

The Unarmed Prophet and His Followers: Left Interpretations of Machiavelli

“[W]hatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends...all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation...”

--Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals

Niccolo Machiavelli is a curiously relevant writer, sparking intense interest from thinkers across the ideological spectrum and throughout a number of epochs. The body of writings produced by those claiming to interpret or draw on Machiavelli is both immense and wildly contending. In this literature review, I will attempt to delineate in broad strokes the afterlives of Machiavelli on the left, with an emphasis on how Machiavelli was adapted for use in particular political and philosophical projects. To do so, I will focus my attention on selected engagements with Machiavelli in the history of the left.

I will begin my study with an inquiry into the reception and adaptation of Machiavelli by the English republican thinkers of the 17th century—unabashed radicals by the standards of their time, if not ours—focusing on James Harrington and Algernon Sidney. Following this, I will briefly look into a very different genre of republican encounter with Machiavelli, that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Next, I will sketch perhaps the most famous left-wing engagement with Machiavelli, Antonio Gramsci’s reformulation of Marxism based on concepts gleaned from the Florentine. Proceeding from this seminal encounter, I will discuss the subsequent interactions with Machiavelli by French Marxists Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Louis Althusser. Finally, I will quickly overview post-Marxist Antonio Negri’s relationship to the thought of Gramsci and Machiavelli.

The Classical Republican

The Elizabethan playwrights had few kind words for “murderous Machiavel”¹. In the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Machiavel was a byword for amoral or immoral scheming, for instrumental rationality gone bad. But in the realm of political thought, Machiavelli found a far more favorable reception in the Isle of Britain. “The Discourses were translated in 1636, and the evidence is beyond all dispute that even before this time Machiavelli had begun to exert a powerful influence on English political thinking. (Fink, 53)

Probably the most documented flowering of Machiavellian republicanism in 17th Century England is James Harrington’s *Oceana*. According to J.G.A. Pocock’s massive study on the *Machiavellian Moment*, Harrington’s treatise “marks a moment of paradigmatic breakthrough, a major revision of English political theory and history in the light of concepts drawn from civic humanism and Machiavellian republicanism.” (Pocock 1975, 384) Harrington is a “theorist of the commonwealth of participatory virtue”(ibid, 397) who is concerned with the secular creation of a new republic to replace the “ancient constitution” of England, which he thought no longer viable. While he was interested in promoting the “good old cause” of republicanism against any entrenchment of aristocracy and the continued rule of a small military leadership on one hand and a return to the historic constitution on the other, *Oceana* “is one of those works that transcend their immediate context.”(ibid, 384)

In forging his systematic account of an ideal imaginary commonwealth, Harrington employs “the Machiavellian theory of the possession of arms as necessary to political personality” to articulate a “general history of political power in both Europe

¹ *Henry VI*, Part 3, Act 3, Scene 2, William Shakespeare.

and England.” (ibid, 386) Working off Machiavelli’s contention that good arms make good laws, he claims both that the balance of power is determined by the distribution of swords—which he adds, is based on the possession of property—and that civic virtue is dependent on the distribution of arms. “As in Machiavelli, the bearing of arms is the essential medium through which the individual asserts both his social power and his participation in politics as a responsible moral being; but the possession of land in nondependent tenure is now the material basis for the bearing of arms.”(ibid,, 390)

Zera Fink, in her study of the *Classical Republicans*, basically agrees with this characterization of Harrington’s relation to Machiavelli, while bringing out some opposing strands of his thought. According to her, Harrington constructed Oceana on the three main bases of “ancient prudence, Machiavelli the retriever, and Venice the exemplifier.”(Fink, 54) Instead of looking primarily to Rome, as did Machiavelli, for examples of a proper republic, Harrington looks primarily to Venice and accordingly incorporates quite a significant element of aristocracy in his ideal of mixed government. Additionally, he held that “corruption” was a material rather than a moral problem and that it was possible to create a “perfect and perpetually healthy state”(Fink, 156).

However, although Harrington held that political office should be held by the nobility, he “stood with Machiavelli...in holding that in mixed states the predominance of power should reside in the people.”(ibid, 60) For Fink as well as for Pocock, Harrington stands with Machiavelli as a theorist of “new modes and orders”, aiming to re-found rather than restore institutions in the wake of their collapse in the Puritan revolution. Perhaps most interestingly, Fink claims that Harrington formulates a theory of dominion that marries the expansionary republicanism of Machiavelli and Rome with

the puritan notion of election. “Some such coalescing of the Puritan spirit with the imperialism of antique republicanism accounts for the presence in Harrington of such statements as that Oceana would be ‘a minister of God upon earth, to the end that the world may be governed with righteousness,’ and that it would spread its arms ‘like a holy asylum unto the distressed world, and give the Earth her Sabbath of years, or rest from her labours.’” (ibid, 82)

Harrington was deeply engaged with the politics of his day, playing a leading role in the “famous” Rota club, “which he founded to expound his ideas” (ibid., 87), while other Harringtonians sat in or addressed the Long Parliament after the death of Cromwell. Fink even makes an argument that character of Megaletor in *Oceana*, the solitary legislator who founds a new constitution after reading Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*, represents Harrington’s hopes for Cromwell. Regardless, “the immense activity of Harrington and his friends provoked” (ibid, 88) the attacks of pamphleteers and led to his 1661 arrest for treason and subsequent imprisonment.

