

BOOKS

BRIAN MORTON

PRINCE OF THE DARK ARTS

Machiavelli: a life beyond ideology

Paul Oppenheimer

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The best way to approach such enigmatic Italian modernists as Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and even the Sicilian Leonardo Sciascia is to think of them not as literary nephews of Jorge Luis Borges but rather as collateral descendants of their countryman Niccolò Machiavelli. Pointless to argue that modern Italy is a unified nation whose sixteenth-century equivalent was a bloody quilt of rival principalities. As recent events have shown, Italy is no more than a loose confederation of interest groups, geographical and otherwise. Even the language is far from uniformly codified.

Machiavelli was first and foremost a great writer and rhetorician. Like most bright young men of his time, he dabbled in poetry, elegant

terza rima in the Dantean style, but also bawdier and more observational stuff. As a young Florentine diplomat, he pioneered a style of writing, outwardly direct but inwardly evasive. It first appeared in his *Discorso fatto al magistrato dei dieci sopra le cose de Pisa*, ("Discourse prepared for the Magistrates of the Ten on issues relating to Pisa"), which considered – a first hint of the "Machiavellian" approach – whether that rebellious city could be retaken "o forza o l'amore". The prose, too, takes us by force and by "love" alternately, as it does in the masterly *Il principe*.

Machiavelli's reputation as the philosopher of cunning and violence is not a twentieth-century back-construction. The notorious prologue to Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* begins "Albeit the world think Machevil is dead / Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps". This was written 75 years after Machiavelli died in 1527 and it makes the point that "Machevil", who is not quite Machiavelli but some dark angel of the stiletto, is abroad in the world, whispering in princes' ears. One hears hints of his rhetoric later still in Lamennais' equally notorious "*Le bourreau est le premier ministre d'un bon prince*", the hangman as ideal prime minister. What isn't clear, but emerges strongly in Paul Oppenheimer's superb book, is how these ideas emerged and in what context.

In his effort to recreate a Machiavelli who is "beyond ideology", legitimised by pragmatism and unfettered by Church or human fears, Oppenheimer locates his politics at a cusp where profoundest suspicion of the political process is matched by greatest need for maximum political control. It is hard to imagine now the degree-zero world in which Machiavelli functioned. I remember once reading E.D. Pendry say that the aftermath of plague in early-modern Europe was akin to the fallout of an atomic assault, and one gets precisely that sense of Machiavelli's world: a nightmare version of *28 Days Later* in which violence becomes the argot of the streets, almost a pastime, and ideological alliance is replaced by fleeting opportunism.

What Oppenheimer has done, almost miraculously, is to create a biography that is in the strictest and most literary sense "Machiavellian", very much in the spirit and style of its subject. It frequently plunges *in media res*. It looks on dispassionately as murder is done (the Pazzi Conspiracy, now gruesomely familiar again to Hannibal Lecter fans), and as state justice is meted out (the execution of the charismatic Savonarola), and it accepts without a blink the apocalyptic logic of a polity in which a figure like Savonarola can thrive. It is also quite an odd text, in which adjectives pile up almost poetically. Duke Federico de Montefeltro is "obese, placid, stumpy, palmy, roly-poly", caught in Berruguete's portrait from a "poky" angle.



Federico da Montefeltro, the renaissance condottiere who is believed to have inspired Machiavelli's *The Prince*

Maggots do their work "daintily", delivering "sterility". And how about a sentence like this: "A pale hint of infinity – philosophy's great unmentionable during the Middle Ages – loomed as a glittering potential shadow on an advancing historical horizon." At one level it seems obscure and laboured, but it is in a real sense the key sentence of the book, Machiavelli's context and the momentum of his legacy delivered in less than two dozen words. For after Machiavelli, who did not invent his age's politics but channelled them brilliantly, the infinite does enter into the world of social and military policy. In astronomy, in economics and in military matters (albeit most old-school soldiers were repelled by the new personal firearms as dishonourable), the universe of possibility was suddenly and vastly enlarged, rattling with skeletons, echoing to anguished cries and the serpentine whisper of a drawn blade. It also anticipates a world – and this is why the reference to Pendry is not out of place – in which statesmen would ultimately and with seeming reasonableness trade in weapons that could consign whole nations to oblivion at the push of a button. It is this which makes Machiavelli so modern and such an obvious forebear of the postmodernists.

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