Machiavelli

he PRINCE

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Introduction by Christian Gauss

A Mentor Book

Niccolò Machiavelli

The PRINCE

Introduction by Christian Gauss

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Machiavelli

For over four hundred years, *The Prince* has been the basic handbook of politics, statesmanship, and power. Written by a Florentine nobleman whose name has become a synonym for crafty plotting, it is a fascinating political and social document, as pertinent today as when it first appeared. Machiavelli wanted to set down for all time the rules and moves in the ageless game of politics, and, as the most successful statesman of his day, he devised this highly readable formula for the man who seeks power. There was little modern democracy in sixteenth century Italy, and as a result, Machiavelli's work became thought of as a blueprint for dictators—instead of a guide for efficient democratic government.

Witty, informative and devilishly shrewd, Machiavelli has long been required reading for everyone interested in politics and power. *The Prince* is one of the significant books of all time.

CHRISTIAN GAUSS, the late Dean Emeritus of Princeton University, has written a new and penetrating introduction to this MENTOR edition, explaining the times in which Machiavelli lived and the meaning of the book to today's reader. Dean Gauss, who died shortly after completing this analysis, was a noted American liberal educator and scholar.

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Introduction to the Mentor Edition

by CHRISTIAN GAUSS

I

FIFTY YEARS AGO, if the average American reader or the student in the American college picked up Machiavelli's *Prince* at all, he did so out of sheer curiosity. For him it was an outmoded book. The very title was against it. The age of kings and princes was passing. He knew that the treatise had been written in the period which the most widely read of the English historians of the Renaissance, J. A. Symonds, called *The Age of the Despots,* and Machiavelli himself, in quite general acceptation, bore so unsavory a reputation that the word "Machiavellian" had become imbedded in our language as synonymous with Mephistophelian. On the strength of a famous essay of Macaulay's, the notion had become fairly widespread that the devil himself had become familiarly known as the Old Nick only because Niccolò had been Machiavelli's first name.

Why, in many quarters, the reputation of Machiavelli and his *Prince* went into eclipse must be explained later. But it is safe to say that in America, as elsewhere, no book has undergone so favorable a reversal of fortune. Newer interpretations of history, the emergence in the twentieth century of new types of states and the clashes between them may help to explain why *The Prince* has again become required reading for us all. Probably no single brief book, certainly no other book of that time, will put the twentieth-century reader so immediately in touch with some of the central problems of our day. These central problems have to do with what is, or what should be, the relation of the citizen to the state, and what is, or what should be, the relation of the states

to each other, and what are the sources of, and the limits, if any, to the power of the state. In addition to its brevity, there are stylistic qualities in *The Prince* which make it easy if not delightful reading. Unlike that later diplomat, Talleyrand, Machiavelli never uses words to conceal his thought. His meaning is never ambiguous. His conclusions may occasionally be unwelcome but they are always as downright as a box on the ear, and it is safe to predict that for the modern reader he will set some of the problems of citizenship, statecraft and political power into new and sharper focus.

We shall also see later that Machiavelli too could have said that it was "a condition and not a theory" which confronted him. His book, therefore, is not an abstract treatise; it is a concise manual, a handbook for those who would acquire or increase their political power. As such it has a history of study and use by a long line of kings and ministers as diverse in aims and character as Richelieu, Christina of Sweden, Frederick of Prussia, Bismarck and Clemenceau. In these cases they all possessed recognized credentials to power. In the twentieth century this circle has been widely extended by those in revolt against the older forms of the state. In his student days Mussolini selected it as the subject of a thesis for his doctorate. It was Hitler's bedside reading, and we need not be taken aback when in his excellent introduction to *The Prince* and *The Discourses* Max Lerner tells us that Lenin and Stalin as well have gone to school to Machiavelli.

