

MACHIAVELLI

The Prince and the Virtuous Republic

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI

Scholars have gone through the life of the great Florentine with a toothcomb, hoping to find clues to the meaning of his books in the character of the man. Many accounts of Machiavelli's life are character assassinations to serve particular religious or political purposes. Machiavelli might be said to have had an 'interesting' life for a political theorist, and he certainly had the misfortune to live through interesting times for his native city.

The Machiavellis were an ancient Florentine family, of sound republican principles, who were a bit down on their luck when Niccolo was born in 1469. Machiavelli's lawyer father was able to provide his son with the education in the classics, then much in vogue both as a humanist training and as a preparation for public office. Machiavelli entered the service of the Florentine republic in 1498, and busied himself about its military and diplomatic business until his *annus horribilis* in 1513. During these years Machiavelli attempted to refound Florence's hopes of military glory on a citizen militia, and he met the rising stars of Italian politics, popes and princes, and especially the brightest of the shooting-stars, Cesare Borgia. Machiavelli also visited the courts of the French king, Louis XII, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian, and these experiences may have provided him with something like an outsider's view of Italian politics as petty, vacillating and mildly contemptible. Machiavelli moved in circles high enough to observe the highest fliers at very close quarters, and he was already shrewdly weighing up their actions and characters in his diplomatic reports to his masters in Florence.

In 1512, the Medici princes, backed by the pope and the Spaniards, returned to Florence, and the world began to fall in on the successful servant of the former republic. Machiavelli lost his job, and in 1513 he was tortured, imprisoned and fined for suspected complicity in a republican conspiracy against the Medici. Machiavelli still had important friends who he thought would be able and willing to lobby the great on his behalf, and his most famous work, *The Prince* (completed by the end of 1513), was intended to show Florence's new masters that its author was a man whom it would be

foolish to overlook in the matter of public employment. None of this ever quite came off, and it is probable that after 1513 Machiavelli began reluctantly to see himself as a man of letters rather than a man of affairs.

The Medicis' loss was the world's gain. In his new poverty Machiavelli wrote the masterpieces for which he has become so justly famous, though, outside the academy, nobody will ever be able to detach his name from the obloquy poured upon it for the supposed wickedness of his little book about princes. The *Discourses on Livy*, the *Art of War*, the *Florentine History* and the brilliant comedy *Mandragola* can never hope to erase the adjective 'Machiavellian' from the popular mind. So much the worse for the masses, some of whom at least Machiavelli hoped would one day again play a real part, and share a real part of the glory, of their native lands.

The problem of Machiavelli's political thought can be stated very simply: anyone with the energy to trawl through the vast secondary literature on the great Florentine would have no trouble in finding fifty-seven varieties of Machiavelli. There is a Machiavelli for everyone. Machiavelli commentary from the sixteenth century to the present ranges across such a wide field that Machiavelli has been accused by his enemies of wanting to lead mankind to perdition, and praised by his friends for wanting to lead mankind to salvation.

How can this be? Machiavelli writes as a Renaissance humanist in beautiful Italian. There are no real problems with the Machiavelli texts. We have *The Prince* (1513), *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (1513–17), *The Art of War* (1521) and the *Florentine History* (1525) as Machiavelli wrote them, as well as other political writings, and we have the poetry, a famous play, *Mandragola* (which is still worth performing), and his correspondence, particularly with the historian Guiccardini. Machiavelli exists whole on the page; there are no prizes for restoring corrupt Machiavelli texts. There are none of those deeply buried contradictions in Machiavelli that we find in some of Rousseau's political writings. And Machiavelli is not Hegel, with his notoriously 'difficult' political writings and his German tendency to sacrifice clarity for profundity. Yet the battle for Machiavelli goes on, some wishing at all costs to show that they are anti-Machiavels while others are keen to show that Machiavelli is on their side. (Among these latter is the twentieth-century Italian Communist Party.)

The sheer volume of Machiavelli commentary testifies to the continuous importance of what he wrote about politics. There has always been something about Machiavelli's political writings which his readers have found attractive or repulsive, but it is far from easy to pin down exactly what it is. There seem to be, broadly speaking, five distinct possibilities for explaining the perennial interest in Machiavelli's political thought, though to say that there *are* five is, in a sense, simply to restate that there *is* a Machiavelli problem.

