



## Be Like the Fox: Machiavelli In His World

*Erica Benner*

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In the five hundred years since he wrote *The Prince*, Machiavelli's name has been linked to tyranny and the doctrine that "the ends justify the means." But that is not what he stood for. In *Be Like the Fox*, Erica Benner takes us back to Renaissance Florence, where newly liberated citizens fought to build a free republic after the Medici princes were exiled. Machiavelli dedicated his life to this struggle for freedom. But despite his heroic efforts, the Medici soon swept back into power. Forced out of politics and prevented from speaking freely, Machiavelli had to use his skills of foxlike dissimulation to defend democracy in an era of tyrannical princes. Drawing on his letters, political writings, hard-hitting satirical dramas, and conversations with kings and popes, *Be Like the Fox* reveals Machiavelli as an unlikely hero for our times.

## Be Like the Fox: Machiavelli In His World Details

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# From Reader Review Be Like the Fox: Machiavelli In His World for online ebook

## Glen says

I won this book in a goodreads drawing.

Machiavelli is a controversial figure in history. Erica Benner tries to explain the man and his writing in the context of his time and his experiences. She argues that much of what we think we know of him comes from a knee jerk letter written by an Englishman, who maybe didn't even know Italian that well.

She argues that Machiavelli actually favored the rule of law, and that many have read his writings and found the wrong moral.

I wouldn't be surprised if this were true. Benner makes a good argument.

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## Karen Chung says

One man's experience with and study of political power struggle. Fascinating parallels to modern times.

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## Marks54 says

This is a thoughtful and readable political biography of Machiavelli by a top political theorist with ties to Yale, Oxford, and the London School of Economics. Her intent is to provide a rich introduction to the life of Machiavelli that brings his core issues to light in ways that are relevant for both the time of Renaissance Florence and today. She succeeds in this admirably and I will make a point to find more of her books.

Why is a biography of Machiavelli a challenge? To start with, he is likely the most read and commented on political theorist of the past 500 years. Saying something new might not be so easy. Second, Machiavelli is one of the most misunderstood and vilified writers ever, whose name is synonymous with amoral power seeking and whose works were on the Vatican's Index of forbidden books well into the 19th century. Third, Machiavelli's work has been the subject of controversy among careful analysts due to the rich textures of his writing and the irony inherent in many of his works. There are multiple levels of meaning in the Prince and the Discourses and it is not surprising that scholars have divided between good and bad interpretations of Machiavelli's work.

Benner is clearly in the camp of the "good" Machiavelli who sought to promote republican values over those of tyranny but who was also prudent about publishing his writings in an environment that was often harsh to political or theological criticisms. Benner tells the story of Machiavelli's life by focusing on the critical political events he was involved with and then judiciously moving from the facts of Machiavelli's life to what he and others wrote about that life and its political challenges as he was working through it or reminiscing about it later in life. I am well of the arguments for studying books like the Prince or the Discourses by sticking to the text. Benner's point, however, is to study Machiavelli's life, and in doing so I can only see value in situating his work into the broader political context within which he lived and was

employed. The result is a masterful and convincing picture of the author of the Prince that is believable and highly informative. The political logic of Machiavelli is also compelling, especially in our contemporary age of brutally partisan politics, confusions in understanding the world, and rising stakes of apparently unending political conflict. It is not at all surprising to me that Machiavelli is relevant and Benner has done a great service to those interest in learning about him.

This is a very good book.

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## **Tom Peebles says**

No consensus exists today among historians, philosophers and those interested in the genealogy of political thinking about the objectives and outlook of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), the Florentine writer, civil servant, diplomat and political philosopher. The adjective “Machiavellian” refers to principles and methods of expediency, craftiness, and duplicity in politics. Common synonyms for “Machiavellian” include “scheming,” “cynical,” “shrewd” and “cunning.” For some, Machiavellian politics constitute nothing less than a prescription for maintaining power at any cost, in which dishonesty is exalted and the killing of innocents authorized if necessary.

