

Niccolò Machiavelli



Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli was an Italian diplomat, politician, historian, philosopher, humanist, writer, playwright and poet of the Renaissance period. He has often been called the father of modern political science.

He was born in 1469, in Florence, Italy and he died on June 21, 1527.

During the Italian Renaissance he was a political philosopher, a statesman, and secretary of the Florentine Republic. His most famous work, *The Prince (Il Principe)*, brought him a reputation as an atheist and an immoral cynic.

The main theme of this short book is that all means may be resorted to for the establishment and preservation of authority -- the end justifies the means -- and that the worst and most treacherous acts of the ruler are justified by the wickedness and treachery of the governed.

The Prince was condemned by Pope Clement VIII.

A successful ruler of a principality, as described in Machiavelli's writings, has to be a brutal person.

Until Machiavelli's writing, most philosophers of politics had defined a good leader as humble, moral and honest. Machiavelli shed that notion, saying frankly, "It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot have both."

Cruelty can be better than kindness, he argued. Keeping one's word can also be dangerous, he said, since "experience shows that those who do not keep their word get the better of those who do."

Moreover, Machiavelli also believed that when leaders are not moral, it is important they pretend they are to keep up appearances. "A prince must always seem to be very moral, even if he is not," he wrote.

Machiavellian History

Machiavelli would be blamed for inspiring Henry VIII to defy the pope and seize religious authority for himself. Shakespeare would cite Machiavelli as “the murderous Machiavel” in Henry VI, Part 3 and many of his characters would embody Machiavellian traits.

Philosopher Edmund Burke would describe the French Revolution as bearing evidence of the “odious maxims of a Machiavellian policy.” In the 20th century, some would point to Machiavelli as playing a role in the rise of dictators like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

Hitler kept a copy of *The Prince* by his bedside and Stalin was known to have read and annotated his copy of the book. Business leaders have looked to the work as a cutthroat approach to getting ahead, and the book has been called the “Mafia Bible” with gangsters, including John Gotti, quoting from its pages.

Some scholars have questioned whether Machiavelli intended that readers take him at his word. Instead, they propose that *The Prince* was actually a satirical work and intended as a warning of what could happen if power is left unchecked.

But most take it at face value as a cold-blooded blueprint for how to gain and hold onto power. Francis Bacon, the English statesman-scientist-philosopher, was among those who appreciated Machiavelli’s frank reflections early on, writing in 1605, “We are much beholden to Machiavel and others that write what men do and not what they ought to do.”



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