But Harrington was far from the only republican so active. In the brief interim between Cromwell’s death in 1658 and the Restoration of the monarchy, numerous varieties and proponents of republicanism surfaced. The other most prominent English republican follower of Machiavelli during the 17th century was Algernon Sidney, the uncompromising² radical Whig whose death on the scaffold in 1683 would mark the end of “classical republicanism as an actively advocated program for the reform of the government.” (ibid, 170) Among other things, Sidney seems to have been among a group of conspirators planning an armed uprising against the King, aiming “at the destruction of

² “[Sidney] shot a horse belonging to him that Louis XIV wished to have because it had been ‘born a free creature, had served a free man, and should not be mastered by a king of slaves’!” (Fink, 149)

the monarchy, and on its ruins to found that republic, which in imagination he adored.”
(John Dalrymple quoted in Fink, 169)

Sidney’s most famous work, the posthumously published *Discourses concerning Government*, is a “page by page” contestation of John Filmer’s *Patriarcha* (the subject of Locke’s First Treatise) that only takes any shape or coherence if “we read the work alongside *Patriarcha*”. (Worden, 20) However, the influence of Machiavelli is clear, both in his citations and his prescriptions. “Like Machiavelli, Sidney believes that freedom and manhood are attained only by men who study the constitutions under which they live and who participate fully in politics as citizens. Like Machiavelli he argues that tumults can be healthy and scorns people who ‘give the name of peace to desolation.’ ”(ibid, 18)
“Like Machiavelli, too, Sydney argued that the best governments were made for increase,”(Fink, 156) designed for outward expansion and not just preservation. And like Machiavelli, he believes that time inevitably brings “corruption”, sharing “Machiavelli’s overpowering sense of the imperfection of all things human.”(ibid, 156)

This acknowledgement of Sidney’s intellectual debt to Machiavelli is more or less where the consensus about Sidney stops, however. Scholars dispute both the nature of Sidney’s influence and views. Pocock claims that he is not a philosopher but a “political writer” and thus a “political actor” (Pocock 1994, 915). However, Jonathan Scott claims that Sidney was not only one of the 17th Century’s “more important politicians” (Scott, 6) but also one of England’s “most influential, and most neglected, political writers”(ibid, 6), classifying him with Locke, Hobbes and Harrington. Scott says Sidney’s political thought “is now acknowledged to have been one of the most important English sources for the ideology of the American Revolution; and the most quoted of them all.”(ibid, 5)

Moreover, in 18th Century France “[Machiavelli] was taken up by Montesquieu, Rousseau and Condorcet” while during the Revolution “his name was a ‘household word’ among French radicals and ‘constantly quoted among the heroes of antiquity.’ ”(ibid, 5) Pocock claims that Sidney was “not at all ill-disposed to the survival of monarchy, to the end that it could be kept under parliamentary control”(Pocock 1994, 935) while Fink views Sidney’s endorsement of limited monarchy in the *Discourses* as a smoke screen for his real republican views, citing the equal applicability of his arguments against absolute monarchy to limited monarchy. And Worden refers to the *Discourses* as “insurrectionary” and “political propaganda”, connected to his plotting with other prominent Whigs to overthrow the government, while Pocock thinks that the *Discourses* were likely not even intended for a public audience.

The lack of consensus on Sidney’s views and influence seems to me to point to a significant opening for new scholarship. Most welcome would be research on the relationship between Sidney’s writings and speeches and the (political) discourses that existed in his epoch, drawing (methodological) inspiration from Pocock’s contextualization of Harrington in the Machiavellian Moment. Such research would address whether he significantly broke from the prevailing ideological field (among republicans) or generally fits right in. It might accordingly serve to clarify his specific influence on later thinkers and address why people stopped reading Sidney. As well, a look into the relationship between Sidney’s writings and existing discourses might indicate why and how he used Machiavelli, hopefully answering the question of whether Sidney tried to use his reading of the Florentine to break out of certain patterns of thought or whether he tried to assimilate Machiavelli to relatively standard ways of thinking or

whether his reading served another purpose altogether. Such an inquiry might also help be a significant contribution to the mapping of the contours of 17th century English republicanism as a whole, as Sidney's work and deeds seem to constitute an important but relatively opaque section of this movement, and the reception of Machiavelli therein.