Machiavelli earned this dubious reputation primarily through his best known work, *The Prince*, published in 1532, five years after his death, in which he purported to advise political leaders in Florence and elsewhere – “princes” – on how to maintain power, particularly in a republic, where political leadership is not based on monarchy or titles of nobility and citizens are supposed to be on equal footing. But many consider Machiavelli a genuine proponent of republican government whose thinking foreshadowed modern democratic ideas. Erica Benner, author of two other books on Machiavelli, falls squarely into this camp.

Benner portrays Machiavelli as a “thorough-going republican,” and a “eulogist of democracy” who “sought to uphold high moral standards” and “defend the rule of law against corrupt popes and tyrants” (p.xvi). She discounts the shocking advice of *The Prince* as bait for tyrants. Machiavelli wore the mask of helpful advisor, Benner writes, “all the while knowing the folly of his advice, hoping to ensnare rulers and drag them to their ruin” (p.xv). As a “master ironist” and a “dissimulator who offers advice that he knows to be imprudent” (p.xvi), Machiavelli’s hidden intent was to “show how far princes will go to hold on to power” and to “warn people who live in free republics about the risks they face if they entrust their welfare to one man” (p. xvi-xvii).

Benner encourages a deeper look at Machiavelli’s major writings, particularly *The Prince* and his *Discourses on Livy*, nominally a discussion of politics in ancient Rome, to discover Machiavelli’s layered insights on several key questions about republican governance: how can leaders in a republic sustain power over the long term; how can a republic best protect itself from threats to its existence, internal and external; and how can a republic avoid lapsing into tyranny. Benner’s title alludes to Machiavelli’s observation that a fox has a particular kind of cunning that can recognize traps and avoid snares. Humans need to emulate a fox by being “armed with mental agility rather than physical weapons” and by developing a kind of cunning that “sees through ruses, decent words or sacred oaths” (p.151).

Benner advances her view of Machiavelli as a forerunner of modern liberal democracy by placing the Florentine “squarely in his world, among his family, friends, colleagues and compatriots” (p.xix). Rather than setting out Machiavelli’s thinking on governance as abstractions, she has integrated his writings into dialogues, using italics to indicate verbatim quotations – a method which, she admits, “transgresses the usual

biographical conventions” but nonetheless constitutes a “natural way to show [her] protagonist in his element” (p.xx). It is a clever look at Machiavelli and his world.

That world centered on Florence, already at its height as the center of the artistic and cultural flourishing known as the Renaissance. But Benner’s story lies elsewhere, focused on the city’s cutthroat political life, dominated by the Medici family. Bankers to the popes, patrons of Renaissance art, and masters of political cronyism, the Medici exercised close to outright control of Florence from the early 15th century until thrown out of power in 1494, with the assistance of French king Charles VIII, at the outset of Machiavelli’s career. They recaptured control in 1512, but were expelled again in 1527, months before Machiavelli’s death, this time with the assistance of Hapsburg Emperor Charles V.

Lurking behind the Medici family were the popes in Rome, linked to the family through intertwining and sometimes familial relationships. In a time of rapidly shifting alliances, the popes competed with rulers from France, Spain and the mostly German-speaking Holy Roman Empire for worldly control over Florence and Italy’s other city-states, duchies and mini-kingdoms, all at a time when ominous challenges to papal authority had begun to gather momentum in other parts of Europe.

Machiavelli served as a diplomat for the city of Florence and held several high-level civil service positions, including secretary, or administrator, for Florence’s war committee. Throughout his career, he lobbied for Florence to abandon its reliance upon mercenaries with no fixed loyalties to fight its wars. He urged Florence to cultivate its own home grown fighting force, a “citizens’ militia.” His civil service career came to an abrupt halt in 1513, shortly after Guilio de’ Medici, with the assistance of Pope Julius II and Spanish troops, wrestled back control over Florence’s government. The new regime accused Machiavelli of participating in an anti-Medici coup. He was imprisoned, tortured, and banished from government, spending most of the ensuing seven years on the family farm outside Florence.

