



1989

The IS and OUGHT of Niccolo Machiavelli

Krista Stearns '89

Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev>

Recommended Citation

Stearns '89, Krista (1989) "The IS and OUGHT of Niccolo Machiavelli," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol3/iss1/8>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

The IS and OUGHT of Niccolo Machiavelli

Krista Stearns



*View of Florence.
Photo by Susanna Woodard.*

Niccolo Machiavelli has long been termed the teacher of evil. Notorious for his treatise *The Prince*, he has earned a reputation in human history as a ruthless individual consumed with the intricacies of power and oppression. However, most overlook his contributions to the republican government in Florence, as well as, what is perhaps his greatest work, *The Discourses*. In *The Discourses* he extolled the value of rule by the people in order to attain liberty. He also revered the Roman-style of republican government. How does one reconcile the apparent paradox? Only through careful evaluation of the nationalistic political history of renaissance Italy is one able to expose the true Machiavelli to twentieth century audiences.

The politics of 15th and 16th century Florence, and of Europe in general, were tumultuous. While only in his twenties Machiavelli was witnessing a crumbling republic under the leadership of the religious figure Savonarola. Florence was facing other grave political and economical problems, the resolution of which depended upon Florence regaining Pisa. Pisa was a valued trading post, as well as a target for French occupation. The French and other powers were seen as a threat to Florentine liberty. Various European powers had already captured other cities in the northern part of the peninsula and all the powers seemed determined to split Italy among themselves. Here, it must be kept in mind that Europe was still in a feudal state of affairs. Nations were just beginning to gain a sense of nationality. In the midst of such confusion, Machiavelli, a Florentine nationalist interested in the preservation of Florence and Italy, became active. For example, he was instrumental in establishing the rural citizen militia. This militia was a

key factor in the eventual regaining of Pisa in 1509 after thirteen years of warfare.¹

The political upheaval that the people of renaissance Italy witnessed helps to explain the fascination with war and power for which Machiavelli is so well known. He, in fact, became particularly interested in the practical aspect of winning wars and wrote books such as the *Arte della Guerra* on the subject. This demonstrates two things: one, that Machiavelli's infatuation with war was a natural reaction to his world as disarmament is to the people of today, and two, that he was particularly interested in the practical world. J. H. Whitfield in his book *Discourses on Machiavelli*, in support, states that "before the time of *The Prince*, Machiavelli had never written a treatise without some practical purpose, and some special context."² *The Prince* is no exception. In writing this treatise it is clear that Machiavelli had in mind the establishment of a strong leadership in Florence. This leadership would now hold Florence together, but, eventually, the leadership would gain considerable strength so as to unify Italy in order for her to reassert her greatness. Furthermore, *The Discourses* are a natural progression from *The Prince*. In both works he professes many of the same techniques of rule and retains his observations on human nature. He regards these observations as underlying constants that must be considered in any regime, autocratic or republican.

The practical side of Machiavelli may be best explained by today's term *realpolitik*. This concept is demonstrated in Machiavelli's famous phrase from *The Prince*, "the end justifies the means."³ As Max Lerner states, Machiavelli distinguishes between what is and what ought to be.⁴

Machiavelli primarily concerns himself with empirical realm, viewing accurate appraisal of existing conditions as the only way to rule

successfully. He reserves any normative discussion for the theme of *The Discourses*. But, despite the idealized theme applauding the virtues of republican forms of government, the importance he formerly attached to the empirical remains. In *The Discourses* he retains an emphasis of a strong military, stresses the role of religion as a means of unifying and controlling the people, reiterates the necessity of a strong, almost Periclean leader, and, finally, Machiavelli emphasizes the need of mass consent for the longevity and security of any regime. Many of these commonalities will be expanded upon more as I discuss Machiavelli's realism and nationalism in specifics.

Nationalism, although referred to earlier, is an important ideal that helps to reconcile the two texts, and requires a more detailed examination. Not only was Machiavelli a proponent of a sovereign Italian nation, but, his belief in the importance of the state was revolutionary for his time. In fact his conception of the state was almost religious, for he places it as the highest good. This is blatantly the case in *The Prince* as we see Machiavelli wavering from his democratic preferences which are so prevalent in *The Discourses*. This nationalism was also practiced in Machiavelli's own life by serving the republican government in Florence and by resolving to participate in public service despite the form of government. Machiavelli best delineates his view in *The Discourses* when he states that the country should be preserved by any means.