The Good Teacher³

Jean-Jacques Rousseau only wrote a few lines on the subject of Machiavelli, all phrases of praise. He claimed in the *Social Contract* that the Prince is a "book of republicans" and that "[Machiavelli] professed to teach kings, but it was the people he really taught. (Rousseau, Book 3, Ch. 6) According to Rousseau, Machiavelli's reputation as amoral or immoral adviser to monarchs had been acquired because this "profound political thinker" hitherto had only "corrupt or superficial readers." (ibid, footnote 23) "Machiavelli was a proper man and a good citizen, but, being attached to the court of the Medici, he could not help veiling his love of liberty in the midst of his country's oppression." (ibid, footnote 23)

Yet Lionel McKenzie claims that the one textual reference and four notes dealing with Machiavelli in the *Social Contract* are merely the tip of much more fundamental engagement with the Florentine by Rousseau. "Jean-Jacques Rousseau tried to obliterate every trace in the *Social Contract* (1762) of the debate into which his contact with the political thought of Niccolo Machiavelli drew him." (McKenzie, 209) According to McKenzie, much of Rousseau's debate with Montesquieu is really a debate with the aspects of Montesquieu's thought that draw on Machiavelli. Moreover, Rousseau

³ I really should review Maurizio Viroli's "Republic and Politics in Machiavelli and Rousseau" in this section as well, but failed to obtain it. I checked a while back if the library had the *History of Political Thought* but didn't notice until too late to ILL it that they only had the journal going back to 2000, when the article I need is from 1989. Mea Culpa.

characteristically glossed over his differences with Machiavelli, selectively quoting Machiavelli to enlist the Florentine's authority and credentials as a republican thinker on his side, even "deliberately" confusing key terms in order to appear to be in agreement with Machiavelli. (ibid, 221)

Unlike Harrington and Sidney, who both drew considerable inspiration from Venice—the former more than the latter—Rousseau looked primarily to the Roman Republic, like Machiavelli, to find the historical models for his variety of republicanism. Like Machiavelli, he thought that human nature had not changed much in 2000 years, allowing one to evaluate "what can be done" on the basis of what has been done"(Rousseau, quoted in McKenzie, 211), and that the " 'boundaries of the possible in the moral realm' [were] less narrow than most people tended to think."(ibid, 211) But "Rousseau's concept of the proper relation between interest and right differs sufficiently from Machiavelli's to make their common appeal to the model of the Roman Republic problematic."(ibid, 210) While Machiavelli believed on the basis of his study of Rome that the conflict of interests—stemming from the different *umori* or humors of the people and the powerful—could serve the common good of the republic, Rousseau wished to banish all traces of discord from his republic. The General Will cannot emerge from conflict.

According to McKenzie, while "Rousseau saw [this] divergence, he tried to bridge the gap without alerting the reader of the Social Contract to the actual distance that separated him from Machiavelli. [Rousseau] covertly disputed Machiavelli's theory and supporting arguments from history while maintaining the appearance of overt agreement."(ibid, 211) Moreover, "Rousseau adopted this tactic on every occasion on

which he found himself forced to confront problematic aspects of Machiavelli's thought.” (Although the only other example of the use of this tactic that McKenezie deals with is the opposition between Rousseau's hope for the transcendence of history and material factors by his prophet-legislator to Machiavelli's insistence that the prophet-legislator requires the right *occasione*, or set of circumstances, in order to act.)\

Barbara Feinberry's study of the lawgiver in Plato, Machiavelli and Rousseau looks at the relation between Machiavelli and Rousseau from a different angle. She starts by claiming that all three thinkers are notable for their inquiries into the “prospects for individual creativity on an abstract normative level.”(Feinberry, 472) After drawing a distinction between the hero-founder, constitution-maker and codifier, she then proceeds to describe the place of her three categories in the political thought of each of her three thinkers. She makes fairly obvious claims—such as the “therapeutic advocacy of violence”(ibid, 483) in Machiavelli and the distasteful place accorded to violence in Rousseau—and claims with questionable textual backing—such as the legislator being a “principle of legitimacy”(ibid, 482), presumably rather than a principle of exigency, for Rousseau and Machiavelli. She is simply unhelpful to me for understanding either the relationship between the thinkers in question or the relationship between their thought and the actions of modern day lawgivers she cites, such as Napoleon and Lenin.

What might help clarify the relationship between Rousseau and Machiavelli—and incidentally, the meaning(s) of the term “republican”—is an investigation into their different conceptions of Rome, grounded in the political and ideological contexts of their respective epochs. Essentially, such an investigation would take the divergences between Rousseau and Machiavelli posited by McKenzie as a starting point and then try to

ascertain the “why” of these divergences. Such an investigation might attempt to ascertain to what extent their respective understanding of Rome reflects the understanding of their contemporaries or breaks from it. Working off such an investigation into the prevailing accounts of Roman history in their epoch as well as perhaps a study of the specific historical events Machiavelli and Rousseau reference, I would like to look into what extent their political theory was formed by their reading of Roman history and to what extent their political theories formed their reading of Roman history.

The Democratic Philosopher

Antonio Gramsci brings the history of left-wing encounters with Machiavelli into the modern age. Arrested at Mussolini’s orders in 1926, his writings over the next nine years of imprisonment have entered the ranks of the canonical works of 20th century left-wing thought. Among the most famous parts of his *Prison Notebooks* is the “Modern Prince”, wherein he reformulates Machiavelli’s “New Prince” for the contemporary age as the “Modern Prince” or Communist Party.