Both *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* took shape during Machiavelli’s period of forced exile, during which he drew upon his long experience in government to formulate his guidance to princes on how to secure and maintain political power. Although both works were published after his death in 1527, Benner uses passages from them -- always in italics -- to illuminate particular events of Machiavelli’s life. Extracting from these passages and Benner’s exegesis upon them, we can parse out a framework for Machiavelli’s ideal republic.

To maintain power over the long term, leaders need to eschew short-term gains and benefits and demonstrate, as Benner puts it, a “willingness to play the long game, to pit patience against self-centered impetuosity” (p.8), above all by securing the support of the people the prince purports to govern. Machiavelli’s long game thus hints at the modern notion that the most effective government is one that has the consent of the governed.

Machiavelli’s ideal republic was not a democracy based upon direct rule by the people but rather upon the rule of law. Upright leaders should put public laws above their own or other people’s private feelings, he maintained. They should resist emotional appeals to ties of family or friendship, and punish severely when the laws and the republic’s survival so demands. Arms and justice together are the foundation of Machiavelli’s ideal republic.

Several high-profile executions of accused traitors and subversives convinced Machiavelli that a republic should not dispense with its established legal procedures when faced with internal threats. No matter how serious the offense, exceptional punishments outside the confines of the law “set a corrupting precedent” (p.121). Machiavelli’s lifelong dream that Florence cultivate its own fighting force rather than rely upon

mercenaries to fight its wars with external enemies arose out of similar convictions.

During Machiavelli's time in exile, the disputatious German monk Martin Luther challenged a wide range of papal practices, setting in motion the Protestant Reformation and, with it, more than a century of bloody conflict in Europe between Protestants and Catholics. The Prince became an instrument in the propaganda wars stirred up by the Reformation, Benner contends, with Machiavelli demonized "mostly by men of religion, both Catholic and Protestant" (p.xv), who saw in the Florentine's thinking a challenge to traditional relations between church and state. These men of religion rightly perceived that the church would have little role to play in Machiavelli's ideal republic. Machiavelli's works earned a place on the Catholic Church's 1557 Index of Prohibited Books, one of the Church's solutions to the heresies encouraged by the Reformation, where they remained until 1890.

Benner's Machiavelli, an "altogether human, and humane" (p.xvi) commentator and operative on the political stage of his time, exudes few of the qualities associated with the adjective that bears his name. The ruthlessly duplicitous Machiavelli – his "evil double" (p.xiv), as Brenner puts it -- is barely present in her account. By using Machiavelli's writings to create dialogues with the principal actors of his time, Benner has produced a "real time" account that is almost Shakespearean, turning on intrigue and foible in the pursuit and exercise of power, and on the shortsightedness not only of princes and those who worked for them and curried their favor, but also of those who worked against them and plotted their overthrow.

But Benner's story is not always easy to follow. Readers unfamiliar with late 15th and early 16th Florentine politics may experience difficulty in visualizing the big picture amidst the continual conspiring, scheming and backstabbing. At the outset, in a section termed "Dramatis Personae," she lists the story's numerous major characters by category (e.g., family, friends, popes), and readers will want to consult this helpful list liberally as they work their way through her rendering of Machiavelli. The book would have also benefitted from a chronology setting out in bullet form the major events in Machiavelli's lifetime.

For a more detailed review, please see my blog, and feel free to copy any comments there also:  
<https://tomsbooks.wordpress.com/2018/...>

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## **Bookworm says**

Read 'The Prince' many years ago in school and remember liking it a great deal. Had been eager to read this, especially considering the life and times we live in and perhaps how maybe a few more of our politicians could read someone like Machiavelli. Since it had been so long I had forgotten that the premise was that Benner wanted to look at his life and legacy and examine whether we should call things "Machiavellian" given what he may or may not have meant.