It is of course true that a good book, like a sound scientific discovery, may be put to humanly undesirable uses without vitiating its central truth. Even if dispassionate investigation should disclose that holders of political power in democracies like our own in this period of instability are more frequently using methods once condemned as "Machiavellian," it would prove little. We are here concerned primarily with one of the major tensions in our culture. No one in our time can fail to note the rise to power of new political leaders like Lenin and Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler, who at times openly

proclaim and at others do not conceal that they believe salvation can only come through the greatly increased power of the national state. On the other hand, no one can fail to note in many quarters an earnest effort to create what Wendell Willkie called *One World*. The United Nations is a more determined attempt to create a "super-state" which to succeed must have at least some power in the interest of peace and human welfare. This is still a major tension of our time. In the last fifty years Machiavelli has repeatedly been hailed as the founder of modern political science. Historians as distinguished as Ranke and Meinecke in Germany, and Lord Acton in England, find in Machiavelli one of the founders of modern historical analysis. A reconsideration of Machiavelli and the steadily increasing favor with which *The Prince* is being regarded may therefore throw some light on the origin if not the solution of our major political problems.

II

MACHIAVELLI'S OWN WORK is all the more deeply rooted in his own time since he was not in the first instance a writer or theorist but an active participant in the troubled and unstable political life of his native Florence.

He was born there in 1469, the descendant of an old Tuscan family. An earlier member of the family had actively opposed the rise of the Medici bankers to power and had died in prison for his pains. The Medici had established a relatively mild despotism which, while allowing older republican forms to persist, retained for themselves the substance of power. None of the Machiavellis favored the Medici. Niccolò's father was a lawyer, and both father and son regarded themselves as republicans. We know little about the details of his education but it is plain that it was that of the humanist of his time, that he found his ideals in Rome and read the works of the Greeks in Latin translations.

Machiavelli grew up under the rule of that member of the Medici dynasty to whom the Florentines have

given the title Lorenzo the Magnificent, and the Age of Lorenzo has often been described as the Augustan Age of the Italian Renaissance. Lorenzo himself was a distinguished humanist and poet and generous patron of artists and scholars. He has been credited with maintaining a sort of balance of power between the five major Italian units of power—the Kingdom of Naples, Rome and the papal state, Venice, Florence and Milan. But it should be remembered that during the period of his rule (1469-1492) his brother was assassinated and he himself wounded in the conspiracy of a rival faction, and that these five units were themselves unstable. They were engaged in continual struggles with lesser cities, as Florence was with Pisa, which often resulted in open warfare. The balance of power was, therefore, so shifting and precarious that a shrewd observer like Machiavelli could have had no illusions about his city's having found a solution to its political problems. Lorenzo died in 1492. His successor Piero was exiled two years later when a new peril, the French army under Charles VIII, appeared in Florence. The Dominican monk Savonarola, after he had reformed the republic and almost succeeded in establishing a theocracy, was executed and burned in 1498. Some months later Machiavelli was elected Secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence, which had charge of foreign and military affairs. He was influential in shaping policy and there could be no higher tribute to his political competence than the fact that he was sent on twenty-four missions, including four to the King of France, several to Rome and one to the Emperor Maximilian. After thirteen years of service, another turn of the political kaleidoscope brought the French army back to Florence. The Florentines, in panic, recalled the Medici, and Machiavelli in his turn was exiled.

Machiavelli had been an able, conscientious public servant of the republic. The conditions of his exile condemned him for a time to live on a small property which he owned in the country and forbade him to set foot in

Florence. He has himself described this reversal of fortune in a letter to his friend Vettori:

> *I am living in the country since my disgrace. I get up at dawn and go to the little wood where I see what work has been done* (by the woodcutters). After gossiping with them he withdrew to a hill to read Dante or Petrarch, Tibullus or Ovid. Then after his frugal midday meal he went to the inn to talk with the miller, the landlord, the butcher and a couple of bricklayers and spent the afternoon *with these boors playing cards or dice; we quarrel over farthings. When evening comes I return to the house and go into my study. Before I enter I take off my rough mud-stained country dress. I put on my royal and curial robes and thus fittingly attired I enter into the assembly of men of old times. Welcomed by them I feed upon that food which is my true nourishment, and which has made me what I am. I dare to talk with them, and ask them the reason for their actions. Of their kindness they answer me. I no longer fear poverty or death. . . . From these notes I have composed a little work,* The Prince.