While there is universal agreement that Machiavelli was a key thinker for Gramsci, the question of his exact importance for and relationship to Gramsci has received relatively little attention, especially given the rash of writings on Gramsci and the concept of “hegemony”. Part of this undoubtedly has to do with the cryptic and fragmented nature of Gramsci’s writings—imposed by the necessity of getting them past a fascist censor—but it also likely has much to do with a fairly standard conception of Gramsci, wherein he attempts to transpose the problematic posed by Lenin to the conditions of Italy and Western Europe. On this reading, Gramsci deepens the neo-

Jacobin Lenin without breaking with him by introducing the concepts of consent, hegemony and civil society. The *virtu* of Machiavelli's "New Prince" becomes the command of revolutionary theory (and thus practice) by the "Modern Prince" or Marxist-Leninist proletarian Party.

Perry Anderson's fundamental article on the "Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci" more or less follows—or, more likely, played a role in inventing—this conception of Gramsci. On his reading, fundamental to Gramsci's thought are a set of dyads between terms like "force" and "consent", the "state" and "civil society", "dominance" and "hegemony", "war of maneuver" and "war of position", "East" and "West". Gramsci's essential contribution is translating Lenin's systemization of Marxism from the "East" to the "West", where consent not force is the fundamental kind of power, hegemony not dominance is the fundamental mode of power and civil society not the state is the fundamental terrain of struggle. Accordingly, a slow drawn out war of position—largely a "battle for hearts and minds"—rather than a fast-moving insurrectionary war of maneuver—along the lines of "the ten days that shook the world"—is necessary in Western Europe.

On Anderson's account, while "Gramsci often had to produce his concepts within the archaic and inadequate apparatus of Croce or Machiavelli" (Anderson, Nov-Dec 1976, 6) this is largely incidental to his writings. Gramsci's primary debt to Machiavelli is to his statement that the prince must be like a Centaur—half man and half beast—and the "dual perspective" of force (or coercion) vs. consent (or persuasion) and dominance (or dictatorship) vs. hegemony (or direction) that Gramsci draws from this image. But

while “Machiavelli had effectively collapsed consent into coercion, in Gramsci coercion was progressively eclipsed by consent.” (ibid, 48)

In his *New Left Review* article on Gramsci, Anderson suggests that the Italian Communist Party leader was primarily interested in questions of strategy and that his theory of a “war of position” was intended, among other things, to justify a united-front position at a time when the Comintern was ordering Communist parties to go it alone. Yet in his *Considerations on Western Marxism*, published in the same year, Anderson lumps Gramsci in with a group of Marxist thinkers for whom the unity of theory and practice that constitutes “praxis” had collapsed, leaving them retreating into increasingly obscure realms of theory. While he was “the greatest, and least typical” (Anderson 1976, 67) of the representatives of “Western Marxism”, the only active political participant in the bunch, Gramsci is still a representative of this tendency—at least in part—with the obscurity of his writings, his relationship to “bourgeois” thinkers and his silence on economic matters. Though Gramsci addresses the “central issues of class struggle”(ibid, 75), his work is also symptomatic of the reversal by later Marxist theorists of Marx’s evolution from philosophy to politics to economics. And while there is a sense in which Gramsci is a living embodiment of the “revolutionary unity of theory and practice”(ibid, 45), he only moved from journalism and propaganda to full-blown theory upon his imprisonment and consequent separation from the mass movement.

Joseph Femia’s article on “Gramsci’s Patrimony” paints a quite different portrait of Gramsci. According to Femia, Gramsci’s writings are a response to the “crisis of Marxism”—both the failure to take power outside of Russia and the failure of the proletariat to endogenously develop revolutionary capacities, organization and will as

predicted by Marx⁴—that presaged the pessimism of the Frankfurt school about the revolutionary consciousness of workers. Gramsci’s primary innovation within the field of Marxism was his movement away from historical determinism and positivistic pretensions to science. He embraced doctrines of “absolute humanism” and “absolute historicism”, meaning among other things that history is not deterministic but contains a number of possibilities and that truth is relative to context and not transcendent. While revolution was still a real possibility, it was more likely in underdeveloped countries such as Russia because the proletariat hadn’t been incorporated in the circuits of hegemony (i.e., educated into false or contradictory consciousness). Moreover, contra Lenin, the Communist party wasn’t the bearer of any infallible truth or “science” that could provide the roadmap to revolution. Instead, the validity of theories is a measure of their usefulness and “what is needed is an ‘active and reciprocal’ relationship between leaders and led, in which ‘every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher’.”(Femia, 356)

In his book on *Hegemony and Power*, Benedetto Fontana proposes yet another distinct reading of Gramsci, based on his analysis of the relationship between Gramsci and Machiavelli. According to Fontana’s persuasive account, Gramsci uses Machiavelli to think his way out from underneath the influence of Croce, who advocated an “aristocracy of the intellect” and claimed there was a realm of “pure politics” separate from the realm of thought. Accepting Croce’s equation of Machiavelli and Marx, while changing its meaning⁵, Gramsci reads Machiavelli through Marx and Marx through

⁴ This problem is a core one, I think, in the works of a number of Second International theorists, from Kautsky to Lenin to Luxemburg..

