
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Vivanti, Corrado. Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography

Mauricio Suchowlansky

Volume 37, numéro 1, hiver 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090819ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i1.21303>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Suchowlansky, M. (2014). Compte rendu de [Vivanti, Corrado. Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 37(1), 182–184. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i1.21303>

Vivanti, Corrado.

Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography. Trans. Simon MacMichael. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. xvii, 261. ISBN 978-0-691-15101-4 (hardcover) \$27.95.

First published in Italian in 2008 and now appearing posthumously in English, Corrado Vivanti's *Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography* offers a comprehensive and brilliant, though at times fragmentary, account of the works and times of the former Florentine secretary. As Vivanti himself asserts in the *Preface*, the aim of the book is to "gather together the nexus between [the public and diplomatic] activities and Machiavelli's works" (viii). More importantly, Vivanti presents Machiavelli's texts as pregnant with a new vision of the world in a context of "outdated theoretical models" (xi). As a result, Vivanti proposes a "realist" interpretation of Machiavelli's political theorizing; his interest in the *verità effettuale* led Machiavelli to view the world that surrounded him "with detachment and to understand the variety of needs of human beings and societies" (xiv).

Organized into three main parts with an appended essay on Machiavelli's uses of the notion of *stato*, Vivanti's text surveys a wide range of issues beginning with the often-debated question of Machiavelli's intellectual background (chapter 1). Vivanti notes that Niccolò may have not received a traditional humanist education, given the economic and social status of his family at the end of the fifteenth century. Yet he nonetheless had access to a respectable number of classical sources (such as Livy and Lucretius) and more recent legal texts thanks to his father, Bernardo (4–6). Crucially, then, Vivanti acknowledges the influence of a humanist education during the early "Shadowy period" as much as the humanist "working environment" of the Florentine republic in Machiavelli's later intellectual development (12–13).

Chapters 2–10 provide a thorough reflection on the so-called "early" Machiavelli: chapter 2 treats his intellectual relationship with Savonarola, which Vivanti deems "ambivalent" as opposed to overly hostile, and the profound impact the friar's vision of civil society and the republican *governo largo* had on Machiavelli's political theorizing (8–9). Dealing with Machiavelli's role as secretary to the Second Chancery and the Ten of Liberty and Peace, chapters 3–6 discuss how the exercise of office helped Machiavelli develop a "habit of dealing with the current problems of the Florentine republic" that eventually

influenced the “ideas and lines of argument that we ... find in his great political works” (21–22 and 28–35). This becomes clearer in chapters 7–10, in which Vivanti treats some of the most important “early” works of the Florentine, such as the *Ghiribizzi al Soderino* (ch. 7), the *Cagione dell’Ordinanza* (ch. 8), the *Tercets on Ambition* (ch. 9) and the *Discorso ai Paleschi* (ch. 10).

Part 2 treats Machiavelli’s major political works alongside the objective historical situation of the former secretary and his beloved city, *post res perditas*. Arguably, it is in this part of the book that we find Vivanti’s own interpretation emerging more vividly. This is most clear in his challenges to the “Reason of State” interpretation of Meinecke and the liberal take of Croce, or when he contests aspects of the neo-republicanism of Viroli (97, 109–10 and 119–20).

Beginning with the question of the date of composition of *The Prince*—an undertaking that he deems “futile” in a direct challenge to the work of Martelli (84)—Vivanti tackles a series of important themes in the scholarship. For instance, Vivanti reminds us that the crucial instruction of *The Prince* is “to provide a remedy to a situation of crisis,” or a response to the “dramatically urgent situation [of the] present...” (97 and 99). In doing so, Vivanti offers an open challenge to the so-called “mythical” considerations of the work—either as a work meant simply to serve the Medici regime or as a “systematic treatment” in which his political science defines an “idealization of the person designated ... to take action on Italy’s behalf” (85 and 89). Rather, “Machiavelli’s entire thought ... is cloaked in history,” an element that Vivanti deems “innovative” when compared to previous medieval and humanist traditions (85–86).

On the *Discourses on Livy* (chs. 14 and 15), Vivanti notes the influence of jurists’ legal texts as well as Poliziano’s *Miscellanea* (108–09) and the consequent development of a novel literary genre “better suited to reflecting on the world affairs in that moment of crisis...” (109). In the same vein, chapter 17 discusses *The Art of War* not only as an outgrowth of Machiavelli’s activities at the Orti Oricellari but also as a “complementary” work to the more political treatises, *The Prince* and the *Discourses* (122–23). Crucially, Vivanti labels Machiavelli’s commentary on the first ten books of Livy “an *institutio populi*, in the sense that it proposes the training of a new protagonist coming for the first time onto the stage of political thought, drawing strength from the experience of the Romans who had been a ‘people’ in the full meaning ... of the term” (118). Vivanti is right to underscore the “realist” substance of the text—the Machiavelli of the *Discourses* sought to “clarify the present misfortunes, but also to examine the

potential remedies” (119). However, he overlooks the ambivalent undertones of Machiavelli’s own theorizing—on, for instance, popular republics, an element that questions the prescriptive value of Rome as a model for modern Italian states.

Finally, part 3 analyzes the “late” works of the Florentine—especially the *Florentine Histories*, the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*, and *The Mandrake*—in relation to Machiavelli’s “Return to business” and the situation of Florence after the death of the last secular heir of the Medici (135). In this respect Vivanti is right to acknowledge the interrelatedness of Machiavelli’s main work on constitutional reform and his *Florentine Histories*. For instance, speaking of Machiavelli’s reliance on the humanist use of speeches *in utramque partem*, Vivanti rightly acknowledges how “Machiavelli ... described the negative actions of the past, offering documentation of the evils to be avoided when reorganizing the city,” a theme that is set forth in the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* (162 and 166). Nonetheless, given Vivanti’s interest in providing an account of Machiavelli’s works and times, it is striking that he considers these two works as simply echoing “passages from the *The Prince* and the *Discourses*” to the extent that they show “a profound coherence of ideas in Machiavelli’s works” (162). Additionally, while Vivanti treats an arguably impressive amount of text, he nonetheless neglects a series of crucial texts belonging to this “late” period, such as the *Sommario delle Cose di Lucca*, the *Minuta de Provvisione per la Riforma dello Stato di Firenze*, and the incomplete *Ricordo al Cardinale Giulio de’ Medici*. Given the otherwise rigorous treatment offered by Vivanti’s study, this lack of engagement is problematic.

Overall, Corrado Vivanti’s intellectual biography is a masterful piece of scholarly writing and a fine corollary to the author’s long commitment to the world of Machiavelli studies. Published on the 500th anniversary of the composition of Machiavelli’s “little book on principedoms” (letter to Vettori, 12/10/1513), this translation of Vivanti’s study nicely displays the liveliness and intensity of Machiavelli’s thought in the context of a changing European world (viii–ix). His engagement with such a broad range of issues in the scholarship, coupled with his appreciation of the Florentine’s political thought in light of “a new context,” makes *Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography* a work for posterity.

MAURICIO SUCHOWLANSKY

University of Toronto