustaining. The new *princeps* envisioned by Macchiavelli has much to do with shaping new perspectives on ruling and power, and is tangibly a *practitioner* inside the new world system of Early Modernism, or Renaissance. The new *princeps* of Macchiavelli's perception is a shaper of his own as well as his principality's destiny.

### *Taking hold as ruler*

In *The Prince* Macchiavelli is giving us a recipe book, precisely intended for the Prince of his city-state world. This ruler both inherits possessions or acquires them, in the course of building and protecting his state. In either instance the prince must from the get go look into the best way to preserve his realm. The best ways, Macchiavelli argues, are either to settle oneself into his newly acquired territory, or to plant settlements there, if possible grafting the acquired territory onto one's own native culture. This kind of organic absorption will be a way of investing fully in the prince's chief undertaking, *war and acquisition*. If, however, the defeated and occupied territory is accustomed to its own freedom, and its own constitution, the best way to confirm one's governance is to devastate the occupied territory. Wiping it out, you will be able to begin from the beginning with this particular piece of real estate. Macchiavelli's friendship with such ruthless power-families as the Borgias and the Medici prepared him for this kind of last ditch annihilation.

### *'Whoever is responsible for another's becoming powerful ruins himself'*

As the above suggests, Macchiavelli is eager to advise the prince on the details of the power game. Why else, after all, should one be so concerned about holding onto occupied and acquired possessions. Power, only power and not money, drives this *Machtpolitik* advice, with which Macchiavelli is so prodigal. Why else should the state of his arms and weaponry be the foremost concern of the prince?

### *What makes for a 'great leader'?*

Both luck (*Fortuna*) and prowess (*virtu*) need to favor the great leader, not arms in a vacuum. Macchiavelli may surprise us with his examples of great leaders in the past: Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus. In Macchiavelli's book, these are all prophetic or persuasive, or harmony-importing rulers of that great past into which, as we observed earlier, Macchiavelli himself subsided, after deepening himself into retirement. *Fortuna* comes to us in this way. For *Fortuna* to support one, one has to have been needed by one's historical setting in its specifics—for example one's people need to have had a leader who was in a position to take them out of Egypt, or who (like Cyrus) knew how to speak to the hearts, and the unique historical needs, of the Persians. *Fortuna* must coincide with prowess, for neither of these forces is enough by itself, to guarantee great leadership. It needs repeating that *virtu*, manliness, is the foremost requisite of leadership. Effeminacy is across the board scorned in Macchiavellian culture.

### *Fear or hatred?*

The present considerations, of a great leader, segue into issues of public opinion. How did such great leaders as mentioned above, or as are abundantly interspersed across the landscape of Macchiavelli's Italy, hold their grip, not on their colonies—discussed above—but on their citizens. Was the fear one's subjects felt more effective, or was love the finest security? Macchiavelli is glad enough to accept the power of benign wisdom, as in the case of the great Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, but in the case of lesser rulers, who lack the experience or charisma, he returns to his insistence on power. Instances of overtly criminal rule are introduced, and examples like that of Oliverotto, who sequestered and butchered

his competition in Fermo, are included among those justified in taking any recourse necessary to guarantee their own power. While Macchiavelli declares his enmity to evil, and his belief in a good god, he is not easily persuaded by any behavior that reduces a man's ability to win out through prowess, or even guile. He has a remarkable tolerance for such behaviors as those of Oliverotto, a man with a tainted past who returned to his old city of Fermo, played nice guy for as long as he could, then found an occasion to massacre those fellow citizens so careless as to question his power. A wise prince is careful always to render his people dependent on him, so that when the prince is forced into extreme circumstances he will be able to rely on a fund of support from the citizens under him.

