

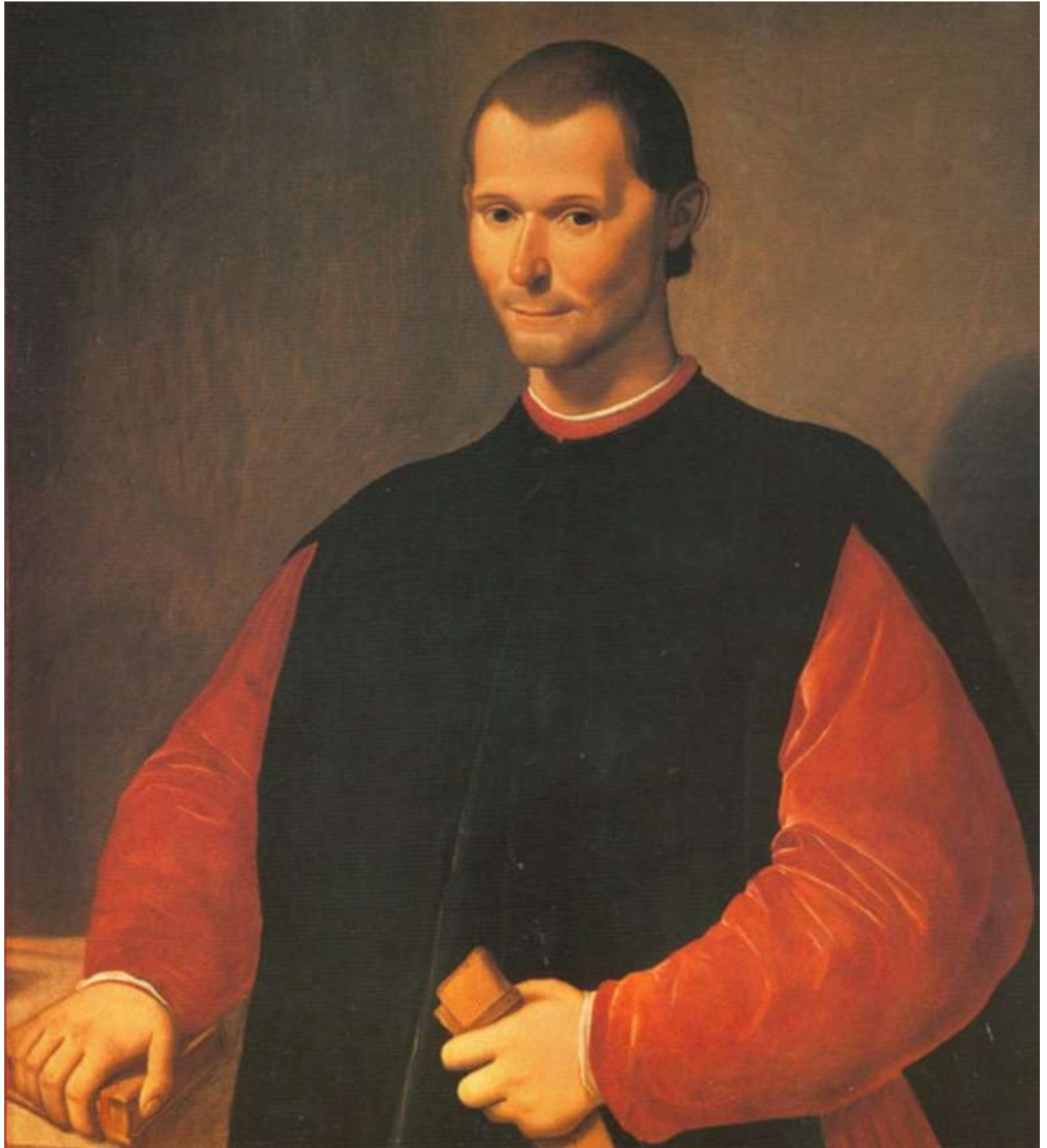


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Machiavelli: Still Shocking after 5 Centuries