⁵ In brief, for Croce, Marx is the “Machiavelli of the Proletariat”. This means Marx follows Machiavelli in his allegiance to the realm of the political and a particular class within it instead of

Machiavelli. In the process he expands the Marxist understanding of the political, making it irreducible to the economic, while rooting Marxism in an Italian intellectual context.

According to Fontana, Gramsci thinks of Machiavelli as a theorist of “relations of power” who is fundamentally concerned with the emergence of the people as a political subject capable of making history, creating “new modes and orders”. (This resembles Sheldon Wolin’s contention in *Politics and Vision* that the originality of Machiavelli lies in his discovery of the “mass” as a political force.) *Il Principe* is a Sorelian myth of the people, describing the moment of force in the forging of the people as a political subject while the *Discorsi* describes the moment of consent. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental unity to the two texts.⁶

Fontana’s Gramsci sees in Machiavelli the prototype of a “Democratic Philosopher” or organic intellectual of the popular classes. Machiavelli is conceived of as a “man of action, who creates an ‘active and operating politics’, whose knowledge is the embodiment of the people—not of a people envisioned as a static, passive ‘mass’, but of a people that is a constantly becoming subject, a hegemonic force that initiates and carries forward a moral and intellectual reform...”(Fontana, 73) Machiavelli addresses himself to the people of Italy, ready to form a nation but not yet forged into a political subject with the attendant organizational forms, as Gramsci addresses himself to the proletariat of Italy. But they do not address the people from outside, as declassed intellectuals, but from within their ranks, having merged with them. “The Gramscian

the realm of thought and the universal class (intellectuals) that Croce favors. For Gramsci, Machiavelli is a “philosopher of praxis” who prefigured Marx’s concerns with the relationship between thought and action and realizing thought (freedom) in the world.

⁶ Althusser expands on this reading, working off the insistence that founders must be solitary in the *Discorsi*, by claiming that to follow his model of Rome, for Machiavelli a monarch must found the popular republic of the *Discourses*.

Machiavelli discovers a knowledge of politics whose realization in the world depends upon the formation of the people as a coherent and purposive subject...to Machiavelli, the people is the subject and carrier of the new knowledge...”(ibid, 158)⁷

If we accept Fontana’s reading, Gramsci relates to Machiavelli in a fundamentally different way than Sidney, Harrington or Rousseau. Harrington and Sidney borrow tenets of their varieties of republicanism from their readings of Machiavelli. Rousseau assumes the cloak of Machiavelli’s authority. But Gramsci takes ways of thinking, a conceptual array and set of relationships posited between thought and action, from Machiavelli. He attains mastery over Machiavelli’s thought, dislodging it from its initial context and ends to serve his historical conjuncture and goals. As the epigram from Nietzsche predicts, in the course of doing so, he produces our first full-blown (re)interpretation of Machiavelli’s thought—as Rousseau attempts to explain contrary features of Machiavelli’s thought away rather than provide a coherent account of Machiavelli’s writings as a whole.

The Politician without Principles

While the split of revolutionary theory from revolutionary practice was a result of imprisonment for Gramsci, by the post-war period this rupture had become part of the intellectual landscape for the theorists of “Western Marxism”. According to Anderson, the Stalinization of Communist parties that had emerged from WWII as the majority party of the working class in Italy and France left Marxist intellectuals with two basic options. “[T]he theorist could enroll in a Communist party and accept the rigour of its

⁷ Fontana claims this view represents a rejection of the necessity posited by Lenin and Kautsky of the importation of knowledge from “outside” intellectuals to a proletariat incapable of producing knowledge on their own, but it could just as well be considered an extension of Lenin’s move away from Kautsky in claiming that intellectuals wielding the tools of Marxist “science” cannot be outside of the class struggle but must take the side of the proles. Regardless, it does seem to be a Machiavellian recasting of the Marxian unity of thought and action embodied by the proletariat.

discipline”(Anderson 1976, 44), giving up their intellectual independence on matters of party policy and major political issues of the day in order to “retain a certain nominal level of contact with the life of the national working class.”(ibid, 44) Or the theorist could remain outside of the party as an “intellectual freelance”, avoiding any “institutional control on political forms of expression” but finding “no anchorage within the social class for whose benefit theoretical work in Marxism alone has ultimate meaning.”(ibid, 44) If there was a third option, some of the most impressive thinkers of the 20th century, from Theodor Adorno to Jean-Paul Sartre to Walter Benjamin, failed to find it.

This choice serves as the background for the use of Machiavelli by the French Marxist theorists Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Louis Althusser. The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty—political mentor to Sartre and coiner of the term “Western Marxism”—chose the latter option, engaging with practical politics without a political base, while the structuralist Althusser chose the former option, remaining in the most rarefied realms of theory rather than risking expulsion by public intervention in Party politics. While both thinkers employed Machiavelli in order to come to terms with both Marx and the historical conjuncture they lived in, their distinct positions in relation to the French Communist Party entailed that this meant very different things for the two of them.