Benner interweaves Machiavelli's biography with his writings plus the political and societal context of his life in an attempt to paint a more full picture of him but I'm not sure if I can buy her premise. It probably has to do a lot with my lack of familiarity with this time period and the history around it in general but I just didn't find the book particularly compelling. I thought it might have worked better if perhaps Benner had taken his work and worked around the context instead of trying to put the writings in the context of the history. Goal remains the same but I wasn't interested in a lot of the details.

Overall the feeling I got was that it was just better to read 'The Prince'. Other people (particularly political scientists, students, etc.) may find this useful. It may have been too long/I should have re-read 'The Prince' to

get a better understanding for me.

Glad my library had this. Recommend as a borrow unless you need it for extensive research.

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### Mike says

This is a masterful written biography about a 16th century Florentine. Machiavelli was a political philosopher with civic involvement and ambition. The ambitions did not come easy. He was an optimist, an emissary, a philosopher, a teacher, a man ahead of his time.

I was familiar with his work through the 'Prince', but the authoritarian, dictatorial persona of that book does not come across at all in this biography.

The storyline is truly astounding. Think 1518 Florence and an advocacy of a Republic form of government, a tax system that does not exasperate the wealthy and the poor, a citizen army, and considering the opinions of political opponents.

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### Keith says

*Be Like the Fox: Machiavelli In His World* is an informative and useful book, most especially for two kinds of reader. First, people like me who read *The Prince* and *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* ever so long ago. Erica Benner's book serves as a vivid refresher to both Machiavelli's political thought and to the historical events in Fifteenth-century Italy. I remember first reading *The Prince* in an undergraduate class and realizing I would understand it all much better if I knew the historical background. This book is also recommended to anyone who is about to read Machiavelli. I think reading Benner's biography first would be a great help in understanding Machiavelli.

Benner's method is useful. She writes what is essentially a political biography of Machiavelli's life. There are some personal details of his youth and family life; however not enough is known to fill in these gaps. Nevertheless, his thought can be illumined by a comparison of his life and times. The structure of the book are sections of historical detail, in particular explaining who the major actors were, buttressed by many quotes from Machiavelli's work as well as from his contemporaries.

Benner adroitly merges different voices into the biographical narrative. Here is an example from the book. The bold type is a quote from Friar Savonarola; the italicized section is a quote from Machiavelli's *Discourses* and the plain text is Benner's explication.

**The people will live amidst rejoicing and the singing of psalms. The boys and girls will be like angels.**

When founding a new republic, Niccolò writes in his *Discourses*, *it's wisest to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have the opportunity.*

Founders of new institutions should assume that a large part of human nature inclines most

people to behave badly, at least now and then: to take more than their share of power or wealth, to profit from other people's weaknesses, to cheat, lie, betray promises. Inclinations like these can't be rooted out of our species; human nature itself cannot be reformed so that more and more people become reliably angelic. That is why prudent founders have built strong checks on human badness into their constitutions.

Overall, this presentation works very well, although I must admit I occasionally lost track of the speaker when there were two different voices being presented at the same time. Finally, as to Benner's interpretation of Machiavelli's teaching, she adheres to a theory of Machiavelli that sees him as a philosopher of freedom:

"When reading the Prince, one often has the impression that the book speaks in two different voices, sometimes in the same sentence. One voice is louder, tough, ambitious, impatient to set aside moral scruples for the sake of gaining an advantage. The other is less attention-grabbing and, for readers on the lookout for signature Machiavellianisms, far less intriguing. Yet it is this lower-key voice that recommends the book's most practical measures, the policies that tend to produce lasting power and security, not just dazzling but problematic results."

Machiavelli may not have been a democrat but he was a republican (classically defined in both cases). There are many who still adhere to a conception of Machiavelli as a teacher of evil. Often his advice is hard-hearted for a often cruel world but the ideal state for him seems always to be one in which all are happy. Neither oligarchy nor aristocracy can accomplish that. Machiavelli's pragmatic republicanism seems much the best of all possible worlds.