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Stewart Patrick [2]

Of all the writers in the “realist” canon—from Thucydides and Hobbes to Morgenthau and Mearsheimer—it is Niccolo Machiavelli who retains the greatest capacity to shock. In 1513, banished from his beloved Florence, Machiavelli drafted his masterwork, *The Prince*. Five centuries later his primer on statecraft remains required if unsettling reading for practitioners and students of politics. Machiavelli’s originality—and the source of his enduring, if notorious, reputation—was his blatant rejection of traditional morality as a guide to political action, and his insistence that statecraft be based on a realistic view of corrupted human nature.

Although frequently damned as an amoral cynic—author of “a handbook for gangsters”, in Bertrand Russell’s words—Machiavelli in fact occupies a more complicated ethical terrain. His central claim is that politics has a moral logic of its own, at times requiring actions to preserve the state that might be regarded as reprehensible within polite society. There are times, in other words, when conventional ethics must be set aside for the pragmatic and expedient dictates of (what would later become known as) *raison d’etat* or “reasons of state”.

What made the *Prince* so daringly modern, as R.J.B. Walker writes, is that it “undermine[d] the universalistic conventions of his [Machiavelli’s] age, whether this is framed as a distinction between morality and politics” or “between two different but equally ultimate forms of morality.” This was a jarringly secular thesis to advance in the early sixteenth century. To be sure, the Catholic Church had grown vulnerable, with the rise of powerful states competing for power and widespread disgust at Papal corruption. Within four years, Martin Luther would post his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenburg, sparking the Reformation and ultimately the fragmentation of Western Christendom. And yet it is still striking that *The Prince* contains no mention of natural law or of the place of man in God’s Great Chain of Being, a common point of reference in Renaissance thinking

Despite his reputation as an influential political theorist, Machiavelli’s body of written work is slight. It consists primarily of *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. Unlike the later realists Hobbes or Rousseau, Machiavelli makes no pretense to offer a systematic theory of politics. Rather, he seeks, from historical study and practical observation, to identify timeless verities of human social behavior and to distill these into a set of maxims, aphorisms, and precepts that may help the prince survive in a treacherous world. He mines the rich history of classical Greece and Rome, as well as the more recent turbulence of the Italian city states, for examples of successful and failed political leadership.

His motivation for writing this primer is not only the edification of his readers but his own political rehabilitation. Seeking to ingratiate himself with Florence’s new ruler, he dedicates *The Prince* to “the Magnificent Lorenzo de Medici,” who, with the assistance of Spanish troops, had overthrown his previous patron, Pier Soderini, the year before. And yet *The Prince* cannot be dismissed as a work of political opportunism. Machiavelli was at his core a Florentine patriot, who wrote, “I love my country more than my soul,” and his book repeatedly betrays anguish at its downfall. His purpose was to find both the cause and the remedy for his city-state’s recent misfortunes. By identifying the fundamental realities and cardinal rules of politics, he believed he could help create a state—preferably a republic—that was both internally stable and just and capable of defending itself from external aggression.

His object was to resurrect Florence from its corrupt and weakened state and to transform it into a “strong, united, effective, morally regenerated, splendid and victorious *patria*” along the lines of Periclean Athens or the Roman republic. Returning the Florentine state to glory would require a prince who possessed and cultivated within his citizenry those pre-Christian faculties prized by great men in the ancient world, including strength, skill, courage, loyalty, honor, civic sense and public-spiritedness. At the same time, cleansing Florence’s ills would require measures commonly considered ruthless, treacherous, cruel, and villainous.

