

Niccolò Machiavelli: The Founder of Modern Political Realism

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Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469-1527), often regarded as the father of modern political philosophy and political science, wore many hats throughout his life in Florence, Italy; he was a diplomat, philosopher, author, and historian. At the young age of 29, Machiavelli held the role of head of the second chancery of the Florentine Republic until 1512, when the Medici family overthrew the republic and exiled him to San Casciano in the southern part of Florence. There, his source of prominence was crafted; he wrote *The Prince*, his groundbreaking book that separated politics from ethics and provided a playbook on how rulers gained and maintained power.¹ The signature piece became the foundation of the global political landscape, paving the way for the field to take shape through movements and ideas. Machiavelli's significance lay in his enduring influence on politics through his realistic redefinition of power and morality, which led leaders, thinkers, and ordinary people of his time to incorporate these ideals into their political decisions.

Niccolò Machiavelli's practical view of power directly shaped how leaders exercised their authority. After all, *The Prince* was intended to serve as a guide for Lorenzo de' Medici (r. 1469-1492), the leader of the Republic of Florence during the Italian Renaissance. Machiavelli wrote in a letter to de' Medici, regarding *The Prince*, indicating he intended for him "to understand in a very short time all those things which I have learnt," reflecting his "ardent desire that [Lorenzo] may attain to that grandeur which fortune and own merits presage for [him]," showcasing the book's use in procuring and establishing rule.² This was especially true in the case of King Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547), whose inspiration behind the "decision to break with

¹ Harvey Mansfield, "Niccolò Machiavelli," in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025), last modified February 10, 2025, accessed November 6, 2025, <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Niccol%C3%B2-Machiavelli/49739>.

² Niccolò Machiavelli to Lorenzo De' Medici, "Dedication," 1513.

Rome, declare himself head of the church, and seize the property of English monasteries,” according to Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540), was Machiavelli’s renowned book.³ King Henry VIII, along with his chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, two of the most prominent leaders of the 16th century, significantly altered the political and religious environment of Europe through the English Reformation; their decisions were directly tied back to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*.⁴ Not only were his works considered in a ruler’s decree process, but Machiavelli himself was also consulted by the leaders of his time.

Pope Clement VII (r. 1523-1534), at the time called Cardinal Giulio during the period he governed Florence, actively sought out Machiavelli’s advice in decisions regarding the reformation of the city’s government, indicating that his insight was valuable and impactful, explaining the Pope’s decision to work with him until the Florentine died in 1527.⁵ Machiavelli was especially invaluable to the Pope in using political means to achieve the “will of God”, highlighting that the commands this leader carried out were often from Machiavelli in some shape or form.⁶ Machiavelli’s contemporary leaders relied on him and his works to form their political and religious edicts; his work detailing the realities of how heads of state gain, maintain, and flourish in power was essential for the effective ruling of their nations.

Niccolò Machiavelli set a “standard” through his works, transforming political philosophy and generating centuries of intellectual thought among scholars. Before Machiavelli, the political philosophy genre advised princes to make “goodness” at the forefront of their

³ Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

⁴ Geoffrey R. Elton, "Henry VIII," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2025), last modified October 28, 2025, accessed November 7, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-VIII-king-of-England/The-breach-with-Rome.>; Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery*, 1.

⁵ Mansfield, "Niccolò Machiavelli."

⁶ Catherine H. Zuckert, "Machiavelli's 'Prince'—Five Hundred Years Later," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 495, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43670903>.

leadership; yet, Machiavelli's work transformed the subject to have an emphasis on the "real truth of the matter than to its imagination".⁷ He called for realism, "for how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live," being a guide to his fellow philosophers as they shared their thoughts.⁸ His work became the focus point of many political intellectuals of his time, through which he became a highly debated and very controversial figure, so much so that almost every political writing at the time had an anti-Machiavellist stance.⁹

