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Niccolo Machiavelli is commonly thought of as a theorist of statecraft or leadership for whom success was all. A “Machiavellian” individual is a schemer, a manipulator who values individuals and morality only insofar as they help him or her achieve their desired ends. This Machiavelli is typically associated with the ambitious rule of a Prince, a President or a CEO: someone who is only interested in power. But there is an alternate tradition wherein Machiavelli is treated as a theorist of the possibilities of praxis (to found new political orders), usually with a strong allegiance to republican government and the popular classes. This Machiavelli digs beneath the official narrative of the founding of states to provide an account of the “primitive political accumulation” of (state) power. While in his treatment of the act of founding a state he seems to suggest that only a new prince in a new principality can perform such a deed, he also champions popular freedoms and even the struggles of the “lean against the fat”.

My proposal is to dig into this popular nationalist/praxis-oriented Machiavelli, familiarizing myself with interpretations that emphasize this strain of his thought. I plan to use this understanding to tease out, insofar as possible, some lessons that Machiavelli might have for contemporary political analysis and praxis.

### **Literature Review**

It is my intention to review the varied interpretations and appropriations of Machiavelli by both the Marxist and republican traditions. (Representative figures in the include Spinoza and Rousseau in the former tradition and Gramsci and Althusser in the latter.) While there are strong divergences both within and between these two traditions, the common factor of interest for me is that they read Machiavelli in the service of political projects that were thought of as benefiting the popular classes—whether the founding of a virtuous state, the taking of power by a Marxist-Leninist party or the reformation and refoundation of historical communism.

Certain figures in the republican/Marxist tradition treat Machiavelli as writing a satire on princely rule or giving deliberately false advice in *Il Principe*. Others treat him

as a theorist of citizenship. And yet others conceive of Machievilli as a proto-Jacobin. But regardless of exactly how they read him, all the writers I'm going to concern myself with took Machiavelli in a direction where he was useful to particular practical/ideological goals.

### **Research Design**

It is far from clear that pre-modern political thought has any significant utility for the present practice of politics. However, it is my hope that by familiarizing myself with the interpretation of Machiavelli for particular political and ideological purposes in various historical conjunctures I might gain some insight into what a useful contemporary reading of Machiavelli might look like—or at least to what degree it is possible to construct a useful (post-)modern Machiavelli. Regardless of its ultimate success, such an endeavor seems to be in the spirit of Machiavelli's belief that political thought is valuable insofar as it lays the ground for practical action and championing of the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa*.

Although it is difficult to predict in advance what directions the literature review will lead me in, practical questions I may be interested in addressing with the research design include, but are not limited to: Does Machiavelli offer an alternative philosophical grounding for praxis from Marx(ism)? Can he offer any help for analyzing the present conjuncture and formulating tactics and strategy for practical activity aimed at the refoundation of the present political order? When combined with the analytic framework of someone like Giovanni Arrighi, does Machiavelli offer any insight into the possibility of constructing popular nationalist regimes on the peripheries of world capitalism? What possibilities, if any, do his writings contain for reinvigorating left thought and practice?