

CVSP-202, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2010

## Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)

*I always have regarded The Prince as one of the most dangerous works which were spread in the world*

(Frederick the Great, king of Prussia – 1739)

### I – Historical context:

1453 Fall of Constantinople.

1454 Peace of Lodi.

1492 Death of Lorenzo de' Medici (il Magnifico).

1494 French invasion of Italy (Charles VIII)

1494-1512 Republic of Florence (Machiavelli is appointed 'secretary' of the Republic).

1512 End of the Republic, restauration of the Medici.

### II – Experience + Theory

**Letter to Francesco Vettori, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1513** : «When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for four hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I absorb myself into them completely. And because Dante says that no one understands anything unless he retains what he has understood, I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De principatibus*, in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a principedom, the categories of principedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost».

**P, Letter to Lorenzo** «a long acquaintance with contemporary affairs and a continuous study of the ancient world».

**P III** «I had a word on this subject with Rouen, at Nantes, when Valentino (as Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander, was popularly called) was occupying the Romagna. When the cardinal of Rouen said to me that the Italians did not understand war, I retorted that the french did not understand statecraft, because, if they understood it, then they would not let the Church become so great».

**P V** «Whoever becomes the master of a city accustomed to freedom, and does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed himself; because, when there is a rebellion, such a city justifies itself by calling on the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, never forgotten despite the passing of time and the benefits received from the new ruler. [...] in republics there is more life, more hatred, a greater desire for revenge; the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest».

### III - Virtù/Fortuna

**P VI** « And when we come to examine their actions and lives, they do not seem to have had from fortune anything other than opportunity. Fortune, as it were, provided the matter but they gave it its form; without opportunity their ~~prowe~~[virtue] would have been extinguished, and without such ~~prowe~~[virtue] the opportunity would have come in vain».

**P XXV** «None the less, so as not to rule out our free will, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves. I compare fortune to one of those violent rivers which, when they are enraged, flood the plains, tear down trees and buildings, wash soil from one place to deposit it in another. Everyone flees before

them, everybody yields to their impetus, there is no possibility of resistance. Yet, although such is their nature, it does not follow that when they are flowing quietly one cannot take precautions, constructing dykes and embankments so that when the river is in flood they would keep to one channel or their impetus be less wild and dangerous. So it is fortune. She shows her potency where there is no well-regulated power to resist her, and her impetus is felt where she knows there are no embankments and dykes built to restrain her».

#### **IV – Moral/Politics**

**P VIII** «After he had been appointed to this position [...] one morning he assembled the people and Senate of Syracuse, as if he meant to raise matters which affected the Republic; and at a prearranged signal he had all the senators, along with the richest citizens, killed by his soldiers; and when they were dead he seized and held the government of that city, without encountering any other internal opposition».

**P VIII** «It cannot be called ~~pro~~ ~~we~~ ~~ss~~ [virtù] to kill fellow-citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory».

**P VIII** «I believe that here it is a question of cruelty used well or badly. We can say that cruelty is used well (if it is permissible to talk in this way of what is evil) when it is employed once for all, and one's safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far as possible turned to the good of one's subject. Cruelty badly used is that which, although infrequent to start with, as time goes on, rather than disappearing, grows in intensity. Those who use the first method can, with God and with men, somewhat enhance their position, as did Agathocles; the others cannot possibly stay in power».

**P XVII** «[the following question arises]: whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The answer is that one would like to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to combine them, it is far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both. One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit; while you treat them well, they are yours. They would shed their blood for you, risk their property, their lives, their sons, so long, as I said above, as danger is remote; but when you are in danger, they turn away».

**P XVIII** «You must understand, therefore, that there are two ways of fighting: by law or by force. The first way is natural to men, and the second to beasts. But as the first way often proves inadequate one must needs have recourse to the second. So a prince must understand how to make a nice use of the beast and the man. The ancient writers taught princes about this by an allegory, when they described how Achilles and many other princes of the ancient world were sent to be brought up by Chiron, the centaur, so that he might train them his way. All the allegory means, in making the teacher half beast and half man, is that a prince must know how to act according to the nature of both, and that he cannot survive otherwise».

**P XVIII** «In the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no court of appeal, one judges by the ~~result~~ [end]. So let a prince set about the task of conquering, and maintaining his state; his methods will always be judged honourable and will be universally praised. The common people are always impressed by appearances and results. In this context, there are only common people, and there is no leeway for the few when the many are firmly sustained».

#### **V – The constitutional principality**

**P IX** «These two different dispositions are found in every city; and the people are everywhere anxious not to be dominated or oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles are out to dominate and oppress the people».

**P IX** «A man who is made a prince by the favour of the people must work to retain their friendship; and this is easy for him because the people ask only not to be oppressed. But a man who has become prince against the will of the people and by the favour of the nobles should, before anything else, try to win the people over; this too is easy if he takes them under his protection».