For where the very safety of the country depends upon the resolution to be taken, no considerations of justice or injustice, humanity or cruelty, nor glory or of shame, should be allowed to prevail. But putting all other considerations aside, the only question should be, What course will save the life and liberty of the country?⁵

Here, as in *The Prince*, Machiavelli is willing to forego morality and his convictions of the superiority of republican rule in order to assure the higher good of the preservation of the state. Government is not about preserving individual liberties, but rather preserving the existence of the state.

Additionally, it is reasonable to conjecture that these nationalistic ideals were an offspring of his realism. In Machiavelli's world European powers were consolidating, particularly France and Spain which were at their zenith at this time. In the interests of protecting Florence, its citizenry, Italian culture, and the liberty of the future, Machiavelli saw an Italian nation as the only means of recourse. But this would call for order, and an order that could only be realized through the leadership of a prince. A prince was needed for the people were weak. The new, unified nations emerging in Europe were the force with which to be reckoned. To survive, the Italians, too, must unify and practice the ruthless, superficial politics that the rest had already adopted. Machiavelli was not the progenitor of the practice, he just happened to be among the first to put it in writing.

An analysis of Machiavelli's realism best explains why Machiavelli wrote his little treatise illuminating the immorality of effective, princely rule. Aside from the bellicose nature of government that Machiavelli continuously witnessed, perhaps the one thing that had the most profound influence upon him was the diplomatic missions for the republican government that Machiavelli participated in during the early 1500s. These missions helped him to view the strife in the peninsula from an international perspective. He watched the cold, deliberate machinations of foreign leaders anxious to wield their influence upon the weak Italian states. His visit to the court of Cesare Borgia was especially enlightening. It was there where his strong beliefs on *fortuna*

and *virtu* fully developed.

Under Borgia, Machiavelli observed that illness, among other things, is beyond the control of man; yet, these uncontrollables have ruinous effects. But Machiavelli also witnessed how preparation can be made to prevent the winds of fortune from being without redemption.⁶ This is best exemplified in the passage in *The Prince* which equates fortune to a river that can be tamed with human ingenuity such as dams and dykes. For Machiavelli, it was fortune that blew an ill wind upon Florence. The series of conflicts, of weak leaders, and the continued power of the Church had corrupted the people. These ills created a citizenry which was only interested in self-aggrandizement. Only under the hand of strong leadership (Lorenzo de Medici in this case) could Florence be saved. The people were so corrupt that the *virtu* needed for the success of a republican form of government was not present. Machiavelli's assumption proved to be accurate when liberty was restored in Florence in 1527. The new regime only lasted for three years until the ousted Medici were able to resume power.

The austere measures in *The Prince* were necessary to achieve Machiavelli's goal of restoring order and building a basic infrastructure which would subsequently work to realize his ideal: a republican form of government. This is a similar view to those of John Langton and Max Lerner. Langton, somewhat convincingly, extends his view to include *The Discourses* as a follow up to *The Prince*. Once Florence became stabilized by following directives delineated in *The Prince*, one could then turn to *The Discourses* for guidance. He regards *The Discourses* as a handbook for a return to republican rule. This book would, of course, be used most effectively with the assistance of Machiavelli playing a role as a consultant to the prince.⁷

Machiavelli's view of leadership in both texts pronounces the need for ruthless, sometimes unjust measures. He first stresses the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. This is consistent with his views on *fortuna*, for it is *fortuna* that necessitates these characteristics. Chance can bring good luck or bad luck. And, when chance knocks at the door, the leader must be prepared to take action and adapt to changing conditions. The ability to act with the cleverness a fox and to speak with the force of a lion is also vital. To do otherwise, that is to be neutral, to refuse to act or act quickly and with confidence, would be cruel. It would put the state at risk to aggression or subject it to undue hazards of fortune.

It is also the responsibility of the leader to establish institutions and laws that will outlive the leader. Machiavelli was counting on this in both works. He implores Lorenzo to adopt new "laws and measures" that will liberate Italy and immortalize Lorenzo as her savior.⁸ Thus, for Machiavelli, a leader must possess flexibility, sagacity, physical strength (especially in the form of an organized military), and foresight— all qualities that seem to add up to Machiavelli's ideas on *virtu*. For if *virtu* truly means to do one's duty well, these assets are what it takes to succeed in a principality or a republic. A leader who possesses these qualities will be able to act as the situation requires yet he will still maintain appearances that appease the people. This is highly important in maintaining the civil peace and the unity of the people.

