

## 1.1 NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI (1469–1527)

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in 1469, a decisive period in European and world history.<sup>1</sup> In 1453, the Turks had conquered the Christian Byzantine city of Constantinople, sealing their rule over the eastern end of the Mediterranean and thereby forcing Europeans at the western end to turn their attention to the world beyond the straits of Gibraltar. At mid-century, Johann Gutenberg used movable type to print a Bible, beginning the long march to mass literacy and modern media. Intellectuals and artists returned to pagan ancient Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, art, and scholarship in the movement called the Renaissance (“rebirth”). They did not reject Christianity, but expanded their understanding of nature and human beings beyond the confines of the worldview of the medieval church. In their cosmology, science and superstitions such as astrology were not yet clearly separated, and they frequently wondered what acts of boldness might enable them to master “fickle Fortune”—or, as we would say today, how to impose our agency on what we now call “contingency,” “circumstance,” and “random events.”

Machiavelli was born in Florence, in the heart of Tuscany in central Italy. Florentines were supremely self-confident, lively, contentious, creative, sharp-witted, and no strangers to violence. “Italy” did not exist as a modern nation-state; it was a collection of warring city-states, and many regions had been or were being conquered by larger powers such as France and Spain. Like many Florentines, Machiavelli hoped to see a strong, unified state emerge on the peninsula—ruled from Florence, of course—that would be similar to the absolutist monarchies that were successfully consolidating large states elsewhere in Europe.

Machiavelli’s father was a lawyer (a not uncommon pattern for many of our theorists) and a citizen of Florence. Niccolò spent his early years during the brilliant reign of Lorenzo de Medici, a patron of the arts and a philosopher in his own right. After the Medici rulers were supplanted by a republic, Machiavelli was appointed as a secretary and second chancellor, a civil service position with diplomatic responsibilities. He held this post until 1512—though he frequently grumbled about the poor pay. He went on diplomatic missions that exposed him to many different types of states, styles of ruling, and ways of maintaining power. Experience in diplomacy and the observation of other states confirmed Machiavelli’s belief that it was important for Florence to have its own militia, rather than relying on mercenaries or “supportive” foreign powers. Along with historical examples, these experiences and observations contributed a number of the case studies that formed the bulk of his evidence for his conclusions about how a ruler establishes and maintains power.

In 1501, he married Marietta Corsini, a woman with whom he had six children. By his account, he was something of a womanizer, but this claim has not been substantiated. His attitude towards women is perhaps captured by this remark from *The Prince*:

...fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her. Experience shows that she is more often subdued by men who do this than by those who act coldly. Always, being a woman, she favours young men, because they are less circumspect and more ardent, and because they command her with greater audacity.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this statement is only a metaphor playing on the image inherited from Greek and Roman times that “Fortune” is a woman.

By 1512, Florence had reverted to Medici rule. Machiavelli not only fell out of favour and lost his appointment but also was accused of conspiring against the Medici, arrested, and tortured by being strung up with a rope to dislocate the shoulders. After his exoneration and release, he retired to the family estate near Florence (at San Casciano) and devoted himself to writing of all kinds—poetry, songs, and plays as well as political writing. In 1513, he completed *The Prince*, his most famous book, and initially dedicated it to Giuliano de Medici, perhaps in the futile hope of being reappointed to a major office. He continued to present his ideas to literary gatherings and was even asked to develop plans to fortify the walls of Florence.

His portrait shows a man with a strong, alert face, eyes sceptically turned away from the viewer and a slight smile on his lips. Indeed, his biographer Villari remarks “he could not rid himself of the sarcastic expression continually playing around his mouth and flashing from his eyes.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to his sarcasm, cynicism, and irony (widely shared dispositions in Tuscan culture), he possessed a marvellous imagination, which was the driving force of his political writing. In 1513, he describes his daily routine in a letter. He rises at sunset, supervises woodcutters on the estate, muses on his romantic affairs, reads classic works of literature, squabbles with tradesmen, eats the midday meal with the kids, plays cards and dice in the local inn, and then finally returns home to put on splendid clothes, and in his imagination talks with the great individuals of the past about history and politics. Documenting his feelings about these passionate conversations, he writes, “for four hours I am conscious of no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I cease to fear poverty, I have no terror of death. I give myself up entirely to them.”<sup>4</sup>

Machiavelli died in 1527, after suffering from severe stomach pains, and left little property to his children.

