

CHAPTER 4

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527)

Confusion verging on chaos aptly describes Italian politics between any two points in time. That being said, the amount of outright violence, political backstabbing and social upheaval Machiavelli had to put up with – as a successful bureaucrat and diplomat first (1498–1512), and later as a disgraced citizen (1512–27) – is, with few if any exceptions, virtually unmatched in the history of Italian philosophy. At any rate, it is conspicuous enough to put him in a league of his own (among political thinkers). All the more so since, in Machiavelli's own words, his claim to originality rested on a return to the things themselves and the 'real truth' they convey through experience, as opposed to the traditional proclivity towards speculation regarding 'imaginary things', most notably by portraying fanciful characters and devising political regimes that can only exist on paper.

Indeed, philosophers had long been lecturing – either in flawless syllogistic fashion or in vivid rhetorical style – both rulers and subjects on how they should behave and interact. However, they had taken little notice of how they actually go about their business. Alternatively, what does unbiased, direct observation of the present and extensive, informed reading of the past teach us about the ways of the world?

Excerpts from *The Prince* provide us with a colourful reminder of Machiavelli's views on what human beings are capable of and how best to deal with them. In a nutshell, when it comes to human relationships, there is no such thing as being too stupid to be wicked. As a matter of fact, ordinary people are guilty as charged on both counts. (One might as well dispense with labels, as Machiavelli does, insofar as non-ordinary people are so extraordinarily few as to make no difference). Men are a sorry lot (they are peevish, greedy, selfish and treacherous) and a credulous bunch to boot (they cannot help rising to the bait when they are told what they want to hear). No wonder Machiavelli offered some peculiar pieces of advice concerning state management and social control.

A couple of straightforward recommendations of his will help us get the gist of (Machiavelli's) Machiavellianism. It should be understood from the start that enjoying an excellent reputation is one thing and being righteous is quite another. It should also be understood that, when they happen to be at odds, Machiavelli urges whoever is running things to surrender moral principles and embrace whatever course of action keeps him ahead of the competition. In other words, for all practical purposes, good politics and bad ethics get on together far better than the other way around. As a matter of fact, to take one's moral notions for political realities is a recipe for failure. So, as far as Machiavelli is concerned, the real issue is not so much whether or not one should get one's hands dirty, since nobody in his right mind would keep them clean when the situation calls for extreme measures. Since it cannot be helped, the only problem one ought to worry about is rather how to get away with questionable practices such as betrayal, assassination and cruelty (three examples Machiavelli treats as a matter of political course).

Even though the vast majority of people do not care much about the way the powers-that-be deliver a reasonable amount of peace and security at home, Machiavelli's golden rule has been met with a certain amount of suspicion. Yet, he definitely had a point and – like every rule of thumb worthy of the name – it makes things a lot easier while reducing the risk of getting hurt in the process. As Machiavelli puts it in devising ways to avoid being hated and despised, rulers should have someone else endorse and especially enforce unpopular policies, whereas they should claim credit for those actions which will increase their popularity. Given the overall purpose of the chapters and their broad moral compass, no stretch of the imagination is required to infer that, in order to succeed, a ruler had better take the merit whenever it is convenient to do the right thing and lay the blame at someone else's door whenever criminal behaviour is in his best interests.

However, what if there is nobody around either to help with the dirty work or, failing that, conveniently to take the fall? Machiavelli spelled out his answer in a number of different ways, but – bottom line – his counsel remains pretty much the same and it emphasizes convenient timing and careful dissimulation. When the time comes to match violence with more violence and subtlety with more subtlety, one should put extra care into keeping up moral appearances, at least until, having no further use for those his previous facade of respectability had deceived, one can afford – on top of dealing with his current foes – to treat old friends as new enemies. In this respect, it is worth noting that it is rather commonplace, albeit inaccurate and somewhat misleading, to saddle Machiavelli with a clear-cut distinction between ethics and politics. True enough, according to Machiavelli, politics has reasons and rules of its own, which morality condemns more than it understands. And true enough again, when push comes to shove, political expediency and moral integrity are mutually exclusive. Still, according to Machiavelli, good faith, mercy and honour, as well as whatever else passes

for good manners or helps you win your neighbour's love and respect, are assets as long as they do not become a liability. All these fine qualities have their uses in the political arena, provided we use them: that is, provided we treat ethical concerns as means to an end rather than as ends in themselves.

Granted that the realm of political possibilities is wide enough to include everything short of mindless violence and random destruction and, as a result, it encompasses what is morally acceptable, how do we get to choose whether to stay within the boundaries of either the ethically or the politically correct? Although apparently well formed, questions along these lines rest on a fundamental confusion to the extent that they overlook the basic fact that we do not really carry the burden – or have the luxury, for that matter – of choosing between the two. Of course, there is plenty to be right or wrong about, but one simply does not decide when it is expedient to go rogue and when, on the contrary, it is unwise to push the moral envelope. Eventually, situations sort themselves out and, when the dust settles, the head count provides a reliable indicator of who got his priorities straight and who didn't.

This is, arguably, the most distinctive feature of Machiavelli's talk of skill, fortune, and how statesmen are supposed to prevail through a solid display of the former and a healthy respect for the latter. First of all, it accounts for the remarkable scope of Machiavelli's *virtù*, which is a constant disposition to do whatever circumstances require, be it good, evil or a bit of both. Second, it goes a long way towards explaining why Machiavelli's Prince is so flexible a character that tycoons and gangsters no less than political and military leaders have boasted that they took a leaf out of his book. No surprise there, either: in a world where everything is negotiable and virtue is simply the art of getting the upper hand, it is immaterial whether it takes a good or a bad person to be a successful ruler. As a matter of fact, it is immaterial whether it takes a person at all. While Dante portrayed Farinata as an individual who would have rather died than give up everything he stood for and thus become somebody he could not live with, Machiavelli is the prophet of another kind of humanity altogether. His Prince is less an individual than a calculating force who does not let anything personal – neither his moral scruples nor his nasty habits – interfere with his commitment to success. A model which is as much suited to humans (monarchs, executives, bureaucrats, diplomats etc.) as human institutions (political parties, state cabinets, corporate boards, criminal cartels and any combination thereof). And this alone should be enough to ensure Machiavellianism a place of choice among the archetypes of philosophical wisdom.

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