

From piazza Signoria to piazza Machiavelli?

On November 7, 1512—five hundred years ago—Niccolò Machiavelli was fired from his post at the Palazzo Vecchio. While Machiavelli never gave up on his dream to return to major public service despite his misfortune, he failed to do so. . His frustration was readily apparent. A year after his dismissal, he wrote to his friend, and fellow ambassador, Francesco Vettori: “I’m worn out, and I can’t stay like this forever...I still hope that the Medici find some use of me, even if they start by asking me to move stones.” He devoted the rest of his life to writing, and political involvement was limited to low-rank positions.

Machiavelli was well known in Florence and in European courts as a result of his famed reputation as a public servant and for his profound intellect. But he would not remain immune to the cruelties of history. Indeed, Machiavelli’s name has been vilified without equal for the last five centuries. His name has been inexorably tied with acts of evil. One need not look further than the Oxford English Dictionary, which describes the term *Machiavellian* as “cunning, scheming, and unscrupulous.” In behavioral psychology the term *Machiavellianism* is a pathological disorder that indicates a person’s willingness to deceive and manipulate others.

His work was criticized almost immediately. In 1559, the Catholic Church officially prohibited *The Prince*; thereafter, religious leaders in Protestant Europe banned his works as well. Perhaps the greatest blow to his standing came from Marlowe and Shakespeare. The Duke of Gloucester in *Richard III* and Iago in *Othello* are compared to the wickedness of Machiavelli. The long list of Machiavelli’s detractors includes Frederick the Great, Voltaire, and Diderot, only to be partly offset by favorable opinions from Sir Francis Bacon, Hume, and Montesquieu. While his epitaph reads “to such a great name no praise is adequate,” one wonders whether the many passers-by take notice.

Benedetto Croce, a famous Italian intellectual, was right when he predicted that “the debate on Machiavelli may be a question that will never close.” But it is clear that the negativity surrounding Machiavelli is contrary to historical reality. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is the most widely read and translated Italian book in the world. In fact, universities from Los Angeles to Tokyo will be celebrating its 500th anniversary (along with his greatest work, *Discourses on Livy*) in 2013. Machiavelli played a fundamental, if unknowing, role as the forerunner of modern social sciences. When he writes “As it is my aim to write something useful...I find it more useful to follow the real truth of the thing than the imagination of it,” Machiavelli lays the foundations for great innovation in social and political thought. For him, observation of facts and a critical reading of historical texts take precedence over centuries of describing what *ought* to occur.

Machiavelli employed the then-radical ideas of using experience, analytical reasoning, the comparative method, and historical sources to add to our understanding of the world. And he was a remarkably talented writer—his letters during his period of civil service are refined and witty. His success as a playwright speaks to his remarkable intellectual versatility. He transformed and expanded the role of diplomats: not only did he transmit secret information, but offered accurate analyses and policy options. Moreover,

Machiavelli inaugurated the empirical study of power manifested through ideas and religion, law, force, and political action. He undertook these analyses within the close examination of different forms of government, measuring their effectiveness in light of the “common good”.

It would be a shame for another five hundred years to pass before the reputation of Machiavelli can be restored. It almost goes without saying that overcoming Machiavelli’s overwhelmingly negative image will be a daunting task. The study of neuroscience has given ample evidence that logic and rational thought can do little in the face of long-held popular beliefs. Reinforcing the merits of Machiavelli in schools and universities is a commendable act, but this alone will be unable to shake-off five hundred years of misconception. A full restoration of his reputation requires a bold course of action. Being the center of Machiavelli’s public life, it is up to the city of Florence to take the first step in the right direction. It is for this reason—and I know I’m asking a lot from my fellow Florentines—that I suggest a provocative proposal. Let’s commemorate the five hundred years since Machiavelli’s dismissal by the Medici by changing the name of *Piazza della Signoria* (which over the centuries has been called *Piazza dei Priori*, *Piazza dei Signori*, and *Piazza del Granduca*) to *Piazza Machiavelli*.

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