It was his intention to dedicate it to one of the Medici in the hope that they might invite him back to public service. He did write a letter of dedication to the new Lorenzo but it remains doubtful whether it was ever presented to him before his death in 1519. It is certain that *The Prince* was circulated in manuscript and plagiarized, but it was not published until five years after Machiavelli's death in 1532.

In his later years, thanks to friends and organizations in Florence, he was sent on minor missions, and thanks to the influence of Cardinal di Medici (later Pope Clement VII) he was commissioned to write *The History of Florence* with a small annual salary.

By this time new factors had further complicated the problems of Italy and added to her dissensions and to Machiavelli's unhappiness. Luther started the Reformation, and the rivalry of the new German emperor Charles

V and Francis I of France for dominion in Italy resulted in the Sack of Rome and another expulsion of the Medici in 1527.

III

The Prince does not give us the whole of Machiavelli's political thinking. It treated the most acute problem of Italy, its inferiority in political organization and military strength to nearby states like Spain and France and was addressed to princes like the Medici, to whom it was dedicated. The fact that he took no steps to publish it in his lifetime, even after it was plagiarized, supports this view. It need not astonish us to recall that it became a handbook for aspirants to political power, and that when in the twentieth century nation states themselves ran into a period of instability it should again have been studied both by idealists and by political adventurers. For Machiavelli's reputation it is unfortunate that it so rapidly overshadowed all his work and became the one book upon which his reputation rests.

Within twenty years of its publication, it had passed through twenty-five editions. If there is any one hero of *The Prince,* it is Cesare Borgia, whose achievements received such admiring commendations in Chapter 7. This is because, to Machiavelli, as later to Garibaldi, the existence of an ecclesiastical state in central Italy would always remain a barrier to her political unification. With tacit consent, and at times active assistance, from his father the Pope, Alexander VI, Cesare was making this area a strong political domain of his own and would, so Machiavelli believed, with a little better fortune, have created a center around which the new Italy might coalesce. After the Medici provided cardinals and popes to the Church, Machiavelli hoped that this same process of creating a central Italian state might be resumed with greater success by the coordination of Medici power in Florence and in Rome.

From the standpoint of his later reputation, time was to prove that Machiavelli had made one of his gravest errors in the choice of his hero. Cesare had committed

crimes on his way to power, and it might be added that he had committed other crimes quite incidentally as well. But it is also true on the testimony of other contemporary historians in his domains, and it is worth remembering, that he had appointed as director of public works an engineer of no mean ability, Leonardo da Vinci. There was another reason why Cesare's prowess appealed to Machiavelli. It will be recalled that during his public service Machiavelli was concerned with military affairs also. Here he early became convinced that the employment of mercenaries by Florence and Italian cities generally would never provide an adequate and reliable military force. Cesare, with the improvement of the lot of the people in his Romagna, had raised and trained his own native levies, a plan which Machiavelli himself had followed. Even so, the text itself of the famous Chapter 7 indicates that Machiavelli was conscious that he was inviting disapproval in making Cesare his hero. That, I believe, is the reason why he felt called upon to repeat: "Reviewing thus all the actions of the Duke (Cesare Borgia), I find nothing to blame, on the contrary I feel bound, as I have done, to hold him up as an example to be imitated by all who by fortune and with the arms of others have risen to power."

But the moral climate of Europe and of Italy was to change rapidly, and within fifty years the son of a Pope, particularly this son of a Borgia Pope, would no longer be acceptable as a model for the savior of Italy. There were other objections also, particularly the glorification of the qualities of the lion and the fox, of force and fraud.

It was for this reason that the immediate effects of Machiavelli's *Prince* on Italian politics were almost nil. Rome, though it alleged other reasons, placed it on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1559. The Inquisition decreed the utter destruction of all Machiavelli's works, and this was confirmed by the Council of Trent. In 1576 a French Huguenot wrote a violent refutation of *The Prince* which was widely circulated and translated into English.

For English readers the rapidity with which Machia-

velli's reputation spread is indicated by the frequency with which his name appears as a byword in the work of the Elizabethan dramatists. It is true that the Machiavelli who speaks the prologue in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* is a travesty. An able American scholar, Hardin Craig, proved, however, that the older assumption that all these dramatists could have had no first-hand acquaintance with Machiavelli is no longer tenable. Beside a Latin and three French published translations it is now plain that English translations as well circulated in manuscript. When in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Shakespeare has one of his characters ask: "Am I subtle? Am I a Machiavel?" it is plain that he intended no compliment. The general tenor of all these references can be summed up in one from Marston's *Pygmalion:* "A damned Machiavellian holds candle to the devil for a while."

