

Gentrain Unit 7. Niccolò Machiavelli, 23 May 2013, Dr. Cindy Ausec

### Niccolò Machiavelli

- Contributed to a large number of important discourses in Western thought
- Writings are unsystematic, inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory
- Term “Machiavellian” or Machiavellism” find regular purchase among philosophers concerned with a range of ethical, political and psychological phenomena

### Life

- Born 3 May 1469 in Florence
- Entered politics in 1494 and by 1498 was Second Chancellor of the Republic of Florence
- Next 14 yrs – engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity on behalf of Florence
- 1512 the Medici defeated the republic’s armed forces and dissolved the government. Machiavelli was wrongly suspected of conspiring against the Medici in 1513, imprisoned and tortured for several weeks
- Enforced retirement led him to literary activities: He wrote verse, plays, and short prose, and produced biographical and historical sketches
- 1520 commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de’Medici to compose a History of Florence completed in 1525 and presented to the Cardinal (returning to Medici favor)

### Machiavelli’s Conflicting Views

- *The Prince*
  - Most people are stupid, irrational and incapable of understanding or exercising sovereignty
  - Only realistic form of government is a monarchy
- *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*
  - Ascribes to the masses an extensive competence to judge and act for the public good
  - Favors a republic over a monarchy

*The Prince*: Written at the end of 1513- published posthumously in 1532

- Machiavelli criticizes the moralistic common view of authority among political philosophers that there exists a relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority
  - Real concern of the political ruler is the acquisition and maintenance of power
  - Legitimate rights of rulership adds nothing to the actual possession of power
  - Goodness and right are not sufficient to win and maintain political office
- Relationship between law and force
  - Good laws and good arms constitute the foundations of a well-ordered political system
  - The legitimacy of law rests entirely upon the threat of coercive force
  - Fear is always preferable to affection in subjects
  - Men in general are: ungrateful, disloyal insincere and deceitful, timid of danger and avid of profit people obey only because they fear the consequences of not doing so

- Virtù
  - A range of personal qualities necessary to acquire in order to “maintain one’s state” and to “achieve great things”
  - Princes of the highest virtù are capable of behaving in a completely evil fashion
  - The prince above all else must acquire a “flexible disposition”
    - Capable of varying their conduct as fortune and circumstance dictate
    - Knows which strategies and techniques are appropriate to particular circumstances
    - Competent in the application of power
- Fortuna (Fortune)
  - Fortuna is the enemy of political order, the ultimate threat to the safety and security of the state. Depicted as a primal source of violence and as antithetical to reason
  - The prince who relies entirely on fortune is lost when it changes
  - Virtù provides the ability to respond to fortune at any time and in any way necessary
- Morality, Religion, and Politics
  - He counsels leaders to avoid the common values of justice, mercy, temperance, wisdom and love of their people in preference to the use of cruelty, violence, fear, and deception
  - Religion - *The Prince* speaks with disdain and admiration about the contemporary condition of the church and its Pope

The *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*

- Authored over a long period of time 1514-1519 published posthumously in 1531
- Demonstrates his republican sympathies, however, uses the same language and concepts as the *Prince*
- Contrasts the best case scenario of a monarchic regime with the institutions and organizations of a republic: shows that a republic is more desirable
- His political theory and his evaluations of regimes based on liberty
  - Majority of people confuse liberty with security
  - The limit of monarchic rule - can only guarantee to its people tranquil and orderly government
- In a republic both the people and the nobility must take an active role in self-government
  - Ascribes to the masses an extensive competence to judge and act for the public good
  - Debate is elevated as the best means for the people to determine the wisest course of action and the most qualified leaders. The republic is governed by words and persuasion
- Republics are better to adapt itself to diverse circumstances than a prince owing to the diversity found among its citizens