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Historian Challenges Age-old Interpretation of 'The Prince'

Though his name is synonymous with the Renaissance and the modern conception of Realpolitik, Machiavelli was in fact a retrograde thinker with a distinctly nostalgic outlook, according to a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Paul Sonnino claims historians have exaggerated the significance of Machiavelli's seminal work, "The Prince"---long considered the original primer on political ruthlessness---and falsely labeled him a progressive. In reality, Sonnino says, Machiavelli was adverse to new ideas and looked to antiquity for inspiration.

"Machiavelli is forever being associated with the concept of innovation, but in fact he was totally disdainful of technology. He was against the use of cannons, firearms, and fortifications, and he wanted people to defend the state like they did in ancient Rome, with hand-held shields. He was definitely not a prophet of a new age," said Sonnino, whose 1996 translation of "The Prince" was named Book of the Month by National Public Radio.

Sonnino attributes Machiavelli's present-day standing as the father of the political slight of hand to misreadings of "The Prince," which he points out was written in response to a particular crisis.

"'The Prince' was a prescription for a society that was falling apart. The circumstances in early 16th-century Florence were so desperate that Machiavelli was urging the current ruler to adopt extraordinarily violent measures to reform the state. Of course, this strongly suggests that Machiavelli believed that he was not living in an era of cultural or intellectual revival," he said.

Sonnino has often expressed skepticism about the idea of a European Renaissance centered in Italy. He says the concept is largely the work of 19th-century secularists eager to establish the primacy of European civilization---and who viewed the Catholic Church as a stultifying influence---as well as nationalists who valued the formation of modern nation-states.

"It is only logical that these groups would assign more historical significance to a period in which the cultural influence of the Catholic Church and the unity of the medieval world steadily deteriorated. Still, the breakdown of medieval institutions doesn't necessarily signal the emergence of the modern world. Nor can we put a premium on that era by virtue of its art. To say that you're going to assess a period by its art is akin to saying you're going to judge Nazi Germany by the Volkswagen," said Sonnino, a specialist in early modern European history, particularly 17th-century France.

"Not only is the idea of a Renaissance oddly Eurocentric in this age of political correctness, it's also unsubstantiated by the available evidence. The people who lived during that period thought it stank and said as much, the population was decreasing, commerce was in decline, and Europe was threatened with takeover by the Turks. Given all this, one would have to conclude the Renaissance is a totally preposterous idea."

According to Sonnino, abandoning such a concept would enable scholars to more fully appreciate other cultures and periods, and permit us to see the people of medieval and early modern Europe in a more accurate and nuanced light---including Machiavelli.

"The history of Machiavelli scholarship is a history of people missing his point. He's stimulating and rouses emotions, so people tend to confuse their reactions and his intentions. For instance, the idea of choosing the lesser of two evils is ascribed to him when in fact Thomas Aquinas said it first. Yet it's imputed to Machiavelli, which incorrectly implies that people before his time, that is people of the Middle Ages,

were stupid to the point of choosing the worst of two evils," he said.

Sonnino took up the task of translating "The Prince" after he translated the writings of two of Machiavelli's most famous detractors, Louis XIV's "Mémoires" and Frederick the Great's "Anti-Machiavel." Published by Humanities Press, Sonnino's version of "The Prince" includes an expansive introduction, in which he recasts Machiavelli as the antithesis of a modern thinker, as well as maps and scholarly annotations. At 136 pages, it retails for \$9.95.

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