## Notes

1. Information about the renaissance is taken from Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1958). [Return to text.](#)
2. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Anthony Bull (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 81. [Return to text.](#)
3. Quoted in George Bull, “Introduction,” in *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 17. [Return to text.](#)
4. Quoted in Federico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 127. [Return to text.](#)

## Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532)

The story of sociology begins with Niccolò Machiavelli and *The Prince*, a book he completed in 1513, at the height of the Italian Renaissance, although it was not published until after his death in 1532. Europe was caught up in a period of dramatic change. In one lifetime—say from 1450 to 1525—a rush of events set the course of modern history for the next 500 years.

- In 1453, the Turks captured Constantinople (now Istanbul) from the Greeks and demonstrated the effective use of cannons and gunpowder; the eastern Mediterranean became part of the Islamic world; and European rulers, merchants, and adventurers felt pressure to expand their sphere westward and southward beyond the Straits of Gibraltar.
- In 1458, Johann Gutenberg printed a version of the Bible with movable type; the modern book and the mass dissemination of the printed word were born.
- In 1492, the sovereigns of Christian Spain completed their reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from Islamic rule and expelled the remaining Moors and Jews. In 1492, Columbus “discovered” the “New” World, the key event of Europe’s explosive movement into the rest of the globe.
- In the years from 1497 to 1503, Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama led the first European expedition to reach India by sea and established Portuguese power along the coasts of Africa; the African slave trade began to expand.
- In 1517, Martin Luther posted his challenge to Roman Catholicism, and the Reformation split the unity of Western Christendom.
- In 1519, Ferdinand Magellan’s fleet set sail to circumnavigate the globe, returning in 1522.
- In 1521, Hernán Cortés and a handful of men brought down Montezuma’s kingdom, beginning a swift and terrible destruction of the indigenous civilizations of the Western Hemisphere.

The cultural background of all these momentous and generally violent events was the Renaissance, the glorious rediscovery—more accurately, reimagining—of the world of the pagan Greeks and Romans: its art, philosophy, and joyous affirmation of human creativity and the human spirit.

In Western intellectual history, *The Prince* was as explosive as gunpowder. For the first time in centuries, someone dared to put in writing a realistic view of human actions. Of course, cynical and brutal advice circulated by word of mouth throughout European society in the Middle Ages: the practical knowledge of how to rule and control people was shared by kings and queens, knights and sheriffs, slave owners and overseers. However, books were filled with morality and pious platitudes; they dwelled on the exemplary Christian life and the noble character of Christian rulers. (In other literate cultures, the written word fulfilled the same prescriptive function, for example, in the Confucian analects.) In short, until the Renaissance, most books were tiresomely normative, not empirical; they prescribed good behaviour rather than observing, describing, and analyzing what human beings really did. *The Prince* broke with the normative tradition of writing: Machiavelli put into his book all the

cruel, violent, cunning, coercive, and occasionally even compassionate acts that the ruler must carry out to stay in power. *The Prince* was based on reality, on observations of real people, and not on moral precepts. For this reason, it shocked its readers and was widely censored and banned. Its publication marks the beginning of modern social science—to write about society as it really is, not only as we would like it be; to write about the “is,” and not only the “ought to be.”

As you will see in the selection, on the surface, *The Prince* appears to be a collection of cynical tips on how to take and hold onto power. Machiavelli used the term “prince” not only for hereditary monarchs but also for soldiers of fortune who came to rule territories, elected politicians, and any person who was intent on establishing and maintaining power. Indeed, executives today still read and learn from the tips.

Machiavelli’s goals in writing *The Prince* went beyond currying favour by offering useful tips to the Medici princes of Florence (to whom it is dedicated). He was writing as an Italian patriot dismayed at Italian rulers’ inability to form the large, powerful, centralized states that were beginning to appear in France, England, and Spain. He hoped that his advice to rulers would be taken up by an Italian prince intent on creating a stronger state; he was concerned that a weak, disunited Italy would be invaded and divided by stronger, more cohesive states—and indeed it was.

