

The nation state: how machiavelli gave birth to the modern conception of rule



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The ideal of a complex nation state, one that possesses a central power and does not operate in a feudal manner or under the control of the Church, came into being during a rather turbulent period of political transition. The political realities of this era provided the gateway for thinkers to advocate change in how states act, how rulers rule, and the overall significance of the centralized 'nation state'. During 1100 to 1600, the Western World experienced a plethora of challenges to the existing order of how political structures operate. These innumerable events, all of which ignited furious philosophical, social, moral, and political thought, eventually gave way to the paramount thinking of Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli's *The Prince*, clearly outlines the problems with the religious and feudal rule that was all too commonplace in Western societies, and offers a tangible guidebook for leaders to look to for assistance in ruling. *The Prince*, which is essentially a realist doctrine, discusses how a ruler should acquire principalities, should act in times of war, should treat his subjects, and most importantly how an ideal ruler can maximize his power and effectively rule a lasting and successful state. Machiavelli's fluctuating political life and his vocational experiences largely contributed to his thinking and intellectual basis for the ideals presented in *The Prince*. He had been a *consigliere* of Florence, yet witnessed the Medici's subvert Florence's government for their own dynastic needs. Prior to unification, Italy was a spread out territory, consisting of feudal City-States, perpetually engaged in conflict and often being subjugated to attacks from outside powers. In 1494 the Milanese had invited the much more powerful French to intervene in Italian rivalries as Milan's ally. This eventually led to the Medici's surrendering Florence to their enemies without a fight, which then led to a popular uprising against the

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Medici regime. Florence's republic was briefly restored, and it is these issues of power that frame Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The organization of the nation state was a foreign concept to Italy. The size of Italian political organization was on a much smaller scale than that of the city-state, regardless if the form of government was a republic, aristocracy, or oligarchy. Machiavelli is primarily concerned with how a state can maintain its independence, and how the ruler must act in order to remain in power. Italy became the pawn of larger nation states, the site of almost a century of war between the French and Spanish Habsburgs, lasting until the Treaty of Cateau Cambresis in 1559. Machiavelli's *The Prince*, discusses the different types of principalities, classifying all of them as hereditary, new, mixed, or ecclesiastical. After establishing his definitions for each, he devotes much time to the ideal prince and the qualities he must possess. In doing so, Machiavelli consistently uses historical examples to substantiate his arguments. He looks to Greek and Roman political events, and also to the political instability of his day both within Italy and abroad, to strengthen his arguments and to provide tangible reference points for the reader to draw upon. The following passage regarding how a ruler maintains a colony, clearly displays Machiavelli's use of furthering his ideas with the assistance of a then contemporary example: If the old territories and the new have similar customs, the new Subjects will live quietly. Thus, Burgandy, Brittany, Gascony, And Normandy have for long quietly submitted to France. Although they do not all speak exactly the same language, Nevertheless their customs are similar, and they can easily put Up with each other (Machiavelli 8). One of Machiavelli's main focuses within *The Prince* is his construction of the ideal ruler. He delves into the specific characteristics that will enable a leader to flourish. Machiavelli begins writing <https://assignbuster.com/the-nation-state-how-machiavelli-gave-birth-to-the-modern-conception-of-rule/>

specifically about the ideal ruler in chapter 15. His prince must possess the qualities that will secure the success of the state. Chapter 16 is devoted to the qualities and overall generosity that the prince should possess. Pope Julius II, King Louis XII, and King Ferdinand of Spain are all then evaluated on the basis of their generosity. Additionally, an example from ancient Rome is utilized to validate Machiavelli's statements on the topic. Chapter 16 concludes briefly: So it is wiser to accept a reputation as miserly, which people despise but do not hate, than to aspire to a reputation as generous, and as a consequence, be obliged to face criticism for rapacity, which people both despise and hate (Machiavelli 50-51). Each chapter follows this pattern of logical reasoning, and as previously noted, each statement is presented and then scrutinized in a historical context. Of those chapters describing the desirable qualities of a prince, the most striking deal with aspects of cruelty. Machiavelli's theory is that cruelty as an abstract quality is fundamentally undesirable, yet in practice can have its own virtues. He asserts that while cruelty for its own sake is not admirable, cruelty employed by a wise ruler for the preservation of the state is warranted. This reasoning reinforces Machiavelli's overall notion that the well being of the state always supersedes any other concerns the ruler may be dealing with. Similar statements are made throughout *The Prince* concerning the deceit and duplicity a ruler must resort to if he plans on maintaining a functional state. Throughout *The Prince*, any actions that facilitate the preservation of the state are looked upon favorably, while any conduct that jeopardizes it, however well grounded in principle, must be avoided at all cost. Machiavelli's intended ideal ruler can easily be contrasted with the ideal ruler, or philosopher king, that is presented within Plato's *Republic*. Both Plato and <https://assignbuster.com/the-nation-state-how-machiavelli-gave-birth-to-the-modern-conception-of-rule/>