Merleau-Ponty’s exact relationship to Marxist theory and really existing Marxist practice (in France and Russia) is hard to pin down. He never fully laid out his points of agreement and disagreement with Marxism and changed his position a number of times from the end of the Second world war till his death. “[I]n his treatment of Marxism, the French Philosopher cut a curiously contradictory figure, torn between phenomenology and a neo-Hegelian account of the meaning of history.” (Miller, 109) Nonetheless, it

seems relatively clear from Merleau-Ponty's "A Note on Machiavelli"—one of only a few instances that the philosopher dealt with a specific political thinker⁸—that his reading of Machiavelli aided him in thinking through his ambivalent relationship to Marxist theory and practice.

Merleau-Ponty sees the relevance of Machiavelli in the Florentine's insistence on the inevitability of violence and relations of power in the political sphere and the consequent necessity to find forms of justice that are compatible with this. As well, Merleau-Ponty sees as crucial Machiavelli's belief in historical contingency and the idea that "history is a struggle and politics a relationship to men rather than principles." (Merleau-Ponty, 219) He takes from Machiavelli the insight that everyone claims allegiance to roughly the same set of values, to ideals like freedom and justice, but what really distinguishes political actors "is the kind of men for whom liberty or justice is demanded, and with whom society is to be made—slaves or masters." (ibid, 219-20)

Working off this reading of Machiavelli, Merleau-Ponty interprets Marx as taking up the problem of a "real humanism", based on a politics of men and not principles and an acknowledgement of the bloody nature of politics, formulated by Machiavelli. Marx's project is the constitution of "a power of the powerless," capable of inventing "political forms capable of holding power in check without annulling it." (ibid, 222) "The solution could only be found in absolutely new relationship between those in power and those subject to it." (ibid, 222) While Merleau-Ponty is attracted to the "essentialist" notion of the proletariat as unitary bearers of a (inevitable and rational) new order—the "identical subject-object of history" in Lukacs' words—he eventually rejected it. Yet his reading of

⁸ However Claude Lefort's *Le Travail de L'oeuvre* is a major study of Machiavelli that employs the categories of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

Machiavelli allows him to salvage what he claims is Marx's underlying project.

Machiavelli points Merleau-Ponty towards the reconstitution of Marxist theory on the basis of "concrete subjects" and historical contingency rather than a "universal class" and historical determinism.⁹

Louis Althusser's encounter with Machiavelli seems to have been even more important for the development of his thought than Merleau-Ponty's. His former student Emmanuel Terray claims that while "the name of Machiavelli is rarely cited in Althusser's work...all who were taught orally by Althusser know it: this impression is misleading. It does not at all reflect the extreme importance that Althusser accorded to the Florentine secretary, the historical role that he recognized in him." (Terray, 257-8) And in the last paragraph of his masterful *Machiavelli and Us*, Althusser says that Machiavelli is "the greatest material philosopher in history—the equal of Spinoza, who declared him 'acutissimus', most acute." (Althusser, 103)

On Wal Suchting's account of "Althusser's Late Thinking About Materialism", the second and final stage in Althusser's development was characterized by a wide-ranging critique of various thinkers, including Lacan and Althusser's own early work, with the concept of materialism at its heart. For the more-materialist-than-thou Althusser, the road to his "aleatory materialism" and the expulsion of all traces of idealism from Marxism ran through Machiavelli, Epicurus and Spinoza. Through his investigations of their thought, Althusser sought to trace the "underground current" of a "materialist tradition almost completely ignored in the history of philosophy." (Althusser quoted in Suchting, 4) But while he is inclined to "closely investigate the cases of Epicurus and

⁹ Althusser on Merleau-Ponty's reading of Machiavelli: "Machiavelli combines contingency in the world and consciousness in man." (Althusser, 6)

Machiavelli...it is only to understand Marx.” (Althusser quoted in Suchting, 62) By uncovering the hidden history of materialist philosophy, Althusser hoped to overcome the “disguised idealism” of the accounts of historical rationality found in the materialism of Marx and Lenin, replacing it with a materialism that takes as its starting point concrete, existing reality without attempting to impute a logic to it. Whereas “the idealist philosopher is a man who, when he catches a train, knows from the outset the station he is leaving from and the one he will be going to...[the materialist philosopher] knows neither Origin nor first principle nor destination. He boards the moving train and settles into an available seat or strolls through the cars, chatting with the travelers. He witnesses, without having been able to predict it, everything that occurs in an unforeseen, *aleatory* way, gathering an infinite amount of information and making an infinite number of observations...”(Althusser quoted in Suchting, 11-12)

For Althusser, Machiavelli is “the theorist of beginnings...of *the* beginning.”(Althusser, 6) But he is not a theorist of politics in general but of particular political problems, reasoning in terms of concrete instances and images instead of fashioning general laws of history from the material of concrete instances. As he proclaims in his introduction to the *Discourses*, Machiavelli discovered a new kind of knowledge. “Machiavelli is not a thinker *on* politics but a thinker *in* politics,”¹⁰(Negri 1997, 142) thinking “*in* terms of the category of the conjuncture”(Althusser, 18) rather than thinking “*on* the category of the conjuncture, as one would reflect on a set of concrete data.” (ibid, 18) “Inscribing itself in the place of the political practice which alone can determine the identity of ‘a New Prince in a New Principality’, Machiavelli’s

¹⁰ My translation in text. In the French: “Machiavel n’est pas un penseur *du* politique mais un penseur *dans* le politique...”

theory of the conjuncture inhabits the space of the putatively universal—the abstract-theoretical—to think the irreducibly singular—the concrete-historical case of 16th century of Italy.” (Elliott, XVII) His thought is both “categorical and elusive,”(ibid, 117) unfolding by “interruptions, digressions, unresolved contradictions”(ibid, 117) and leaving the reader in a state of indeterminacy such that “his thought goes on inside us, despite ourselves.”(ibid, 118) It is this that produces what Althusser calls the “solitude” and the “strange familiarity” of Machiavelli.