The Florentine pioneered the realm of political thought, and it was essentially based around him for centuries. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) credited Machiavelli for the inspiration of his renowned scientific method, writing that he was "beholden to Machiavel[li] and others, that write what men and not what they ought to do."¹⁰ Influenced by the way Machiavelli moved political philosophy from centering on how leaders ought to operate to how they actually operate, Bacon shifted science from a speculative approach (how nature ought to work) to an empirical one, which detailed how nature actually works. Bacon is not an isolated instance; Machiavelli's work was attributed to inspiring many key figures, especially of the 16th to 18th centuries, and beyond.¹¹

Most notable were the colonists of the soon-to-be United States during the late 18th century, who drew direct inspiration from Machiavelli's book, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, when drafting the U.S. Constitution, specifically in establishing a government where, "there is combined under the same constitution a prince, a nobility, and the power of the

⁷ Mansfield, "Niccolò Machiavelli."; Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 56.

⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 56.

⁹ Enzo Baldini, "REVIEW ARTICLE: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF MACHIAVELLISM," *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 4 (2015): 765, accessed November 6, 2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26228615>.

¹⁰ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (Floating Press, 1605), 258, accessed November 6, 2025.

¹¹ Baldini, "REVIEW ARTICLE," 770.

people, then these three powers will watch and keep each other reciprocally in check.”¹²

Machiavelli’s work caused people to adopt pragmatic implementations of ideas that revolutionized science, government, philosophy, and beyond.

Through the circulation of Niccolò Machiavelli’s work and its ensuing controversy, ordinary people gained political consciousness and thus were empowered to challenge existing authority structures in ways that altered political landscapes. His work centered around informing the common folk, “for the aim of the people is more honest than that of the nobility, the latter desiring to oppress, and the former merely to avoid oppression.”¹³

As Machiavelli’s ideas spread, individuals began questioning hereditary rule and divine justification for power. His advocacy for civic “virtù” influenced Enlightenment figures, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose writings inspired people to prioritize their needs over those of a monarch. Machiavelli intended his work to reveal the outrageous actions of tyrants to ordinary people, so they could take appropriate measures to establish justice. World-changing movements such as the English and American Revolutions all incorporated significant ideas introduced by Machiavelli’s compositions.¹⁴ The Florentine galvanized the everyday people to revolt against those who caused them grievance. With *The Prince*, he aimed to inform the Italian public on the cruel and immoral practices of their princes, which transformed him into “a symbol of Italian and European national independence movements, and then the inspiration for nationalisms and totalitarianisms, but also expressions of anti-totalitarianisms.”¹⁵

¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, trans. Luigi Ricci (New York: Modern Library, 1950), First Book:12.

¹³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 36.

¹⁴ Baldini, "REVIEW ARTICLE," 770-772.

¹⁵ Zuckert, "Machiavelli's 'Prince'—Five," 495; Baldini, "REVIEW ARTICLE," 770-771.

Machiavelli made an effort to make his works accessible to all; he stated, “I have not sought to adorn my work with long phrases or high-sounding words or any of those superficial attractions and ornaments with which many writers seek to embellish their material,” demonstrating his commitment to spreading information for the purpose of encouraging people to self-advocate.¹⁶ By rejecting ornate and jargonistic language, Machiavelli made complex political theory accessible to those beyond the educated elite, bridging the gap between rulers and the ruled and initiating a new era of civic awareness.

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli certainly was a major figurehead of the Early Modern Period; his influence on the rulers, thinkers, and ordinary people defined the era. Yet, he plays a more prominent role contemporarily, as his work has inspired people far past his death in 1527; some noteworthy examples were modern rulers, such as Vladimir Lenin (r. 1917-1924), Richard Nixon (r. 1969-1974), modern thinkers like Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), as well as contemporary people.¹⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli’s legacy endures in his intellectual courage in portraying the world as it truly is, influencing his own time and continuing to be relevant in modern society.

¹⁶ Machiavelli to De' Medici, "Dedication."

¹⁷ Baldini, "REVIEW ARTICLE," 772-773.; William A. Rusher, "The Long Detour," review of Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority, Claremont Review of Books, Claremont Institute, last modified 2025, accessed November 8, 2025, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/the-long-detour/>; Zuckert, "Machiavelli's 'Prince'—Five," 495.

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