

John P. McCormick

Machiavelli's *The Prince* at 500: The Fate of Politics in the Modern World

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI WOULD HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY SECURED ENDURING FAME FOR any one of the roles he played during his life in and out of Renaissance Florence: historian, diplomat, military strategist, civil servant, poet, playwright. However, it was in his capacity as a political thinker that Machiavelli earned eternal renown. His political writings sparked some of the most intense scholarly controversies in Western intellectual history and raised fundamental questions that every participant in politics throughout the globe would henceforth have to confront. Not without reason, many commentators consider Machiavelli the father of modern political thought or modern political science—some even ordain him the founder of “modernity” itself.

Yet the specific content and precise objectives of his political writings remain elusive half a millennium after their circulation. Was Machiavelli an advisor of tyranny or a partisan of liberty? A neutral technician of power politics or an Italian patriot? An anticlerical reviver of pagan virtue or a devious initiator of modern nihilism? To what extent was Machiavelli a “Machiavellian”? What would Machiavelli, the self-proclaimed and widely reputed master of political prudence, say about contemporary political problems? Intriguing answers to some of these provocative questions are offered by the esteemed contributors to this special issue of *Social Research*, which commemorates the five hundredth anniversary of the composition of Machiavelli's most famous work, *On Principalities* (1513–1514)—or, as it was titled by others, *The Prince*.



This “little book,” as Machiavelli called his short treatise on the means of gaining, holding, and expanding political power, certainly announced a dramatic break with previous political doctrines anchored in substantively moral and religious systems of thought. Unlike his classical or medieval predecessors, who took their political bearings from transcendentally valid or divinely sanctioned conceptions of justice, the author of *The Prince* oriented himself to the “effectual truth” of politics; how the world actually “is” rather than how it “ought” to be. Indeed, Machiavelli’s often brutally “realistic” advice—meticulously analyzed here with surprising results by contributor Erica Benner—seems intended to contravene all previous, socially respectable forms of political reflection.

For instance, Machiavelli boldly declares that it is safer for a prince to be feared rather than loved (if he must choose between these two forms of regard) because subjects love at their own pleasure while they fear at the pleasure of a prince. Moreover, Machiavelli steadfastly insists that violence and cruelty are necessary means of effective political action (even if their deployment must be circumscribed meticulously to avoid unintended, deleterious consequences for a prince’s rule). Apologetically inclined commentators, in efforts to soften Machiavelli’s radically severe political advice, consistently emphasize—indeed, too often overemphasize—the qualifications of his doctrines contained in the preceding parentheses.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli barely feigns hesitation over recommending as exemplars of “well-used” fear and cruelty such individuals as Agathocles the Sicilian, Cesare Borgia, and Liverotto of Fermo, whom historians and contemporary opinion-setters considered criminals. And yet Machiavelli demonstrates that revered figures such as Moses, Romulus, and Cyrus, whom established authors elevate beyond moral reproach, themselves achieved political greatness by recourse to crimes. One prominent difference between the first disreputable and second celebrated set of princes, Machiavelli insinuates, is that the latter’s crimes were minimized or obscured by the legendary attributes bestowed on them as a result of the longevity of the “new modes and orders” they founded.



Machiavelli appropriately praises the successful founders of long-enduring republics, empires, and religions—Moses, Romulus, and Cyrus—as the most virtuous princes in history. Yet his desire to lay bare the effectual truth of politics, stripped of its idealistic and mythical veneers, compels Machiavelli to devote much more space in *The Prince* to generally underappreciated, less successful, and far less reputable historical figures, such as the likes of Agathocles and Borgia. Precisely because the latter two accomplished demonstrably less in the long term than did Romulus and Moses, their motivations, deeds, and genuine achievements can perhaps be more readily apprehended and more easily analyzed. Machiavelli intimates that the careers of Agathocles and Borgia may provide important clues for those pursuing answers to the following crucial questions: What horrendous crimes, in addition to the few already recorded, did Romulus and Moses actually commit in order to secure the political outcomes through which they achieved immortal fame? Conversely, what mistakes might have Agathocles and Borgia avoided if they were to succeed ultimately in gaining the success and renown attained by Romulus and Moses?