Those who criticize Machiavelli for extreme ruthlessness, evidence of which can be found in both texts, mistakenly evaluate his thoughts from a post-Lockean framework. What people of today find problematic is that the state which Machiavelli desires to build seems to ignore that the construction of such a nation may ruin the things that are beautiful within it. But, from a sixteenth century perspective, when

there was no conception of inalienable or natural rights, he hardly seems excessive. Ideas such as freedom of speech, access to judicial processes, and beliefs of non-interference from the government were not widely held nor even in existence. People were commonly subject to absolute rulers who could do as they pleased. Often these absolute rulers governed only in order to advantage themselves.

What does seem particularly invidious, though, is his call for deceit and trickery. A ruler must be a fox. He need not be religious but appear so; he need not be just but must appear to be just. If clever, a ruler can do what a situation demands while convincing the people of his concern for humanity. But, to the reader, this demonstrates his presumption that running a government calls for means of its own. This is what separates him from the classicists. Machiavelli is willing to acknowledge a separation of the public and private domains.

This position regards *The Prince*, in relation to *The Discourses* and Machiavelli himself, neither as an aberration, nor as a set up, nor solely as a response to the uncertainty and unrest that fortuna had laid upon Florence. Rather, Machiavelli's realism, and notably his nationalism, are viewed as the only effective means of governing the people of the time. Dietz's arguments against this theory are unconvincing. For example, she harps on his historical examples and his exclusion of historical data contradictory to his arguments. I assert that like any smart politician or realist, Machiavelli simply selected supportive evidence most appropriate to his purposes. *The Prince* was not intended as a complete historical account. Furthermore, Machiavelli was not an historian but a politician turned writer. As Leo Strauss points out, *The Discourses*, too, are filled with inconsistencies regarding past events.⁹ The former work, then, is not the only evidence of material that has been ignored or misconstrued. Additionally, the fact that Machiavelli only

designed *The Prince* for the eyes of Lorenzo de Medici support my thesis. Again, one notes that history suggests Machiavelli, in every other treatise he wrote, intended it to address a very specific set of circumstances such as those we find in *The Prince*. And, lastly, the final chapter of *The Prince* not only serves as a call to action for Lorenzo but suggests that he truly believed that the action he calls for would be in the best interests of all. Rule under *The Prince* would not be as brutal as the prevailing circumstances. In the closing of *The Prince* he states, "What Italian would withhold allegiance? This barbarous domination stinks in the nostrils of every one."¹⁰

The differences between these two great works are best reconciled by viewing the measures for ruling a state called for in *The Prince* as being consistent with measures described in ruling a republican government modeled after the great republic of Rome. The underlying practice of the two governments remains remarkably constant. But, Machiavelli's effort to sustain Medici rule created a dichotomy which can only be resolved through evaluating his visions of realpolitik and a unified Italian state. These are the reflections of the practical politics that he was concerned with throughout his adult life. And, despite his love of liberty he acknowledged his forceful rules as being more important than the establishment of a weak republican state. For such a state would be incapable of maintaining order and of creating the new strength that Italy needed in order to flourish. Italy could not be extravagant. The Italians were not in a solely epistemological world, but rather the empirical, practical world of feudal 16th century European politics.

NOTES

¹Hale, J.R. *Machiavelli and the Renaissance Italy*, (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1960), p.10.

²Whitfield, J.H. *Discourses on Machiavelli*, (Cambridge, Great Britain: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1969), p. 23.

³Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince and the Discourses*, with an introduction by Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 66.

⁴Jensen, De Lamar. *Machiavelli: Cynic, Patriot, or Political Scientist?*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: J.C. Heath and Company, 1960), p. 10.

⁵Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince and the Discourses*, with an introduction by Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 528.

⁶Hale, J.R. *Machiavelli and the Renaissance Italy*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), p. 25.

⁷Langton, John and Mary Dietz, "Machiavelli's Paradox: Trapping or Teaching the Prince," *American Political Science Review* (December, 1987), p. 1282.

⁸Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince and the Discourses*, with an introduction by Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 96.

⁹Strauss, Leo. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), p. 36.

¹⁰Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince and the Discourses*, with an introduction by Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 98.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dietz, Mary. "Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception." *American Political Science Review* (September, 1986): p. 777-797.

Gilbert, Felix. *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965.

Hale, J.R. *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960.

Jensen, De Lamar, ed. *Machiavelli: Cynic, Patriot, or Political Scientist?*. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1960.

Langton, John and Mary Dietz. "Machiavelli's Paradox: Trapping or Teaching the Prince." *American Science Political Review* (December 1987): p. 1277-1288.

Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince and the Discourses*. Introduction by Max Lerner. New York: Random House, Inc., 1950.

Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The History of Florence*. Edited by Hugh R. Trevor-Roper. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970.

Strauss, Leo. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958.

Whitfield, J.H. *Discourses on Machiavelli*. Cambridge, Great Britain: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1969.