We can even engage in a leftist reading of *The Prince*, seeing its author as the prototype of a radical democrat revealing the secrets of power to the masses. After all, princes have known the tricks of rule since time immemorial; the lore of power has circulated by word of mouth through royal families and among counsellors and generals since the Bronze Age. To put this lore in writing was a radical leap, a secular parallel to the dissemination of God’s word in the form of the printed Bible. Just as people could now freely and directly read God’s word, without the intercession of priests, they could now read and understand the workings of earthly powers. The secret oral lore of those in power was made available and transparent to the masses through the medium of writing. Thus, *The Prince* is one of the first steps toward the emergence of the democratic and revolutionary ideals that characterize modern times. This left or radical reading of *The Prince* is a bit controversial, but intriguing.

As you read this selection, note its method as well as its key ideas. Machiavelli often first states his observations as general rules and then supports them with examples from classical antiquity or from contemporary Italy. This evidence may strike the modern reader as scattershot or anecdotal, but it represents the beginning of a case-study method, still popular in our day as a way of educating public administrators, policy planners, lawyers, and executives.

These examples of how to apply general rules in specific contexts allowed Machiavelli to develop his paired concepts of *fortuna* and *virtù*. *Fortuna* refers to the external circumstances in which one must act, the situation that fortune (or fate) doles out to each individual. *Virtù* refers to the qualities of the individual that allow him or her to act effectively within those circumstances. To some extent, *virtù* is inborn in the individual, in boldness, strength of will, courage, and intelligence; but it can be enhanced, and that enhancement is the purpose of *The Prince*.

In this selection, Machiavelli develops another important contrast, the one between the

lion who rules through coercion and the fox who rules through cunning.

Keep both of these paired concepts (*fortuna/virtù* and lion/fox) in mind, as we will encounter them in other writers in updated forms. The juxtaposition of *virtù* and *fortuna* will reappear in Karl Marx's view that "human beings make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing" and in the contemporary distinction between agency (meaningful action) and structure (external social circumstances). The lion and fox will reappear in theories that address the central question of how power is exercised in different types of societies, whether by coercion or consent.

## Reading 1.1: Excerpts from *The Prince* (1532)

[Source: Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated for this text by Larry Garner.]

### *Chapter XVII*

**ON CRUELTY AND COMPASSION: WHETHER IT IS BETTER TO BE LOVED THAN FEARED, OR FEARED THAN LOVED** ...Every ruler should seek to be regarded as compassionate and not cruel—nonetheless he should be careful not to make a poor use of his compassion. Cesare Borgia<sup>1</sup> was regarded as a cruel person; nonetheless his cruelty re-established order in Romagna, bringing peace and obedience to the law. Indeed, if one reflects on the matter, it is clear that he was much more compassionate than the people of Florence who chose not to intervene in neighbouring Pistoia when it was afflicted by internecine massacres because they wanted to avoid the taint of cruelty. A ruler should not, therefore, be overly concerned if he finds himself in disrepute on account of the cruelty he deploys to bring peace and order to his subjects. And the reason is that, by meting out a very small number of exemplary punishments, he will be more compassionate than those who for compassion's sake allow order to break down, resulting in a rise in murders and robberies. Murder and robbery undermine the life of the entire community, whereas the punitive measures taken by the ruler bring hardship and resentment only to those who are punished. And in the case of new rulers, it is almost unavoidable that they will be accused of cruelty, because new regimes are fraught with dangers to their stability. As Virgil says, through the mouth of Queen Dido, "The newness of the kingdom and harsh necessity forced me to take such measures and to keep our borders securely guarded on all sides."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, rulers must give due consideration to their every thought and move. On the one hand, they should not be afraid to take forceful action; but, on the other hand, they should know how to act with moderation, proceeding cautiously and humanely. In short, they should neither overestimate their capabilities—which leads to rash actions; nor should they be weak-willed—which leads their subjects to disdain them.