Within both *The Prince* and his equally important *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (c. 1513–1519), Machiavelli famously places himself in the company of the most illustrious princes; he boasts that he, in formulating a startlingly unprecedented, realistic political doctrine, has embarked upon the dangerous road of founding new modes and orders. Yet few scholars note how closely Machiavelli affiliates himself personally with what might be called the common criminal element in the history of princes and would-be founders. Indeed, this rather low-born Florentine of questionable parental lineage uses exactly the same phrases to describe himself—a victim of “fortune’s malignity” who suffered countless “hardships and dangers” on behalf of his fatherland—as he does to evaluate, respectively, the “illegitimate” papal offspring, Borgia, and the abjectly poor “potter’s son,” Agathocles. A careful assessment of Machiavelli’s accounts of these figures’ careers yields the conclusion that in many respects he considers Borgia, despite his limited success, and Agathocles, despite his “infinite crimes,” politically superior to, respectively, recent hereditary kings



of France and the Roman nobleman most exalted by humanist literati, Scipio Africanus.

What then are the princely qualities most conducive to political success as so assertively and realistically reconceived by Machiavelli? Flouting the ethical pretensions of classical, Christian, and humanist political philosophy, he unequivocally instructs readers of *The Prince* that “virtue” most certainly does not correspond with the interior moral character of an individual political actor. Instead, Machiavelli affiliates virtue with the latter’s proficiency at wielding force and fraud to overcome fortune’s sway over the external world. He allegorically presents fortune’s nearly inexorable power as a raging river overflowing its banks or a manipulative goddess determined to derail the grand designs of mortal men. More literally, Machiavelli associates fortune with the unexpected events that emerge from the ever-changing conditions of human affairs or, more pointedly, with the limits imposed on a prospective prince’s autonomy by his servile dependence on superiorly situated political actors. The virtuous would-be prince, Machiavelli argues, creates laws and institutions – political dams and dikes – that, at least temporarily, impose order on the unruly political universe; and he metaphorically slaps around Lady Fortune by ruthlessly eliminating any individuals who stand in the way of his efforts to attain increased power and unfettered autonomy. My contribution to this special issue explores the full extent to which Machiavelli recommended crime as an indispensable aspect of political virtue and how much he considered Christianity to be a debilitating hindrance on the practice of princely virtue in his own day.

Further indicative of Machiavelli’s unorthodoxly realist approach to politics, the Florentine blatantly rejects the ideal of philosopher kings whose perfect judgment might be even remotely approximated by the educated, wealthy, and prominent noblemen of worldly cities. Machiavelli insists that there exist no few “best men” whose wisdom, prudence, or love of the common good can be counted on to settle, with impartial justice, political controversies and crises. Defying the aristocratic preferences of “all” previous philosophers and his-



torians, as he states in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli recommends in *The Prince* that individual princes militarily arm the common people, in whom the noble quality of *onestà* (honesty, decency, or justice) actually resides, and crush at every opportunity self-styled nobles, “the great,” whose ambitious and avaricious motivations and machinations offer little more than oppression for the people and insecurity for a prince. Catherine Zuckert’s essay carefully analyzes Machiavelli’s strategy of undermining “nobility” — as both a principle and a social class — within politics, and evaluates the ramifications of his success in this regard for politics today.

The Florentine Republic (1494–1512), which Machiavelli served in the functions of administrative secretary, diplomatic emissary, and militia organizer for over a decade, was overthrown by an aristocratic coup, foreign intervention, and papal intrigue that returned the Medici family to power in his native city. Machiavelli responded by writing to the restored princes, delicately advising them to betray their allies among the nobility and align themselves instead with the presently disempowered Florentine people (Machiavelli, “Ai Palleschi”). For his troubles, he was implicated in an anti-Medici conspiracy, tortured, imprisoned, and subsequently confined to internal exile. Several years later, he repeated his advice that the Medici ultimately re-empower the Florentine people at the expense of the family’s aristocratic “friends” in an understudied but important memorandum on constitutional reforms (Machiavelli, “Discursus Florentinarum rerum”).

Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, *Art of War* (1521), and *Florentine Histories* (1532) clearly exhibit the author’s admiration for republics even if, ever intriguingly, these works generally affirm rather than repudiate the (im)moral and practical lessons of *The Prince*. The “near perfect” ancient Roman Republic is Machiavelli’s primary subject in the *Discourses*, while the hopelessly disordered “great and wretched” medieval Florentine republic takes center stage in the *Histories*. In Rome, a wise founder, Romulus, armed the poor and collected the wealthy in a senate, insuring that future conflicts between plebeians and patricians would produce two salutary institutions: an office, the plebeian



tribunate, dedicated to the welfare of the common people, and large citizen assemblies in which the people themselves freely discussed and directly decided legislation and political trials. Intense but productive class conflict at home, and unprecedented territorial expansion abroad herald, for Machiavelli, Rome's singular greatness and its ultimate value as a model to be emulated by all subsequent republics. In what follows, Yves Winter explores with great perspicacity Machiavelli's arguments concerning the symbiotic relationship between domestic politics and military affairs in the *Art of War* and his other writings.

In contrast to Rome, Machiavelli demonstrates how in Florence one individual after another emerged with the prospect of assuming the role of a Romulus-like founder (for example, Giano della Bella, Michele di Lando, the Duke of Athens); yet each ultimately demurred from fully arming the people civically and militarily such that social conflicts (not only between classes but especially among families and factions) persisted in episodically destructive rather than constructive ways. Machiavelli exhaustively chronicles how the republic's defective ordering and chronically tepid leadership result in its gradual enfeeblement, measured by both geopolitical decline and civic corruption. In her contribution, Jo Ann Cavallo carefully elucidates what Machiavelli precisely means by the "liberty" he associates so closely with civic health and good government.

Particularly emblematic of Machiavelli's views on the salutary effect of institutionalized social conflict is his vivid account of Florence's Ciompi Revolt in book III of the *Histories*. Since the city's oppressed woolworkers had no recourse to tribunes who might air their grievances and were unable to confront directly Florence's wealthiest and most prominent citizens assembled in an actual senate, the Ciompiani were compelled to pursue the city's elites house to house in a series of bloody, destructive riots. These disturbances produced no long-standing progressive gains for Florence's poorer citizens but rather facilitated conservative consolidation of power among the city's richest families. From such entrenched oligarchic arrangements, Cosimo de' Medici and his family successors rose to the ranks of commercial



princes. Rather than arm citizens, the Medici rendered the latter mere economic clients, definitively corrupting the city's civic life and ensuring its military dependence on foreign powers and mercenary warlords.

Why were Rome's founders and civic princes so virtuous and Florence's so hesitant and inept? Machiavelli sometimes directly and sometimes more subtly blames Christianity for the weakness of modern republics and their leaders: unlike the teachings of previous, more robustly *political* belief systems, Christian tenets encourage passivity, subservience, and deferral of punishment to the next world and, perhaps worst of all, promote an inflexibly undifferentiated view of "the good." These precepts seem to inhibit modern peoples and princes from behaving in the "bad" ways that actually prove beneficial for political life. Ancient armed populaces often took matters into their own hands to discipline those who committed "sins" against the public; and ancient princes like Moses and Brutus never hesitated to eliminate rival threats to their new modes and orders that guaranteed the liberty and longevity of their regimes.

Indeed, Machiavelli laments, Christian populaces suffer rather than punish ill treatment by abusive elites; or, as the Ciompi Revolt makes plain, when finally provoked to the point of spirited response, they strike out against them in undisciplined and ineffective ways. Florentine princes such as the Medici, Friar Girolamo Savonarola, and Machiavelli's own patron, Piero Soderini—all of whom maintained concrete ties of one kind or another with the Roman Catholic Church—seem hamstrung internally by Christian morality or externally by the Church's secular power from acting decisively to found and maintain a healthy civic republic. In particular, Machiavelli avers, Christian princes seem especially incapable of arming the people with little more than platitudes attesting to their goodness and eliminating the metaphorical "sons of Brutus," who forever threaten "a free and civil way of life": oppressive-minded aristocrats who invariably detest the people's liberty, bitterly resent their participation in politics, and always intransigently oppose any reformer who attempts to limit their own power and privilege. Nathan Tarcov skillfully demonstrates



how deceptively straightforward Machiavelli's critique of Christianity proves to be in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.