#### *A healthy state*

Lest one underestimate the range of Macchiavelli's sensibility, be in known that he had an active sense of what makes a state or principality healthy. To this point we have been discussing game plans essential to the individual prince. Clearly, though, Macchiavelli values the benefit to himself which can accrue from satisfied and loyal citizens. 'The main foundations of every state...are good laws and good arms...' Macchiavelli looks to his own immediate culture, in asserting this, and discovers that his point is not a truism. The kicker is that many of the armies that protected the city states of Italy were mercenary forces, ultimately loyal to no one. 'Mercenaries are disunited, thirsty for power, and disloyal; they are brave before their friends, and cowards before the enemy.' Only citizen armies play into a healthy state. Even at that, there is a kind of army which is more harmful than mercenaries, that is auxiliary armies. These armies, which are loaned to a principality from outside, can fight more professionally than mercenaries, who simply want your money, but are more dangerous than mercenaries. Auxiliaries form a standing army dependent on a foreign power, with sufficient training that, if turned against the prince of one state, they can do him irreparable harm.

#### *Centrality of war*

Macchiavelli puts it all bluntly, as we have seen: 'a prince must have no other object nor thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war...' 'The art of war is all that is expected of a ruler. 'One will doubtless be struck, in such a formulation, by the utter indifference to the arts and culture, or to the spiritual dimension --we recall the author's allegiance to God. Just as virtue, or prowess, are the key values of a man, so war is the true test of his value, not least because of the security and wealth it secures for the prince. The mindset of the prince must constantly reflect this centrality of war. The prince himself must think war and military affairs in every part of his life, skilling himself at the hunt, training his body in military exercises, preparing himself for self-defense. (No missing the carry over, here, to Castiglione's portrait of the Courtier, in the book devoted to that iconic figure of Renaissance Italian court and military life. It was mandatory that the 'courtier' be at all times ready to defend himself, whether with sword or dagger, or with wrestling. It is equally mandatory that the prince be alert to geographical and geo- logical details, as they might any day prove relevant to the jobs of fortressing or assaulting.

#### *The training of the prince*

While we have had little cause to stress the grandeur of Renaissance art and culture, under the regimes of the Italian prince, we need to add that the study of history emerges as a sine qua non for the Prince. Like Montaigne, Macchiavelli strongly stresses the importance of following the examples of 'the ancients,' who, especially Romans, actually formed the dominant base of historical education in Western Europe during the Renaissance. While it is unclear whether Macchiavelli read Greek, he was full of examples of Roman literature and political history; citing his detail like a true scholar. It was a matter of course for him to think in algorithms like this: 'Alexander the Great imitated Achilles; Caesar imitated Alexander; and Scipio, Cyrus.' The examples favored here are predominately military.

#### *Ostentatiousness of the prince*

Macchiavelli is keenly interested in the initial impressions made on the people by the actions of a new ruler. Conspicuous public works, like fortifications and bulwarks, can impress the people as well as adding to their security. The same can be said for displays of extravagance, at which the people can

enjoy unaccustomed food and drink, and the seemingly straightforward pleasure of hobnobbing with their rulers. The form this sociability assumes will depend on the ruler's strategies. Does he want special favors from the populace? Does he want to stress his disciplined if humane side? Above all, does he want to instill fear or affection in the people? Both a lion and a fox, the smart ruler will know how to frighten, even to exercise cruelty, but only under circumstances that direct and shape policy. He will at all stages of rule be conscious of keeping his people on his side. It will at times be necessary to stir up dissension or conflict among the people—so that one can ostentatiously pacify a rough situation, thereby proving magnanimity—but such occasions are rare, and in the present, says Machiavelli, there is very little to be said for dissension.

### *Princely alliances*

It should be the prince's practice to take sides, and to continue faithfully in the allegiances he has undertaken. Any effort to avoid war is likely to generate a wider outburst of fighting, and to bring on additional disadvantages for the actor, who will inevitably get caught up in factional disputes. For good service in military campaigns, the prince must be ready to hand out handsome rewards. He must treasure reliable and talented ministers, who will consequently feel indebted to the prince. The advice of objective minded ministers, who can truly see and pursue valuable opinions, and can root out flattery wherever it can be found, is of great value to the ruler. A new ruler is always of special interest, as opposed to a fixed hereditary ruler, and should satisfy the people's hunger for fresh and unfamiliar ideas. While doing so, he should keep in mind that, as Macchiavelli puts it, 'our lives are half dependent on fortune, and half on our own determination.' so that we must keep unexpected turns of fate in mind. We must do our best to promote situations in which control falls into our own hands. 'Fortune is a woman, and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her.'