This should be sufficient to indicate that in England as well as in France and Spain and Italy, within seventy-five years of the publication of *The Prince,* Machiavelli's name had already been taken over into ordinary speech with those connotations which we have already mentioned. Machiavelli had become "the drunken Helot of literature." In the popular mind there has been little change in Machiavelli's reputation, and the words "Machiavellian" and "Machiavellianism" still carry these implications in ordinary language today.

Although Shakespeare's contemporary, Francis Bacon, noted without disapproval that Machiavelli dealt with men as they are, not as they ought to be, nowhere in the world of criticism and scholarship was there to be for a century and a half any serious attempt to rehabilitate Machiavelli's reputation.

IV

THE ESTIMATE of Machiavelli in the learned world did not differ substantially from the popular conception. That is why no change in the cultural history of Western Europe is more striking than the reestimate which

historians and political scientists are in process of making or have already made of Machiavelli's once notorious and now famous work.

In his *History of Political Theories* W. H. Dunning tells us that Machiavelli's work is as completely dissevered from the older accepted systems of political theory as the discovery of America by his contemporary Columbus is dissevered from the older accepted systems of geography. We might add that for nearly three centuries it will remain dissevered from the main currents of modern political thought. Machiavelli will begin to impinge upon these modern currents in the late eighteenth century, and in some of their phases at least will come near dominating them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Aristotle is often classified as a realist, and his treatise on *Politics* was to influence greatly the pre-Machiavellian trend of thought. Perhaps nothing can serve better to set forth the difference in spirit between the older tradition and Machiavelli than to remind the reader of Aristotle's opening sentence and have him compare it with the opening of *The Prince*. It reads:

> *Seeing that every state is a sort of association and every association is formed for the attainment of some Good —for some presumed Good is the end of all action— it is evident that, as some Good is the object of all associations, so in the highest degree is the supreme Good the object of that association which is supreme and embraces all the rest, in other words, of the State or political association.*

A brief sample chapter in Aristotle can be summarized as follows:

Three qualifications are requisite in the holders of the supreme offices of the State:

1.) loyalty to the polity
2.) capacity for their offices
3.) virtue and justice in the sense appropriate to the polity.

Then, in discussing how a polity may best be pre-

served, he adds that the best of all preservatives is the education of the citizens in the spirit of the polity: "Without this education the wisest laws are futile."

Machiavelli is not concerned with the education of the citizens. They are regarded as inert. The state is no longer an instrument for achieving the good life. It has become a dynamic, amoral entity, a force. Many contemporary students of Machiavelli, like Leonardo Olschki in *Machiavelli the Scientist,* will point out that he is more scientific than Aristotle or any other of his predecessors, and that this is what constitutes Machiavelli's break with tradition. There is much truth in this contention. As Olschki puts it, "The state is in Machiavelli's mind a merely theoretical reality, an abstract principle whose practical realization is represented by principalities or republics." It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the role of the prince is to direct this force according to principles which in essence are very much like those by which the scientist directs the course of a guided missile. There is no inherent purpose in the state. Any direction it may receive must be imposed upon it by the ruler.

It was not, however, in the first instance, the recognition of this "scientific" quality of Machiavelli's work that accounted for the renewed interest in Machiavelli. This arose from a quite different consideration which will not be clearly evident to the reader until he reaches the very last chapter of *The Prince.* The "exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarians" with its fervent hope that "some individual might be appointed by God for her redemption" is the most eloquent passage in Machiavelli's work. Its dithyrambic quality stands out so sharply against the purely intellectual, almost algebraic presentation of the rest of *The Prince* that until recently it was often regarded by scholars as a later appendage and not an integral part of the work. In spite of the seeming inconsistency, there is nothing to support the contention that it was added later. The explanation lies in the fact that Machiavelli was both scientific and an ardent patriot, and it was the nationalism that first brought him back into favor.