The Democratic Philosopher Revisited

The critical theory crowd greeted the publication of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* with a hail of accolades. *Empire* arrived “as a prepackaged intellectual event imprinted with its status as both a galvanizing political document and a fundamental critical diagnosis of contemporary global capitalism.” (Kraniauskas) Despite largely being a recapitulation of Antonio Negri’s previous work, transplanted into the context of the avant-garde of cultural studies by co-author Michael Hardt, it was hailed as a “Communist Manifesto for our time” by Slavoj Zizek and “the first great theoretical synthesis of the new millennium” by Frederic Jameson. What this reception tended to obscure is the formation of Negri’s thought in the context of theoretical debates and practical activity within the Italian (Marxist) left.

While Machiavelli and Gramsci are largely sidelined for Marx, Deluze and Guattari, Foucault and Spinoza in *Empire*, Negri’s encounter with his fellow Italians is important to his theoretical position. Marci Landy provides a systematically un insightful but somewhat useful step by step comparison of the positions of Gramsci and Negri on selected issues in her article on “Gramsci beyond Gramsci: The Writings of Toni Negri.”

In this piece, she argues that on account of Negri's "rethinking of the role of intellectuals, his reformulation of the concept of the state in relation to civil society, and especially his dissection of power, it seems that he has indeed read 'Marx beyond Marx' and that we can read him as 'Gramsci beyond Gramsci'." (Landy, 97) As well, in Negri's book *Insurgencies*—an early rendition of his theme of "Constituent Power"—Machiavelli is given a long discussion, with Gramsci brought in for the conclusion.

For Negri, Machiavelli is fundamentally a theorist of "mutation", of the capacities for creation in the face of *fortuna*. The essential quality of Machiavelli's new politician is the "constitutive capacity, the dimension of praxis" (Negri 1999, 80) that goes by the name of *virtu*. Machiavelli is the "prophet of democracy", for "the absoluteness of the political, invented in *The Prince*, is made to live in the republic [of the Discourses]: only the republic, only democracy, is absolute government." (ibid, 61) Moreover, following Althusser, Machiavelli is "the theoretician of the absence of all the conditions of a principle and a democracy; and it is from this absence, from this void, that Machiavelli, literally, wrenches away the desire for a subject and constitutes it into a program." (ibid, 96) In Machiavelli, constituent power—the formless power of creation of the multitude in contrast to the institutionalized "constituted power" of rule wielded by elites—finds "its first absolute and inevitable definition." (ibid, 96)

As Gramsci realized, in reading Machiavelli one experiences "the privileged historical moment of the birth of the concept [of constituent power]." (ibid, 318) Negri claims that Gramsci discovered in Machiavelli the heady "image of a new subjectivity that is born from the nothingness of any determination or preconstituted destiny and that preconstitutes collectively each determination and destiny!" (ibid, 319) On this account,

Machiavelli's "New Prince" and Gramsci's "Modern Prince" are both Sorelian myths of the multitude, the forms of political subjectivity that constituent power assumed in their particular historical conjunctures. In this sense, Negri is indeed a "Gramsci beyond Gramsci", attempting to will into being the "post-modern prince" of the multitude with his writings.

But my discussion can go no further and remain a literature review until the English language literature on Negri grows. If Negri's work is to continue to be considered a major left-wing account and not just a passing intellectual fad, there is a major gap in the treatment of Negri's intellectual context and political formation within the Italian left—although Alex Callinico's devastating treatment of Negri's involvement with the autonomist movement in *Debating Empire* is a good start on the latter. The relationship between Negri and Gramsci seems to be worth probing here. Part and parcel of this might be an inquiry into their respective interpretations of Machiavelli. Given Hardt and Negri's divergence from the central body of Marxist thought in *Empire*, Negri's claims of agreement with Gramsci on the subject of Machiavelli might be vulnerable to the charge of papering over their substantive differences, à la Rousseau, in order to assume the cloak of Gramsci's authority.

The Conclusion

On my original terms, this literature review is a failure. If there is something in common to the historical conjunctures of the various thinkers I have surveyed that made Machiavelli particularly relevant, that made him speak to their concerns, it escapes me. I don't think any plausible theory of what makes a historical conjuncture Machiavellian can be assembled on the basis of the preceding. Accordingly, the literature review itself

provides no grounds for assessing whether Machiavelli is relevant to the present conjuncture, even without an explicit theory of its nature.