### *Themes*

*The Prince* is a succinct, subtle book of advice for the princely leader of a Renaissance state. While its aim is in part practical, it is also a launchpad for the serious study of political science. Aristotle and Plato were of course the forefathers of the theories of politics inherited by Macchiavelli, but neither Plato's *Republic* nor Aristotle's *Politics* entered the practice of state management in the concrete, and for each of those Greeks, politics heavily intersected with theories of human nature, human destiny, and chance, as distinct with the dialogics of social shaping. There are, nonetheless, speculative themes in Macchiavelli's work, and they are the theoretic leaven that raises his thought.

### *Princely rule.*

Macchiavelli's book is concerned with the prince, or ruler of a small scale principality. The author is himself a veteran of diplomatic court life, and has drawn his thinking and examples from his own personality. Thus individual experience builds the theme of ruling, here, and the stratagems and intuitions of a particular ruler are the foundation of the prince's procedure. How to lead, how to exert power, how to milder your discourse when needed, how and when to exercise cruelty. The ins and outs of skillful principality-ruling are the dominant theme of *The Prince*. As such, *The Prince* is an instructive and realistic novelty.

### *Craftiness*

Macchiavelli is proud to think of himself as a fox, and as an experienced person privy to many tactics and stratagems for manipulating a city-state. He is a subtle judge of appropriateness: of when to block dissension within the community, of when to make war—almost always, if there is any significant provocation; of what kind of ministers to choose for delicate diplomatic conflicts, of how to learn military procedures from the example and study of the past, of how to deal with flatterers and how to choose ministers who will give you accurate advice.

### *Dignity and Honour*

Machiavelli sees no conflict between honor and craftiness. Honour, in fact, may be most clearly expressed by the keen sightedness that enables you to anticipate hostile behaviors, or language intended to demean or disparage you. Honor is sustained by being crafty. Manliness, virtue, is another element of the honorable man. To be effeminate is, in the understanding of Machiavelli's culture, to be less than a man, in no condition for honor, in this treatise for which the culture arts play so small a role. Again it is worth comparing Macchiavelli's manly ideal with that of Castiglione, whose courtier can fight on a dime or thrill a coterie of ladies.

### *The past*

Macchiavelli puts great stress on the value of the historical, especially the Roman historical, past. Plutarch, Tacitus, or Livy serve as regular benchmarks for value thinking, as Machiavelli seeks for models around which to construct his crafty image of the prince. The Italian city states were themselves republics in the ancient Roman sense, independent, self-reliant, and tuned to one-man control.

### *The future prince*

It will be remembered that Macchiavelli devotes *The Prince* to the 'new prince,' no archaic autocrat, but a man of modern temper, who understands the 'psychology' of governance and of being governed' For Macchiavelli, that understanding is part of the modern temper—I borrow a term from Joseph Wood Krutch's book of the same name—to which practical realism is the effective insight. The romantic trappings of governance were, for Machiavelli, nothing but ostentatious facades intended to bluff the man on the street—might Macchiavelli not have levelled the same critique at the televised funeral of Queen Elizabeth? *Machtpolitik*, stripping rulership to the self-interest of a ruling cadre, was our prince's gesture of welcome to the modern mind.

### Study guide

With Erasmus and Macchiavelli, different as they are, we see in common their birth on the modern side of the year 1600 and thus, in a literal sense, both are figures of Renaissance culture. In actuality the passage of one century into another is a textbook convenience, and in fact leaves us with nothing more definite than the realization that spiritualized points in time are only as significant as we make them.

In this study guide please expand our inquiry into the broad issue of historical time. Is it real? What is it that separates Pico and Ficino from Erasmus and Macchiavelli? Is it historical time? But what is that? Presumably it has gone? We would not know where to go to find it. Shall we then say that it is a fiction created by humans as an extrapolation from recorded numerals, dates of births and dates of deaths? Has the historical reality of us, the fiction makers, any more substantiality than that of the temporal outline we construct to represent history?