Machiavelli have a set vision of the ideal leader. In both Plato's kallipolis and Machiavelli's ideal principality, the supreme goal is some form of the common good. Plato's common good is maximizing the good for all citizens, while Machiavelli's is simply the conservation of the state institution, which in turn acts to protect the rights of the citizens. While these ideas are similar, Machiavelli and Plato offer radically different notions of the ideal leader within a given political structure. Machiavelli manifests such differences by stating: I am concerned it may be thought presumptuous for me to write on this as well, especially since what I have to say, as regards this question in particular, will differ greatly from the recommendations of others. But my hope is to write a book that will be useful, at least to those who read it intelligently, and so I thought it sensible to go straight to a discussion of how things are in real life and not waste time with a discussion of an imaginary world. For many authors have constructed imaginary Republics and principalities that have never existed in practice and never could, for the gap between how people actually behave and how they ought to behave is so great that anyone who ignores everyday reality in order to live up to an ideal will soon discover he has been taught how to destroy himself, not how to preserve himself (Machiavelli 48-49). Many political trends that we have witnessed throughout both the present and the past can be seen within The Prince. Machiavelli's attitudes towards colonization and imperialism can be applied to a multitude of events in recent time. The establishment of puppet states in conquered territories, as described in The Prince, can be easily related to the emergence of Cold War satellite states. The conception of 'well-used cruelty' to further the goals of the state can be related to perhaps the most notorious tyrants in modern history. From Stalin's purges, <https://assignbuster.com/the-nation-state-how-machiavelli-gave-birth-to-the-modern-conception-of-rule/>

to Mao's Cultural Revolution, Machiavelli's almost prophesied words are so far reaching, universal, and easily identifiable. In addition to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, other texts were born out of similar settings, circumstances, and attitudes towards the existing system of rule. Outside of Italy, many similar socio-political events, and the responses to them were slowly bringing in a set of renewed ideas that led to the intellectual basis for the conception of a strong nation state. During this period, France witnessed significant religious strife between the Catholic's and the Protestant Huguenots. In effect, the existing French monarchy was nearly torn apart by civil war between these two factions of competing noble families. These events led French philosopher and lawyer Jean Bodin to address the destructive nature of the Huguenot wars in his defining work, *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576). Bodin wrote that in order for a state to survive, a sovereign monarchy was imperative. Bodin advocates that the monarch must possess a monopoly on power to defend and maintain the state, while still respecting the individual rights of his subjects. Even though France had begun as one of the early nation states, it was not until the monarch could prevent unruly nobles from fighting against each other and the interests of the central government could nation states really be considered developed. Bodin's conception of sovereignty, the definitive authority as a means to rule within a given political system, furthered the overall strengthening of the nation state. Machiavelli's *The Prince* was born out of an era of widespread political turmoil. His ideas presented within draw heavily from the failures of the past and his present, yet in turn led to a hauntingly real vision of the future role of political structures. Machiavelli's thought provided the blueprint for the modern day nation state. Subsequent thinkers, such as Jean Bodin, added to <https://assignbuster.com/the-nation-state-how-machiavelli-gave-birth-to-the-modern-conception-of-rule/>

Machiavelli's model of change from existing reliance on feudal, religious, and local governments)to that of a strong nation state.