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## **Roman Clodia says**

This is very much a political biography rather than a personal one, a 'life and times' of Machiavelli rather than a psychological study of the man. Benner builds on a solid scholarly foundation of primary sources and delivers from them a lively, mostly accessible, account of the struggles for power in Florence during Machiavelli's lifetime.

In some ways, this is another rise and fall of the Medici with interventions from Savonarola and Cesare Borgia at various parts of the history. Machiavelli himself, not always as central as Benner might wish, works as a diplomat, helps establish a short-lived citizen army, then falls foul of the ruling powers and comments from the margins via plays, poetry and political discourses.

Benner is very positive, almost hagiographical, about her subject but it's difficult to get a sense of the 'real' man - not necessarily her fault as the period doesn't lend itself to displays of interiority, but disappointing all the same. We know he marries and has five children, we hear briefly of his infatuation with a courtesan, but the book focuses on his political personality, his politicised friendships such as that with Francesco Vettori.

It's not new, of course, to read *The Prince* as irony but there are contradictory moments such as when Machiavelli asks the advice of his friends as to whether he should present it to Guiliiano de'Medici (p.247), odd if it's intended as an exposé of the Medici family's political manipulations?



Benner has a jaunty style of writing: the narrative is in the present tense with embedded quotations distinguished typographically according to who is 'speaking' (italics for Machiavelli himself, bold for Savonarola's ranting, for example). There are places where the complications of wars and changing alliances between France, the papal powers, Florence and other Italian city states get a little hard to keep hold of and a historical time-line would have been handy for quick look-ups. Overall, though, this is a lively, intelligent and enjoyable re-look at Machiavelli's role in Florentine politics.

I read a review copy via Amazon Vine.

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### **James Taylor says**

I really wanted to enjoy this book. And while the author had an intriguing idea, I don't really think that she pulled it off. While she clearly knows her subject intimately and is obviously a very competent writer I just didn't find that the book ever excited me.

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### **Alper Çu?un says**

Machiavelli a nice guy and enlightened statesman? I'll take it in this fun and insightful book that draws from his entire oeuvre and the broader history of Florence. Read carefully and you'll find a lot of good advice to be gleaned from this take.

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### **LoLo says**

As an aficionado of political philosophy, I've always held Niccolo Machiavelli's work in high esteem. And any careful examination of his teachings will reveal that he isn't quite the amoral mastermind that his name has become synonymous with. In fact, the thing that stands out most about his work is that he seems to speak from both sides of his mouth, both advising the power-hungry tyrant while also advocating for the merits of a happy and equitable republic. This book delves into the roots of this dichotomy, and lays bare the truth of Machiavelli's subversive intentions and why he wrote the way he did. It provides a very clear understanding of Machiavelli's true political thought, and it's surprising just how fiercely democratic it is.

His most ardent belief, and his passion project, was that Florence absolutely needed its own militia, composed of its own citizenry. Florence was only capable of employing mercenaries for military protection, and this proved to be ineffective and ripe for corruption, over and over again. Only a citizen, whose entire existence is bound up in the struggle, could defend his own republic with a passion (and therefore effectiveness) that hired guns could never be motivated to achieve. In this concept, Machiavelli highlights the power of patriotic love and it is a central theme that runs through the rest of his philosophy.

He stresses the importance of a well-ordered political economy because ensuring a decent living for all citizens is one of the main foundations of a state's military power. He emphasizes how popular sentiment can make or break a head of state: "if the people hold you in hatred, fortresses do not save you." He advocates, with the health and longevity of the republic in mind, for the rule of just laws over the rule of a single man. He argues that a rich public, funded by taxes and sumptuary laws, makes for a safer and freer society. He expounds, with impressive fervency, the degree to which people will fight against their oppressors. And he

does all this while appearing to compliment the (naked) emperor's clothes.

