

Trombley, Tristin

Professor Marcello Bellini

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the topic of the Italian diplomat and political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli, and his book *The Prince*. Using information from lectures and our course readings, I will identify Machiavelli and his philosophy, as well as analyze the contents of his political treatise.

Niccolo Machiavelli was a political philosopher during the time of the Italian Renaissance from the 1400's to the mid-to-late 1600's. He lived his life as a Florentine from 1467 to 1527, where his father was a lawyer. This was also during a time where Savonarola was dominating the public political sphere in Florence, which greatly influenced the beginning of Machiavelli's diplomatic opinions particularly against the Medici family. He obtained a minor post in the Florentine government in 1498 until the Medici rule was restored in 1512 and he was arrested but acquitted. He spent his retirement writing many pieces about war and politics, and he gained inspiration from classic literature from Petrarch and Pico.

His theories were immensely shocking and radical for the time, as he combined scientific and empirical ideology based upon his own experiences in means to seek truth and honesty. He believed reality was 50% fortune and 50% virtue, meaning there were aspects of life one could not control and others that intelligence could influence. He was also famous for proposing the question: Is it better to be loved or feared as a ruler? It was believed that it was better to be feared but not hated, and that a perfect republic could be reached with respect for culture, a strong middle class, civic spirit of virtue, etc. This was seen in his published work "The Discourses," as he commented on the republic of ancient Rome and the art of statecraft.

Another one of his most famous pieces was *The Prince*, written in 1513. It was dedicated to Lorenzo the Second, in hopes to win favor from the Medici. He stated in the beginning that it was not a republican work but contained concerns for how principalities were won. He explained how an absolute ruler could take over and maintain control in a previously republican state. It advised rulers to use violence and cunning ways to protect their power for the sake of stability and success over morality. He wrote that a ruler would perish if he was always good, and that he must be as cunning as a fox and as fierce as a lion. In addition, it is mentioned in chapter XVIII

that a prince should only keep faith when it pays to do so, otherwise he should remain faithless. He noted it was important for a ruler to seem religious but overall disguise his character and work deceptively.

His assessment of the extent of human freedom of action is one that is particularly interesting. Going back to the topic of fortune and virtue, he also stated that human preparations against fortune could only limit its immense power, not fully change the result. He thought about war and politics in this way, being that an invasion of a republic would be inevitable in destiny, but could be mitigated through human devices. This passionate concern with the power of conditions to shape events was used to further explain his sense of fragility of leaders and their plans. A ruler had to be strong, confident, and bold in making such decisions to protect against fortune.

Machiavelli purposely and knowingly took a radical approach to his writing. He innovated political theory by transforming it from the private sphere of government discussions to the public political world. He was most original for dealing with amoral and immoral means by which power is seized, administered, and lost. The appeal to his book came from Machiavelli's willingness to discuss the dark truths of the nature of power, but his reputation suffered greatly due to attacks upon his morality. He was perceived by many as the devil, being nicknamed "Old Nick." It is an understandable accusation, especially given the fact that he so publicly opposed the Medici and then turned around and wrote specifically to please them.

With Machiavelli's belief that to ensure control over a state, terror tactics and brutality were needed, he also admitted that a ruler could not slaughter his citizens. This further represented his notion to underline the complexity of political life and judgment. A ruler cannot be defined simply by one thing; he must be as complex and twisted as society in order to control

it. It is a very fascinating concept, even to apply to today's different standards of government around the world.