At the dark heart of *The Prince* is an unsparing and unsentimental view of human nature. Most men, Machiavelli writes, are “ungrateful, fickle, dissembling, anxious to fear danger, and covetous of gain.” In such a world, the ruler who conducts himself according to Christian morality will fast come to grief. “The way men live is so far removed from the way they ought to live that anyone who abandons what is for what should be pursues his downfall rather than his preservation.” He explains “Hence it is necessary that a prince who is interested in his survival learn to be other than good.”

What Machiavelli is implying is that the public and private worlds are distinct moral universes, with ultimately irreconcilable codes of conduct. In choosing the life of the statesman rather than the private citizen, the leader

has committed himself to operate (and to be judged) by a separate set of pre-Christian values and principles, dedicated to the creation and security of “a great and glorious state.”

It must be understood... that a prince... cannot observe all of those virtues for which men are reputed good, because it is often necessary to act against mercy, against faith, against humanity, against frankness, against religion in order to preserve the state... he must stick to the good so long as he can, but being compelled by necessity, he must be ready to take the way of evil...

Instead of being a saint in a world of sinners, the prince must cultivate power and ruthlessly crush enemies, unafraid to be judged as wicked and unscrupulous.

Drawing on examples from the Roman emperor Caracalla to the Florentine Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli offers advice for any would-be prince. First and most fundamentally, do whatever is necessary to preserve your power and secure your state. Beware of causing another to become powerful, or of joining forces with a more powerful state, for you will only bring ruin on yourself. Second, be skilled in warfare, “the only art expected of a ruler”. Keep the state on a perpetual war footing and maintain sufficient arms and soldiers to secure your realm from outside aggressors and internal rivals. Treat “peace” as nothing more than breathing space to prepare for another conflict. Ignore just war theory. A war is “just” when it is necessary—no more, no less.

Third, use deception as a central element of your statecraft. Mask your true intentions, and remain faithful to pledges only so long as they are in your interest. Remember that others will be false to you, unless you ensure that their falsehoods do not pay. Beware of surrounding yourself with powerful subordinates. Keep your own counsel and listen to only a few advisors. Eliminate victorious generals and keep nobles weak and divided.

Finally, employ both cruelty and kindness, as the situation warrants, recognizing that it is better to be feared than loved by your subjects, if you cannot be both. When meting out an injury, do it abruptly and severely, to prevent retaliation. Where possible, let others do the dirty work, for you can subsequently gain favor by cutting their heads off. When doling out benefits, do so gradually, so that they taste better. At all costs, avoid becoming an object of contempt. A ruler’s best fortress to not be hated by his people.

Wicked stuff. And yet Machiavelli is no sadist. Unscrupulous means are justified only if they serve one specific end, in the words of Kenneth Waltz, preserving “your power in the state and your state among others.” He does not advocate mindless violence or gratuitous cruelty—not because he is squeamish, but because they are counterproductive. Machiavelli thus counsels prudence as a core element of princely leadership.

What is most scandalous about *The Prince*—no less so now than when it was written—is Machiavelli’s apparent endorsement of the principle that “the ends justify the means”, however cruel and harsh these means be. As the author himself explains, “In all men’s acts, and in those of princes especially, it is the result that renders the verdict when there is no court of appeal”.

Particularly disturbing to contemporary readers is Machiavelli’s lack of remorse about the ruthless statecraft he advocates. There is no sugar-coating for him, no effort to comfort the reader. Wholly absent is the tragic tone of later realists like Hobbes and Rousseau—or, more recently, Morgenthau, Waltz, and Mearsheimer. For these writers, power politics and recurrent war are existential, dispiriting, and regrettable facts, the unavoidable structural byproducts of an anarchical, self-help system that compels each state, like the participants in Rousseau’s famous “stag hunt”, to look after its own interests—and devil take the hindmost.

This problem of interstate anarchy is not, however, Machiavelli’s primary concern. His gimlet eye is focused on human nature. And what he sees is not pretty.