The first possibility is that what Machiavelli wrote about politics is profoundly shocking. This is the stock Machiavelli of the Elizabethan dramatists, the Machiavelli of

'Machiavellianism'. In this view, Machiavelli is the teacher of Iago in *Othello* or Edmund in *King Lear*, the advocate of utterly ruthless and devious methods for the acquisition of power or the doing down of one's enemies. This can even be made into a game played for its own sake, the game of power politics and intrigue played for enjoyment like games of chess, with no other object than to keep playing the Great Game. The Machiavelli of Machiavellianism certainly exists. His hands are not bloodless. *The Prince* is full of hard and calculated advice about how a new prince should act to establish himself in a recently conquered principedom, and a good deal of the advice is about the use of violence and deceit. So much is clear, but what is not so clear is why the advice should be considered to be especially shocking. Machiavelli is always careful to cite modern and ancient precedents for what he advises, not to *excuse* what he has to say but to convince us that his advice would work. His advice to new princes is an extrapolation from the actions of already successful princes, so it is hard to see what was so 'shocking' at least in the sense of being 'shock news'. Machiavelli seems to be saying to princes: 'do what others have already done', only choose your precedents carefully to make sure that you imitate the right prince in the right circumstances. And the notion that princes might have to do some pretty nasty things now and again to save their states had been a commonplace since ancient times. The ancient Romans, so much admired by the Renaissance humanists, had thought nothing of massacring whole peoples, would put their own surrendered armies to the sword to encourage the others, and would decimate a legion before breakfast. (It is only by accident that the word 'humanist' is cognate with our word 'humane'.) Aristotle himself had said that it was a part of political science to advise a tyrant how to survive, and Aristotle's own advice is straightforwardly Machiavellian: he tells the tyrant to 'act like a king'—that is, to deceive.

It is, then, hard to see who exactly it is that would find *The Prince* so shocking. Not princes, because the successful ones at least are already doing what Machiavelli advises. It is, of course, possible that Machiavelli's intended audience for *The Prince* was not princes at all but the people upon whom princely wiles are practised, but why the people should be 'shocked' to find princes doing what the people are already supposed to be looking out for is not clear.

It is possible that Machiavelli's *Prince* is so shocking not so much for what it says but for the way it says it. Machiavelli's realism, it is sometimes said, must have been devastating to contemporary Christians whose minds were still clouded by the bewitching speculations of medieval metaphysics. Here was a thinker who did not try to refute the intellectual assumptions upon which medieval political thought was based, but simply treated those assumptions as if they were not there. So in Machiavelli we find no natural law and very little original sin; nothing about the duty of princes to assist the preaching of the true gospel, and no scriptural reference (beyond admiration for Moses as a leader) and nothing from Augustine and the other Fathers of the Church. On this view of him, Machiavelli was able to throw over the whole intellectual baggage of his age, consigning it all to history's dustbin. To this can be added the element of parody in *The Prince*. The writing of 'Mirrors for Princes' was one of the stock features of medieval political writing. No sooner had a king's eldest son learnt to read than the court chaplain would write him a 'mirror for princes', setting out the Christian virtues which the prince would

be expected to practice when he eventually succeeded to his father's throne. Mercy and liberality could always be relied on to come high on the list. By contrast, ruthlessness and stinginess head Machiavelli's list of the princely virtues. This deliberately parodic flying in the face of all decent convention could only compound the shock that Machiavelli's *Prince* caused to Christian sensibilities. Here was a man who not only defied the intellectual assumptions of Christian Europe but actually flaunted that defiance.

