Many people are probably most familiar with Machiavelli as the author of The Prince. It begins by asserting that “All states, all dominions that have held power over men have been either republics or principalities.” But in this book, Machiavelli adds, “I shall not discuss republics, because I have previously considered them at length.” That last statement is almost certainly a reference The Discourses, a longer and more sprawling book that he was working on during roughly the same period as The Prince. (Both books were published only after Machiavelli’s death in 1527, though manuscripts had circulated among his friends before then. Of course, there have been centuries of debate about which of these two very different books represents the “real” Machiavelli—or whether, perhaps, both of them do.)

Machiavelli’s book about republics is framed as a set of commentaries on the first ten volumes of Titus Livy’s history of the Roman Republic (which Livy wrote during the reign of the first Emperor, Augustus). The reason is that Machiavelli wants to use the Roman Republic as a political model from which his contemporaries can draw lessons, so his book is an exercise in theoretical and practical analysis, not historical antiquarianism. As Machiavelli sums things up in Book II, Ch. 2:

“But most marvelous of all is it to observe the greatness which Rome attained after freeing itself from its kings. The reason is easy to understand; for it is not the well-being of individuals that makes cities great, but the well-being of the community; and it is beyond question that it is only in republics that the common good is looked to properly in that all that promotes it is carried out [...]. The opposite happens when there is a prince; for what he does in his own interests usually harms the city, and what is done in the interests of the city harms him.”

Here are a few background remarks about Machiavelli’s Discourses and the historical context in which it was written (with apologies to those for whom this introduction is unnecessary—and please pardon the sweeping generalizations, too).

During the western Middle Ages, in most of Europe the predominant system of rule was some form of feudalism. In some places semi-autonomous cities re-emerged, but they were islands in a feudal sea, and they came increasingly under the control of large-scale monarchies to which they had been formally subordinate from the start. Northern Italy, however, was a world dominated by independent city-republics, or communes.

Politically, the great age of the Italian city-republics ran roughly from the 1100s to the 1300s. Then the cultural flourishing of the Renaissance coincided historically with the decline and eventual collapse of the communes. Beginning in the mid-1300s, more and more of them succumbed to the pressures of internal crises and/or external conquest. If they weren’t swallowed up by larger political units, they increasingly came under despotic rule, producing that swarm of ruthless, energetic, and often personally fascinating Renaissance despots who feature so prominently in The Prince. Starting with the momentous French invasion of Italy in 1494, all this was complicated by the large-scale intervention of foreign armies in devastating warfare up and down the Italian peninsula. By the mid-1500s, the only significant self-governing republic that remained was the Venetian Republic (La Serenissima Repubblica)—which managed to hang on through the 1700s, though by the end its reputation for decadence and art outweighed its reputation as a bastion of (oligarchic) republican liberty.

But the same period, running from the 1400s through the early 1500s, that saw the eclipse of the northern Italian city-republic also produced the richest flourishing of explicitly republican theorizing and ideology, which left behind an important intellectual legacy. (It is hard not to be reminded of Hegel’s observations that philosophy begins when a world is dying, that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk, and the
In this long-term historical process of the rise and fall of the Italian city-republics, Machiavelli’s city, Florence, was one of the last major cities to succumb to despotic rule. Machiavelli’s work is part of a burst of political theorizing (also including the writings of his friend Guicciardini) that accompanied the last dying gasps of the Florentine Republic in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Over the course of the 1400s, while republican forms were preserved, Florence came increasingly under the effective control of the Medici family, who were virtuosos of urban machine politics. But in 1494 a revolt drove out the Medici and established a republic with a broadened political base. This revived Florentine Republic survived until 1512, when Medici rule was re-imposed by a Spanish Army. For most of that period Machiavelli was one of the Republic’s senior civil servants, serving as Second Chancellor and as Secretary of a committee called the Ten for War. His job also included extensive diplomatic travel. After the Medici’s restoration to power, Machiavelli was suspected of participation in a republican plot, which led to his being briefly arrested and tortured. For most of the next decade he vegetated (as he complained to friends) on his farm in the Tuscan countryside, and it is to this period of enforced political inactivity that we owe his two major theoretical works, *The Prince* and *The Discourses*.

In order to escape from this marginalization, Machiavelli tried to make himself look useful to the Medici family (one of whom had become Pope in 1513). Thus, *The Prince* is dedicated to Lorenzo de’ Medici, who was made Duke of Urbino in 1516. In his last years Machiavelli did manage find some employment with the Medici (including minor governmental posts and a commission to write an official *History of Florence*). Ironically, these Medici links rendered Machiavelli politically suspect when, in 1527, Florence once again revolted and drove out the Medici. Machiavelli died shortly afterwards. The last Florentine Republic lasted from 1527 to 1530, when it was crushed by another Spanish army, and the Medici returned for good. In 1537 Cosimo de’ Medici became Grand Duke of Tuscany, and in 1569 Florence was formally absorbed into the Grand Duchy, marking a definitive end to Florentine republicanism.

One small note of clarification. At several points in the *Discourses* Machiavelli argues that in order to establish and maintain liberty, it is sometimes necessary to be willing “to kill the sons of Brutus” (e.g., I:16 & III:3). The Brutus referred to here is not Marcus Brutus, who became famous as one the conspirators who assassinated Caesar in a vain attempt to save the Republic, but to an equally famous ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus. Back around 509 B.C., Junius Brutus played a major role in driving out the Roman kings and establishing the Republic. According to one story (reported by Livy among others), while Brutus was serving as consul, it was discovered that his two sons were implicated in a plot to restore the monarchy. Acting as a magistrate, Brutus condemned his own sons to death, and was even present at their execution. Thus, he actively put loyalty to the republic and republican liberty above the loyalties and attachments of kinship. For the next two millennia, this action (real or legendary) helped to make Brutus an iconic figure exemplifying stern and incorruptible republican virtue. (Rousseau, for example, praised Brutus as an admirable and heroic figure, while recognizing that some others found such “cruel virtues” a bit too grim to stomach.)

--Jeff Weintraub