To be sure, Machiavelli was well aware of what later realists would call the security dilemma. As political and military advisor to Soderini, he had sought to manipulate the shifting power balance amongst Italy’s wary and jealous city-states. He had seen his beloved Florence, after a litany of errors (including reliance on too-powerful allies like France), capitulate to its enemies. Such experiences taught him that “it is impossible for a state to remain for ever in the peaceful enjoyment of its liberties and its narrow confines; for though it may not molest other states, it will be molested by them and, when thus molested, there will arise in it the desire, and the need, for conquest.”

But Machiavelli differs from later realists like Hobbes—and more contemporary “neorealists” like the late Kenneth Waltz—in recognizing that human agency matters as much as the structural fact of international anarchy in determining both foreign policy behavior and ultimate outcomes in world politics. Through historical

examples of successes and failures, Machiavelli reminds us that individuals matter. Yes, the world is perpetually changing, buffeting the state in all directions. But even if “there’s a Providence that shapes our ends”—as Shakespeare’s Hamlet observes—a leader’s choices can have a pivotal impact on politics, both domestic and international.

Machiavelli explores the interplay between material forces and human agency through the concepts of *fortuna* and *virtu*. All princes (and indeed, all people) are subject to societal and natural factors larger than themselves. Still, “free will cannot be denied,” Machiavelli insists. “Even if fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, she still allows us to control the other half, or thereabouts.” Though fortune be capricious and history contingent, the able leader may shape his fate and that of his state through the exercise of *virtu*. This is not to be mistaken for “virtue”, as defined by Christian moral teaching (implying integrity, charity, humility, and the like). Rather, it denotes the human qualities prized in classical antiquity, including knowledge, courage, cunning, pride, and strength.

Machiavelli describes the relationship between *fortuna* and *virtu* in the *The Discourses*:

“For where men have but little *virtu*, fortune makes a great display of its power; and, since fortune changes, republics and governments frequently change; and will go on changing till someone comes along, so imbued with the love of antiquity that he regulates things in such a fashion that fortune does not every time the sun turns around get a chance of showing what it can do.”

The prince’s challenge is to ride the wave of *fortuna*, using *virtu* to direct it in the interest of the state, as necessity (*necessita*) dictates.

Machiavelli’s contributions to the tradition of political realism are enduring. They include his admonition to take the world as it is, rather than it should be; his recognition that power and self-interest play a paramount role in political affairs; his insight that statecraft is an art, requiring political leaders to adapt both to enduring structures and changing times; and his insistence that the dictates of *raison d’état* may conflict with those of conventional morality. It is this last contention—that the public and private spheres possess their own distinct moralities—that remains so jarring today.

We live, after all, in an age of democratic sovereignty, in which “princes” are elected by citizens and, as government officials, are expected to conduct themselves with probity, transparency and accountability. The global normative context for statecraft has also changed profoundly, thanks in large measure to the expansion and international codification of individual human rights. Much of the state-sanctioned violence taken for granted in Machiavelli’s day—whether the conquest of empires, the taking of slaves, or the commission of atrocities—is both legally and morally impermissible today, thanks to the expansion of human-rights law, humanitarian law, the laws of war, and the proliferation of international norms, treaties, and institutions defining certain acts as beyond the pale, authorizing sanctions or intervention to put an end to them, and providing judicial mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable. Atrocities and illegal acts still occur, as Darfur or Syria remind us. But standards of legality and legitimacy have evolved, making these the exception rather than the norm.

In other respects, though, *The Prince* holds up well as a guide to politics, domestic and foreign. His accounts of official corruption in Florence, of decadence in the late Roman empire, and of deception by Italian popes would raise few eyebrows in contemporary Washington, D.C. Nor would modern readers be surprised to learn that in political life, it is more frequently the sinners than the saints that rise to power and cling to their positions.

Stewart M. Patrick is a senior fellow and director of the International Institutions and Global Governance Program at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Editor's Note: This piece first appeared last September. We are reposting due to reader interest.

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