And so the question arises: Is it better to be loved or feared? Many will reply that it is best to be both. But since it is difficult to combine both qualities, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to make a choice. And this is because human beings in general are ungrateful, fickle, false, and deceitful, loath to take risks but eager to reap profits. When you treat them well and times are good, they are all yours. They offer you their blood, their property, their life, the lives of their children...provided the need never arises. But as soon as times become difficult, they turn against you. And any ruler who relies on the pledges people give him and fails to take other measures will meet with disaster; for loyalty which is gained through gifts, rather than with the compelling and lofty qualities of one's character, is a loyalty which is bought but not securely held—and with time it fritters away. And men feel less compunction about taking action against someone who attempts to make himself loved than against someone who makes himself feared. For love is a bond which human beings—ignoble creatures that they are—will break whenever they find it to their advantage; whereas fear holds people in check because they will always dread the prospect of punishment.

Nonetheless, a ruler should make himself feared in such a way that, even though he is not loved, he is not hated; for it is perfectly possible to be feared but not hated. And he will always succeed in doing so if he lays no hand on the property of his citizens and subjects and stays away from their women. But if he must shed blood, then he should do so when there is sufficient justification and clear culpability—and, above all, he must refrain from taking the property of others; for men will erase from their memory more readily the death of a father than the loss of their estate. Furthermore, pretexts for seizing the property of others are never in short supply—and a ruler who begins by plundering some of his subjects, soon enough moves on to others. But reasons for shedding blood are few, and they are quickly dispensed with.

But when a ruler is at the head of an army and has to give commands to masses of soldiers, he should not be concerned at all about having a reputation for cruelty; for without this reputation he will never be able to hold his army together nor get his men to go into combat. Among the extraordinary deeds of Hannibal (247–182 BCE) was that, even though he had an exceedingly large army made up of all kinds of men from different races who fought in distant lands, there was never any breakdown in discipline—neither amongst themselves nor directed against the leader, neither when circumstances (*fortuna*) were favourable nor when they were unfavourable. And this was a consequence of his inhuman cruelty, which, together with his countless other qualities (*virtù*), made him revered and feared by his soldiers; without that cruelty, all of his other qualities would have been insufficient to produce that effect.

There are those rather thoughtless writers who, on the one hand, admire Hannibal's achievements, but, on the other hand, condemn the very means which made the achievements possible. And for evidence that Hannibal could not have relied solely on his other qualities to achieve success, we need look no further than the case of Scipio (236–183 BCE). The latter was a man of exceptional virtues, not only in his own time but also in the memory of all time. And yet his armies revolted against him in Spain—his excessive leniency had given rise to a laxness in their ranks incompatible with military discipline. Fabius Maximus upbraided him for this leniency in the Senate, calling it a corrupting force among Roman troops. Indeed, when one of Scipio's officers massacred and pillaged the Locrians, Scipio failed to redress the outrage and to punish the misdeeds of his officer—once again a consequence of his forgiving character. Indeed, when someone in the Senate sought to justify Scipio's conduct, he said that Scipio was one of those many men who found it easier to avoid making mistakes himself than to take measures to correct them in others. Over the course of time, Scipio's leniency would have lost him his claim to fame and glory had he continued as a military commander. But since he lived in the shadow of the Senate, this shortcoming of his not only remained hidden but even brought him glory.

Returning, then, to the question of being feared or loved: Since men love at their own choosing but live in fear at the choosing of the ruler, a wise ruler will count on what he controls and not on what others control. He must only guard against being hated....

### *Ch. XVIII*

**WHETHER A RULER SHOULD KEEP HIS WORD** Everyone knows that it would be altogether well and good if a ruler always kept his word, living his life in an upright fashion and avoiding duplicity. Nonetheless, experience shows that, in our times, rulers who have achieved great things have paid little attention to keeping their word; rather, they have excelled in their use of cunning to manipulate the minds of others—and, in the end, they have eclipsed those who relied on being faithful to their word.

You should bear in mind that there are two ways of having one's way in this world: the first is by enforcing laws and codes of right conduct and the other is by means of violence. The former is peculiar to human beings; the latter is the way of beasts. But because codes of right conduct are often inadequate to the task at hand, recourse to violence may be called for. Thus, a ruler has to know when it is necessary to act like a human being and when like a beast. In ancient times, writers taught this lesson to rulers through mythology. They wrote, for example, how Achilles and many other princes from ancient times were nurtured by Chiron, the centaur, and that they were brought up under a discipline imposed by the centaur. The meaning of the myth is clear: the ruler has as a mentor a creature that is half man and half beast because he must learn to use both sides of the centaur's nature—if the ruler possesses one side but not the other, his power will not last.