There is something in that view of Machiavelli, but not much. There *is* a sense in which Machiavelli's political thought is un-Christian, and it might be in some important ways anti-Christian (though Machiavelli never denies the truths of Christianity and seems himself to have been conventionally if erratically pious). But the problem with the 'shocking to Christian sensibilities' thesis is that it depends on comparing what Machiavelli has to say in *The Prince* to Christian political and moral theory at their most elevated, and not to Christian political practice. It is easy to forget that Christianity is a religion of forgiveness because there is always going to be a lot in human conduct that requires to be forgiven. Medieval political thinkers and good Christian princes had no illusions about human conduct in general and political conduct in particular. Medieval political thought suffers from the reverse of a lack of 'realism', if by realism we mean a jaundiced view of humankind. Even Thomas's appeal for a gentler view of human nature must have fallen on some deaf ears. And as we have seen in the case of Marsilius, *salus populi suprema lex* could cover a multitude of sins.

Part of the 'shocking to Christian sensibilities' view of Machiavelli is the contention that he is forward-looking in a sense that minds still intent on living in the Middle Ages would have found deeply disturbing. Machiavelli, it is sometimes claimed, looked forward to modernity, and he is supposed to have done this not by challenging the intellectual assumptions of his age but simply by ignoring them. But it is far from clear in what senses Machiavelli's political thought is forward-looking at all. Machiavelli is, after all, a humanist, which in part means he believes the 'rediscovered' classical past has important things to teach him and his contemporaries. In this sense, Machiavelli's political thought is just as 'backward-looking' as the Christian political thought to which it is compared. A case could easily be made for saying that Machiavelli's reliance on his classical sources, particularly Cicero and Livy, is more slavish than the reliance of Christian political thinkers on the Scriptures and the Church Fathers. Machiavelli seems to be saying to princes: 'imitate' the ancients rather than follow them. The lessons ancient history has to teach are not for Machiavelli *general* lessons but, on the contrary, very particular lessons which are supposed to be useful to princes confronted with particular problems in particular situations. The classical past teaches by specific examples and not by maxims so general that they provide no real help in particular cases. The 'Machiavelli versus the Christians' thesis boils down to this: both are essentially backward-looking but they look backwards to different pasts. Even this will not quite do because it ignores the enormous amount of ancient learning preserved and incorporated in medieval thought. Where would Augustine be without Cicero, or Thomas and Marsilius without Aristotle?

And besides, there was nothing necessarily anti-Christian about the Renaissance humanism of which Machiavelli was such a star. Modern historians have long amused themselves by discovering pre-Renaissance renaissances right in the heart of medieval

Christian Europe. There is now a Carolingian renaissance and a renaissance of the twelfth century. There is a Byzantine renaissance (though why it had to be a *re*-naissance is not altogether clear), and no doubt there will be others. Secularism, anti-Christian cosmology and the puffing-up of man's pride were all directions which humanism could easily take, but that still left plenty of Christian alternatives. The Reformation itself can be partly explained as the outcome of humanist thought, and whatever else might be said about the Reformation, it cannot be accused of not taking Christianity seriously.

There is another way of looking at the extraordinary fuss that has always been made about Machiavelli's political thought, and it arises as much from the details of Machiavelli's own life as from what he actually wrote. Machiavelli came from a Florentine family of impeccable republican credentials and he held high office in Florence before the Medici family returned to extinguish for ever the city's republican institutions. Machiavelli wrote his *Discourses* to praise republican government, and he was even tortured on suspicion of being involved in an anti-government plot after the Medici had returned. Yet we find him writing *The Prince* shortly after, a work which appears to explain step by step how a new prince can subdue a newly conquered people. The book opens with a cringing dedication to a Medici prince which contains a thinly veiled plea for employment in Florence's new anti-republican government. History, it is said, hardly contains another such blatant example of public coat-turning. Machiavelli must have been an exceptionally wicked and cynical man to commit such a barefaced treason to his long-held moral and political beliefs. Other facts are then adduced from Machiavelli's life to add to the portrait of wickedness. *Mandragola* is an obscene play; Machiavelli wrote some scandalous letters and verses; he was not a model of husbandly fidelity. He was, in short, a libertine, just the kind of man whom one might expect to betray his political principles with the same levity that he betrayed the principles of ordinary decency. Machiavelli must have been a bad lot, through and through; woe betide the prince who got his statecraft out of *The Prince*, and God help his people.

