

Research Design

While imprisoned by Mussolini, Antonio Gramsci recast Machiavelli's "new prince" as the "Modern Prince", turning Machiavelli's mirror for princes into a mirror for communist parties. My intention is to examine the relevance of Machiavelli for a contemporary reinvention of left praxis. Can Machiavelli's "new prince" become a "post-modern prince"? If so, what might a mirror for post-modern princes look like?

I will begin my investigation from the far from evident or uncontroversial assumption that Machiavelli was a political theorist who produced generally applicable knowledge or ways of thinking about politics. It is a commonly held position that Machiavelli's writings were primarily or only relevant to the specific historical conjuncture of early 16th century Italy. However, there is also a strong tradition of writings that claim Machiavelli created context-transcendent knowledge or ways of thinking about statecraft or, alternately, the undertaking of projects of radical social change. I situate myself in this latter tradition, reading Machiavelli as a theorist concerned with the act of political creation—though not only a theorist of the possibilities for and constraints upon political innovation.

Yet even given the premise that Machiavelli produced writings that are applicable beyond the particular circumstances of their creation, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that they can be useful in the particular circumstances we find ourselves in. There is a long tradition of various figures committed to radical social projects adapting Machiavelli for their own uses, from Algernon Sidney and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, but even if Machiavelli could be harnessed to their

purposes—at least to some degree—this does not mean that Machiavelli can be useful for a version of left praxis geared towards the present historical conjuncture. Compounding this problem is the historical failure of the Marxist-Leninist branch of the radical project¹ and doubt about which group(s), if any, is capable of being the agent of radical social change. Without a systematic account of left praxis or possible agents of historical change, how can a particular thinker or body of thought can be harnessed to a project of radical change or provide insight to radical social movements? Formulating a “post-modern prince” would require not simply injecting some of Machiavelli’s concepts or insights into a preexisting body of thought about left praxis, as Gramsci did, but using him in forging a new one.

Gopal Balakrishnan’s magisterial recent *New Left Review* piece² on a “Machiavelli for the 21st century” suggests some directions such a Machiavellian revival of left praxis might take—without coming to any substantive conclusions about even its possibility. I will attempt to build on his foundation. My working hypothesis will be that Machiavelli is at least somewhat relevant to present left praxis and, in particular, the category of *fortuna* or contingency must be central in any satisfactory account of the possibilities for left political action. I will attempt to test this thesis—insofar as it is possible to test such an assertion—by creating a mirror for post-modern princes, addressed to radical social movements, which draws on Machiavelli but is not limited to his thought. While the proof of my thesis must be found in the world, it should also be judged on its coherency—both internally and with representative accounts of political

¹ Nominally Marxist-Leninist parties still control large parts of the globe and Maoist insurgencies are active in Peru and Nepal, but I view these as the death spasms.

² Gopal Balakrishnan, “Future Unknown: Machiavelli for the 21st Century”, *New Left Review*, March-April 2005. This article started me on the train of thought that led to this qual.

strategy and the present historical conjuncture—and its theoretical insight into the present possibilities for political action. A lack of either would be grounds to declare failure although theoretical coherency and insight alone would not equal success.

A key antagonist to my account will be Antonio Negri. Negri is not only the (co-) author of one of the closest things to an all-encompassing, post-cold war left account of the present conjuncture, the methods of praxis possible within it and the emergence of a new historical subject capable of radical change (the “multitude”), but also a commentator on Machiavelli. Through a thorough assessment and critique of Negri’s writings on the grounds of Machiavelli and his inheritors, I hope to move towards being able to put forth an alternative account.

Though I am unsure what a mirror for post-modern princes might look like, I suspect that it will disagree significantly with Hardt and Negri and find a central place for the concept of hegemony³. What I think will be essentially Machiavellian about it—if nothing else—is that chance will play a leading role. Given the irreducibly multiple identities of individuals—race, gender, class, nationality, etc.—as well as the empirical decrease in the size of the (industrial) proletariat in the core countries, the classical Marxist notion of the radical project as the self-emancipation of a singular, unchanging historical agent no longer seems like a workable model for left praxis. Any viable account of left praxis must rely not on a single group but alliances of social groups,

³ While the concept of hegemony finds more textual support, I think, in the work of Marx than that of Machiavelli, it works off between consent and coercion—which can be traced back to Machiavelli’s assertions that a ruler must be either feared or loved and that opponents must be caressed or crushed, as well as his image of the centaur. What seems essentially Machiavellian about hegemony to me is that it introduces historical contingency into the field of Marxism.

forged in historical circumstances and not by necessity, taking political action⁴. In this respect, my mirror for post-modern princes will likely find significant resonances in Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's *Hegemony and Socialist Theory* as well as much of Roberto Unger's work.

According to Gramsci, the modern prince cannot be a concrete individual but must be a "complex element of society in which the cementing of a collective will, recognized and partially asserted in action, is already begun." The post-modern prince must be comprised of complex elements of society, which cannot be stood in for or construed as equivalent to a political party. Given the multiplicity of actors and the historical tendency towards the autonomization of power, struggles must be articulated and coordinated horizontally and not vertically. (Although in opposition to Hardt and Negri, I think this multiplicity of actors make it especially important for there to be some degree of coordination so that struggles will aggregate.) Moreover, social struggles must contain the possibility of modifying the actors that take part in them, of creating the practical unity that is a prerequisite for collective action out of a diverse set of groups without in the process destroying their diversity. The above is vague, but one of the goals, if not the goal, of my research project will be to make it less so.

I see the chief task of present-day left praxis as the finding and/or forging of a political subject capable of introducing "new modes and orders." This is a Machiavellian task and I intend to contribute to in a Machiavellian fashion, starting from concrete instances of potential relevance. But in place of Rome or Cesare Borgia, the World Social Forum and Hugo Chavez will provide my examples. The World Social Forum seems to

⁴ It is worth noting this cuts entirely against Machiavelli's assertion that founders of new orders must be solitary individuals.

be the most promising attempt at creating a political subject capable of articulating the struggles of social movements on a global scale. Hugo Chavez is currently carrying out the most ambitious attempt at a popular-national project within the capitalist world system—in the process, testing out the nature of state sovereignty—and possibly provides a modern day incarnation of the Machiavellian ideal of the solitary legislator who is engaged in the project of creating a popular republic.