Nonetheless, if I had to venture a theory as to what made Machiavelli relevant to the thinkers I have surveyed, I would point to the concepts of crisis and historical possibility. Machiavelli writes his principal works at a time of crisis and attendant uncertainty, after the collapse of the Florentine republic that he loved but while there still seemed to be a possibility for the constitution of an independent Italy. Sidney and Harrington wrote at a time of political and ideological crisis, when republicanism appeared to be a historical possibility for England. Rousseau wrote during a legitimization crisis for monarchism, at least in the realm of enlightened thought, which was also a period of intellectual flowering. Gramsci wrote during a period of crisis for both the theory and practice of Marxism and a more general societal legitimization crisis, when the possibilities for popular struggle were grim but not hopeless. Merleau-Ponty and Althusser wrote during a period when the realities of “really existing socialism” were being revealed and the classical unity of revolutionary theory and practice had been shattered, but the Communist Party was a major political force in France and a living alternative to capitalism was reigning over nearly a third of the globe. Negri wrote during a period in which the Marxist-Lennist project collapsed and capitalism reigned triumphant, yet through his experience of the radical promise of the massive social contestation in the 1st world of the 1960s and 1970s—including the Italian “hot autumn” of 1969—and the victorious national-liberation struggles in the 3rd world.

The above emphasis on crisis and possibility, however, perhaps says no more than that for all the thinkers I have reviewed, Machiavelli is quintessentially a theorist of “new

modes and orders”. Such a thinker attains relevance during periods of crisis, when old hopes no longer suffice or the status quo no longer seems legitimate. While Machiavelli’s writings may be untranslatable into or not useful for effective political action in particular historical conjunctures—if not all historical conjunctures other than his own—an encounter with his method of “thinking in the conjuncture” seems to provide useful training for those attempting to engage in (contemporary) projects of political innovation.

Francis Fukuyama’s prediction of an “end to history” notwithstanding¹¹, we appear to be living within a prolonged crisis of legitimacy, going back to at least 1917. The turn to the left in Latin America and emergence of significant *altermondialiste* and anti-war movements in the core countries seems to indicate that the post-cold war lull was merely a temporary break in the storm. The Machiavelli who is a “theorist of beginnings”, whose subject matter is both the act of political creation and the historical conjuncture, will likely remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

¹¹ Even as Fukuyama was writing about the “end of history”, the popular struggles against “Neoliberalism” in Latin America were commencing in countries such as Venezuela.

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 theory and practice. Can Machiavelli's "new prince" become a "post-modern prince"? If so, what might a mirror for post-modern princes look like?

Gopal Balakrishnan's magisterial recent *New Left Review* piece 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 useful for 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 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 hegemony¹². 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, forged in historical circumstances and not by necessity, taking political action¹³. 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,

¹² While the concept of hegemony finds more textual support, I think, in (early) Marx than in Machiavelli, it works off the distinction 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.

¹³ It is worth noting this cuts entirely against Machiavelli’s assertion that founders of new orders must be solitary individuals.

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, social struggles must be articulated horizontally and not vertically. (Although in opposition to Hardt and Negri, I think this multiplicity of actors make some degree of coordination especially important 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 it in a Machiavellian fashion, starting my study from concrete instances of potential relevance. In place of Rome or Cesare Borgia, the World Social Forum and Hugo Chavez will provide my examples. The World Social Forum seems to 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. Both the World Social Forum and Venezuela have the potential to serve as not only sites for resistance

but for the creation of new relations of powers. If another world is truly possible, it must be built upon this Machiavellian kind of creation.

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3. Blair Worden, "The Commonwealth Kidney of Algernon Sidney," *The Journal of British Studies*, 24, 1, 1985, pp.1-40.

JSTOR Search: "Algernon Sidney"

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4. J.G.A. Pocock. "Review: England's Cato: The Virtues and Fortunes of Algernon Sidney." *The Historical Journal*, 37, 4, 1994.

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7. Lionel McKenzie. "Rousseau's Debate with Machiavelli in the *Social Contract*" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43, 2, 1982, pp. 209-228.

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8. Barbara Sinberdick Feinberry. "Creativity and the Political Community: The Role of the Law-Giver in the Thought of Plato, Machiavelli and Rousseau." *Western Political Quarterly*, 23, 1970, pp. 471-84.

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Found this in the big reference book on Machiavelli studies.

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13. Benedetto Fontana. *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (1993).

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15. James Miller, "Merleau-Ponty's Marxism: Between Phenomenology and the Hegelian Absolute", *History and Theory*, 15, 2, 1976, pp. 109-132.

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17. Emmanuel Terray, "An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli" in *Postmodern Materialism and the future of Marxist Theory: essays in the Althusserian tradition* (1996), eds. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio.

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An account from one of Althusser's students. Interesting and insightful, but not terribly so.

18. Louis Althusser. *Machiavelli and Us* (1999).

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Referenced in the introduction to *Machiavelli and Us*.

A really solid piece, but didn't give me much that I didn't get elsewhere—although I'm sure I missed some of the nuances of the French.

21. Gregory Elliott, "Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli" in *Machiavelli and Us*, pp. XI-XIX.

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26. 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. A good survey of the field and a quite thought-provoking discussion.