It need hardly be said that this view of Machiavelli is sustainable only if we confine our reading of Machiavelli to *The Prince*, or if we choose to see a stark contradiction between *The Prince* and both the *Discourses on Livy* and the *Florentine History*. There can be no doubt that we would conclude that Machiavelli was one of the greatest republicans who ever lived if we were to do what nobody ever does, which is to confine our reading of Machiavelli to the *Discourses on Livy*. So the question seems to boil down to this: are *The Prince* and the *Discourses* reconcilable?, and the answer is a resounding 'yes!' Not only that, but the *Discourses* themselves provide us with a complete political theory into which Machiavelli's treatment of princely government in *The Prince* can easily be fitted. Far from there being a contradiction between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, it might be said that *The Prince* is simply one part of the *Discourses* writ large. It may even be that, on a simple level, the fact that *The Prince* is called 'the prince' has misled many readers into thinking that it is specifically and solely intended for the princes of the Renaissance and the restored Medici princes in particular. This is far from being the case. By 'princely government' Machiavelli means any government by one man. 'One Man Rule', though an ugly phrase, would be a much less misleading title for *The Prince*. (It might conceivably be that very simple readers of *The Prince* have

unconsciously paraphrased the title to mean ‘the son of a king’, as if Machiavelli were advising sons to turn against fathers, and to replace traditional Christian kingship with self-aggrandising tyranny. This, for instance, seems to have been a stock Elizabethan view of Machiavelli; it often turns up in Shakespeare, not to mention Webster.) Machiavelli does advise new princes to be ruthless and devious, but this does not mean that all rule has to be ruthless and devious. And even the most cursory reading of the *Discourses* will show that Machiavelli by no means thinks that rule by one man has to be the typical form of government under which men are destined to live. In the *Discourses* Machiavelli makes it perfectly clear that the ruthless rule of a new prince is only one of the forms of government which men must live through, and it won’t necessarily last very long. Properly considered, princely government in Machiavelli’s sense in *The Prince* need only be an episode in the necessary cycle of development in a state from one form of government to another.

If none of the views of Machiavelli that we have considered will explain the extraordinary effect this man’s political thought has had since the sixteenth century, then what does explain it? The effect can be partly explained by the undoubted fact that many anti-Machiavels have only read *The Prince* and have treated some of its classical and Renaissance commonplaces about the occasional necessity for princely ruthlessness as evidence for Machiavelli’s extreme wickedness as a political thinker. But this simple view does not account for the fact that very serious and learned commentary on Machiavelli has often found Machiavelli’s political thought equally disturbing.

There has always been a feeling that Machiavelli is hard to pin down in that shadowy ground that lies between politics and ethics. It may even be that it was Machiavelli himself who made that ground shadowy by questioning the place that moral certainties occupy in political life. It is even suggested that Machiavelli did something called ‘divorcing politics from ethics’ (whatever that means). Perhaps the key to the whole puzzle of Machiavelli is really very simple. Machiavelli’s politics is an attempt to derive a set of political axioms from a set of assumptions about human beings which will always *work*. It is sometimes said that Machiavelli has a very grim view of ‘human nature’, but statements like this can be very misleading. Machiavelli knows that human beings are sometimes very bad, sometimes very good, and sometimes in between. Machiavelli also recognises that a description of human nature like that is hopeless for a political thinker in search of certainties in political life. Building a political theory on the variability of human behaviour would be like building a fortress on quicksand. So Machiavelli begins to ask rather different sorts of questions from the ‘What are men in general like?’ kind of questions. He asks: ‘What is there about human nature which is absolutely consistent?’, or, better still, ‘What assumptions can a prince make about human beings which are absolutely safe and reliable?’ In political terms, this boils down to questions about what will always work.