Many scholars often grossly overstate Machiavelli's concrete impact on practical politics and constitutional forms in the modern world. In fact, the "republicans" of the broad Enlightenment era drew upon the Florentine's prescriptions in a highly selective fashion: they only partially adopted his call for neo-Roman full militarization of the people and almost completely rejected the quasi-democratic institutions and practices that Machiavelli hoped would be demanded by such newly armed citizenries. They explicitly rejected his call for modern plebeian tribunates, and for assemblies in which common citizens themselves discuss and enact public policy. Instead, the framers of modern constitutions opted exclusively for generally elected offices in which the people might choose the most wise and prudent (read: richest and most prominent) individuals, and for elected assemblies of notables that purportedly would faithfully and effectively "represent" the interests of common people. Resisting such longstanding interpretive tendencies, Miguel Vatter and Jan-Werner Müller insightfully apply Machiavelli's political analyses to twenty-first-century crises of the modern state in, respectively, a global and a European context.

Machiavelli achieved perhaps his greatest practical influence, and hence earned his greatest infamy, in literatures associated with "reason of state," a phrase he never used. Mark Jurdjevic and Jacob Soll open this special issue of *Social Research* by clarifying more precisely Machiavelli's relationship to this etatist tradition of political thought and practice. After all, one could argue that while architects of the European absolute monarchies appropriated Machiavelli's apparently cynical, amoral doctrines, they nevertheless decisively severed these from the Florentine's own crypto-normative political concerns. They successfully elevated individuals to the status of national monarchs – Tudors and Stuarts; Valois, Hapsburgs, and Hohenzollerns – and they certainly helped subordinate traditional aristocracies to the latter's authority. But by relying on professional militaries and by endorsing "representation" of the public's interest, modern statebuilders failed to



empower the people to the full extent that Machiavelli recommended. The economic dependence of these modern princes – and, notably, the bureaucratic states that succeeded them – on newly emerging capitalist aristocracies would leave the citizens of modern republics without recourse to the military or civic arms that the Florentine thought eternally necessary for the defense of their liberty from rapacious elites.

Another way that the modern world has failed to fulfill Machiavelli's aspirations for the flourishing of human liberty is evident in the following fact: religion persists as a continuing source of political oppression and senseless wars – both civil wars and wars among states. In Machiavelli's view, ancient princes and republics, like Hannibal and Rome, properly united diverse peoples through invocations of harsh "necessity" and practices of seemingly "inhuman," but actually quite benign, cruelty. From a Machiavellian perspective, too many modern regimes, however, still invoke empty transcendental appeals and engage in acts of "pious cruelty" to legitimate themselves and their irrational policies. As a result, unnecessary oppression of domestic populaces and interminable but utterly avoidable geopolitical conflicts proliferate, to use the Florentine's phrase, "under the cloak" of religion. Machiavelli hoped that his lessons, properly heeded, would make domestic political strife ever more manageable and salutary, and would render international conflagrations mercifully short and swift. Whatever controversies will continue to rage over the meaning and implications of Machiavelli's political thought in our own time and the future, with respect to the issue of religion and politics, the contemporary world most decidedly needs to be more, not less, Machiavellian.



Notes on Contributors

ERICA BENNER is a Fellow in Political Philosophy at Yale. Her books include *Really Existing Nationalisms* (1995), *Machiavelli's Ethics* (2009), and *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (2013). She is writing a new book on Machiavelli, *Be Like the Fox* (Penguin), and a book on Thucydides (Princeton UP).

JO ANN CAVALLO, Professor of Italian at Columbia University, works primarily on Italian Renaissance literature, including Machiavelli's opus. Her publications include *The World beyond Europe in the Romance Epics of Boiardo and Ariosto* (2013) and "Machiavelli and Women" (in *Vilches and Seamen* 2007).

MARK JURDJEVIC studies early modern Europe. He is the author of *Guardians of Republicanism: The Valori Family in the Florentine Renaissance* (2008) and *A Great and Wretched City: Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought* (2014).

JOHN P. MCCORMICK, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, is the author of *Machiavellian Democracy* (2011); *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (1997); and *Weber, Habermas and Transformations of the European State: Constitutional, Social and Supranational Democracy* (2006).

JACOB SOLL is the author of *Publishing "The Prince"* (2009), *The Information Master* (2011), and, most recently, *The Reckoning: Financial Accountability and the Rise and Fall of Nations* (2014). A professor at the University of Southern California, he is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship.

NATHAN TARCOV is Professor in the Committee on Social Thought, the Department of Political Science, and the College at the University of Chicago. He is author of *Locke's Education for Liberty* (1984) and translator with Harvey C. Mansfield of *Machiavelli's Discourses on Livy* (1996).



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