I love this shit. This is why I hold a degree in poly-sci. Also, as a hilarious aside, I learned that Machiavelli's greatest fear was to be shunted off to some godforsaken countryside and forced to teach children how to read. It conjured up a hilarious mental image of this great strategist banging his head on the wall as he's stuck in a room full of little Ralph Wiggams.

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## **Bill Newell says**

When I visited my daughter's political science class on Family Day her first year at Smith, I witnessed a discussion of one of the classic conundrums of political theory: How could Machiavelli write, in rapid succession, both *The Prince* (a notorious guide to unscrupulous dictators which spawned the adjective 'Machiavellian') and *The Discourses* (extolling and advising free republics)? She and her classmates were pushed to close textual analysis, which I greatly admired, but struggled to answer the question, as have scholars ever since it was written.

I believe that question has now been definitively answered by Erica Benner in her *Be Like a Fox: Machiavelli in His World* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), 360 pp., which I just finished reading. She makes a rock-solid case that *The Prince* was written ironically, because a straight-forward approach would have got him fired, black-balled, and banished, if not murdered. Indeed, he offers counsel that would inherently appeal to a tyrant, but which, if followed, would likely bring on his demise.

Even if you're not interested in political theory, you'll find fascinating and instructive Benner's recounting of his depiction of Cesare Borgia, whose lucky rise to power (thanks to foreign powers), megalomania and narcissism, ineptitude at ruling what he conquered, and eventual demise bear striking similarities to Donald Trump without the tweets.

*Be Like a Fox* is seriously scholarly work of political history, but it's surprisingly accessible and entertaining. In no small part that's because it is replete with imagined dialogue, using wording drawn from his other published and unpublished works and those of his confidants.

A la Siskel & Ebert, I give it two thumbs up.

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## **Laura says**

*From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the week:*

*A new interpretation on the importance of The Prince in Machiavelli's life and subsequent reputation.*

*His name has of course become a by-word for political machination, but this new biography by Erica Benner challenges the notions that Machiavelli was simply a satanic cynic.*

*She suggests that, in context, he emerges as his era's staunchest champion of liberty who refused to compromise his ideals to fit the corrupt times in which he lived. As often as he advocates extreme measures for dealing with the enemy, he actually balances this with respect for the law in sentences such as "victories are never secure without some respect, especially for justice" and "cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom."*

*So this book is an attempt to redress the balance.*

*Read by Toby Jones*  
*Written by Erica Benner*  
*Abridged by Polly Coles*

*Producer: Clive Brill*  
*A Brill production for BBC Radio 4.*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08k1stv>

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### **Daniel1974nlgmail.com says**

Not so good as her other 2 books on Machiavelli. Her first and her second were really more textual interpretations in terms of influence and trying to explain the text itself, as in her second book. The Prince.

This was not much a biography of Machiavelli's life than a sort of history of his diplomatic dealings with numerous illustrious figures he had in his long career and how he dealt with these people and situations. As such it was not really what I was expecting, though still rather interesting. What I only would have liked to see then is how these people and events exactly influenced Machiavelli's writing. But unfortunately this is not really worked out in detail. Though there are numerous quotes from various texts, the relation is never really worked out.

Great in terms of gaining a better idea on Machiavelli's work as a Civil Servant in service of the City Of Florence, not so good when you'd wish to obtain a better understanding of Machiavelli's work. For that you can better turn to her other two books.

As such I thought the title was somewhat misleading as it is also never really explained how this title relates to the book. I would say that Machiavelli was a great diplomat, not cunning, devious or anything. But that he was an even greater writer and teacher to others.

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### **Karlan says**

Here is the story of 15th C Florence with a never ending cast of exciting characters. The biography is wonderfully readable. For those of us who have not thought of Machiavelli since college days, it all seems new and amazing. Highly recommended to those who enjoy historical fiction, too.

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