To answer questions of the last kind, Machiavelli has to take a deliberately truncated view of human nature. He is not really interested in everything about human beings, but only in either what is consistent about them or what the prince may safely take to be consistent. This leads Machiavelli into some grim territory. Take the business of loving and fearing rulers, or, for that matter, loving and fearing anybody. Machiavelli knows

that princes and ordinary people feel good about being loved. This is a fact of life and needs no further explanation. Naturally, it follows that a prince who is loved is more secure than one who is hated, just as an ordinary marriage is more secure if the partners love each other. A prince who is loved by his people will no doubt be tempted to love them in return. As Aristotle remarked long ago, even vicious tyrants cannot help loving their people at least some of the time. But love is a very insecure *basis* for princely rule because human beings often betray the objects of their love. We don't have to go as far as Oscar Wilde ('each man kills the thing he loves') to realise that the history of the world is the history of love's unreliability. (Rome herself was founded through Aeneas' betrayal of his love for widow Dido.) It is the unreliability of love which leads the poet Auden to speak of 'anarchic Aphrodite'.

In Machiavelli's terms, love does not always work because the behaviour of those in love relationships is usually but not always predictable. Fear, by contrast, never fails: 'If you have them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.' Therefore it is an axiom in politics that it is better for a prince to be hated and feared than to be loved only. Hence the motto of that monster of an emperor, Caligula: *Oderint dum metuant* (let them hate me provided they fear me). This is very far from saying that his people's love is of no use to a prince. Of course it is, but a prince would be a fool to take seriously the Christian idea of a good prince basking securely in the warmth of the love of his good people. This would put the prince off his guard. A moment's reflection would tell a prudent prince that he can't actually be loved by everybody. (Christianity itself tells us that it is part of wickedness to hate the good.) There will always be a malcontent out there somewhere, and the world did not have to wait for Hobbes to teach it that any man may, in the right circumstances, kill another. Hatred can sometimes get the better even of fear. There are some men, though they are very rare indeed, whose hatred of a prince can overcome their fear of him, so that they are prepared to 'swing for' princes.

From this unlikely but always possible eventuality comes another of Machiavelli's political axioms for a prudent prince: treat everybody as a potential assassin. It can't matter to the prince that he has to operate on the basis of an assumption about human beings which is not true. Machiavelli is perfectly aware of the fact that assassins prepared to risk horrible deaths to kill princes are very rare. The point is rather that the only safe assumption a prince can make is that he is surrounded by assassins. From this follows a third Machiavellian axiom: dissemble affability. Princes are expected to be friendly to their subjects (within limits), and all princes have to live in courts among friends, family and advisers. The prince must wear the mask while unmasking others, concealing his inner malevolence while seeing through his familiars to the inner malevolence which the prince must always assume is there if he is going to survive. Not, you might say, a very pleasant prospect for princes, but again that does not matter greatly. Part of Machiavelli's message is that those who wish above all things for a quiet life have no business going into the prince business in the first place.

What does matter a great deal is the way the prince has to think, or the way an adviser to princes has to think on the prince's behalf. If there is a general message in *The Prince*, it is that the prudent prince will always think the worst of those by whom he is surrounded. It follows from this that *thinking* about politics and *thinking* about ethics

involve profoundly different ways of looking at the world. Thinking about ethics at all requires that we think of our fellow men as neither very good nor very wicked. If men were very good by nature, then thinking about ethics would be superfluous because men could always be relied upon to act well. If men were very bad, then thinking about ethics would be redundant because men could always be relied upon to act badly. Thinking about ethics is thinking about the 'in between' the very good and very bad, on the assumption that saintliness and devilishness are both very rare. Machiavelli seems to be saying that useful thinking about politics can only proceed on the basis of the assumption that men are always very bad. If the prince acts on the assumption of the universality of human wickedness, it is a case of heads he wins and tails he doesn't lose. It must be stressed that this is a special kind of thinking which applies to politics only. Ordinary family life, or ordinary human life in general, would become impossibly miserable and diminished if it were to be conducted on the basis of the political axioms of Machiavelli. People living their ordinary lives have a choice about what assumptions to act upon as the occasion demands. Sometimes they will assume the best, sometimes the worst, and mostly they will make assumptions which fall somewhere in between.