But if a ruler must know how to use the beast within himself, he must also know how to play both the lion and the fox—for the lion is not very good at defending himself from traps, while the fox does poorly against wolves. Consequently, a ruler must learn to be a fox whenever traps are to be avoided, and to be a lion whenever wolves have to be frightened away. Those who would play only the part of the lion will fail the test. Thus, a prudent ruler cannot and should not keep his word if, by so doing, he undermines his own position and when the original reasons to keep his word no longer abide. If human beings were all good, then this axiom would not be true. But since they are a wretched lot who do not keep their word to you, you likewise have no obligation to keep yours to them. Furthermore, a ruler will never lack legitimate reasons for his breach of good faith. One could give endless examples of this in modern times; countless peace treaties and agreements have been broken and annulled by rulers—and those who have known how to use the tricks of the fox have fared the best. Still, one must know how to disguise effectively this disposition by mastering the art of deception and prevarication. And human beings are such simpletons and so preoccupied with just their immediate needs that rulers who undertake to deceive will always find those who let themselves be deceived.

There is one example from our own times which should not be overlooked. Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503) never did or ever considered doing anything that did not involve deceiving others—and he could always find occasions to deploy his deception. And there never was a man who was more adept at swearing an oath to observe his word and then disregarding that same oath. And yet he always managed to carry out his acts of deceptions with success because he knew very well how that part of the world worked.

Thus, one can say that it is not necessary for a ruler to possess all of the above-mentioned qualities, but it is essential he be able to appear to possess them. I would even go so far as to say that virtuous qualities are harmful to a ruler if he possesses them and always acts in accordance with them; on the other hand, those qualities are most useful insofar as the ruler

simply appears to possess them. It is a good thing to appear to be compassionate, faithful to one's word, humane, upright, and religious—and even to be such in reality. But a ruler must be adroit enough to know how to act in just the opposite way if circumstances require it. So the lesson above all is this: A ruler, and especially a new ruler, cannot live by all of those good qualities by virtue of which humans are regarded to be good human beings—and this is because a ruler, in order to maintain order and hold on to his power, is often forced to act against the principle of being faithful to his word, against charity, against his humane feelings, and against religion. In short, he must possess a personality which enables him to shift from one *modus operandi* to another according to the direction of the winds and the prevailing circumstances (*fortuna*)—doing what is right and good when he can, but capable of doing evil if he is forced to do so.

Consequently, a ruler must always be on guard against ever letting slip out of his mouth any words which might suggest that he does not fully possess the five qualities mentioned above. To others who see or hear him, he must always appear to be the very embodiment of compassion, trustworthiness, integrity, kindness, and piety. And it is necessary, above all, for the ruler to possess this last quality: i.e., to appear to be a man of religion. For humans everywhere judge others more with their eyes than with their hands—since we can readily see things but not so readily touch them. And this means that everyone sees what you appear to be, but few have close enough contact to know who you really are—and those few are little inclined to stand up against the opinion of the many, which is backed up by the magisterial aura of the State. For in appraising the actions of all men, and especially in the actions taken by rulers—for which there is no court of appeal—the eye focuses on the end result to be achieved. If, then, a ruler is able to win victories and maintain law and order within his State, the means employed will always be deemed honourable and praised by all. Average people are taken in by appearances and impressed by final results—and the world is made up of average people. And the few will be able to hold sway over the many as long as the many feel secure. A present-day ruler, who best goes unnamed,<sup>3</sup> never ceases to preach the virtues of peace and mutual trust, and yet he is the worst possible enemy of both; and if he had ever really lived by those virtues, he would have lost his reputation and his State many times over.

## Notes

1. Cesare Borgia (1475–1507) an Italian nobleman and cardinal, was recognized by Pope Alexander VI as his son and personally known to Machiavelli who hailed his boldness. [Return to text.](#)
2. Queen Dido, the first queen of the North African city of Carthage, is a character in Roman mythology and in Virgil's epic poem, the Aeneid. [Return to text.](#)
3. Ferdinand II of Aragon, 1452–1516. [Return to text.](#)