Princes cannot allow themselves the moral luxury of choice available to their subjects. Thinking the worst the whole time is not something which comes naturally to most men. It has to be learned. Suppose a prince refuses to learn his trade properly. Suppose he insists on conducting himself on the basis of Christian ethics, assuming that men are seldom very good or very bad. Suppose he even goes as far as thinking about his enemies like that. Machiavelli does not say that this is an improper way of conducting princely business in a moral sense; he simply says that it is unsafe. Love your enemies if you will; believe they will keep faith; turn the other cheek if you like, Machiavelli seems to be saying, but don't come complaining to me if you lose your state. Besides, men of sense, if they think at all about so obvious a matter, will naturally want to live in a state well-governed by its prince and feared by its neighbours. Nobody wants to live in a state which is weak and vulnerable to military takeover.

One of the annoying things about Machiavelli is that he refuses to argue that Christian ethics as conventionally conceived are not ethics at all. We would not have the problems we do have with reading Machiavelli if he would just say with an insider's wink that we all really know that the Christian virtues of the Sermon on the Mount aren't really virtues at all, or that they are pseudo-virtues for popular consumption, useful for keeping the plebs in their place but of no use at all to thinking men. But Machiavelli refuses to be Gibbon or Voltaire. The Christian virtues *are* virtues, and we are to take seriously Machiavelli's famous assertion that he was quite looking forward to going to hell because there he could enjoy for eternity the conversation of the ancient sages. Behind the moral bravado lies a real belief in hell's existence and a real sense of his own sin.

It won't do to move Machiavelli on a couple of centuries and put him in with the Enlightenment. Machiavelli is probably a Christian about everything important *except* politics. Commentators have not always emphasised enough just how *political* Machiavelli's political thought actually is. Thinking about politics is different from thinking about anything else. When we say that Machiavelli separates thinking about politics from thinking about ethics, we should add that thinking about politics is different

from thinking about lots of other things as well as thinking about ethics. There may be a Machiavellian ‘world-view’ because nothing is easier to attribute to a great thinker than a view of everything. (It is as if having a world-view is part and parcel of *being* a great thinker.) But what should not be assumed is that whatever Machiavelli thinks about things in general is necessarily ‘Machiavellian’. His view of politics is, but it simply does not follow that his view of everything is ‘Machiavellian’. Commentators on Machiavelli have always been impressed by his intellectual range. Machiavelli might be Renaissance man writ very large indeed, but that does not mean that he has to be Machiavellian over the whole range; nor does it even mean that his thoughts about everything have to be particularly original. It may even be that Machiavelli is a rather conventional kind of Renaissance humanist in everything except politics.

THE ADVICE TO PRINCES IN *THE PRINCE*

The Prince is above all else what we would now call a work of political psychology. Machiavelli is always interested in what goes on inside people’s heads. He always asks what political actors are likely to be thinking in specific political situations, and then goes on to ask whether they are wise to be thinking as they are. This applies particularly, as one might expect, to princes. Princes, no less than other men, are apt to react to situations in perfectly understandable and natural ways, but these ways are not always advantageous to princes. Part of being a prince is learning to react in ways which might seem unnatural, but the one thing Machiavelli never pretends is that the life of a successful prince is going to be easy.

The ‘natural’ reactions of men are likely to be especially automatic at moments of elation. This is why Machiavelli is particularly concerned with advising new princes, that is to say princes who have been successful in conquering new territories and are faced with the problem of what to do next. A prince in the first flush of victory is likely to make perfectly understandable human mistakes. Victory might make him feel warm and generous, qualities which Machiavelli thinks might lead to carelessness. Above all, the new prince must not think his problems are over just because he has won the battle and the defeated prince has been killed or has fled, because it is only then that his problems as a ruler begin. Machiavelli’s advice to the new prince in these circumstances is based on a shrewd estimate of what his new subjects are likely to be thinking.

They can be divided into three distinct groups. The first group consists of those who remain loyal to the family of the old prince. Perhaps they are already dreaming of a government in exile which will one day return to claim its own. The new prince’s problem is not so much the existence of such a group, which is entirely predictable, but the existence of members of the old prince’s family around whom this dangerous opposition will eventually coalesce. The new prince cannot even identify the malcontents, who do not advertise their hostility and are content to bide their time. However, the prince can identify the likely members of the old prince’s family who might become the focuses for resistance. Therefore the new prince must exterminate the ousted dynasty if he can. Leaving men alive to whom one has done injuries is always