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Filippo Del Lucchese tr. Warren Montag

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On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli

By Filippo Del Lucchese

Translation by Warren Montag

An “encounter”—a word repeated “without end” by Marx—impelled Althusser to take up Machiavelli. A very “Italian” encounter, thanks to a stunning Sicilian beauty, and a visit to Cesare Borgia’s Romagna:¹ first Gramsci, and immediately after him, Machiavelli.² An aleatory and contingent, but nevertheless necessary, encounter. Above all, a very strange encounter. Strange not so much that it took place, but how it took place, the way in which Althusser decided to “embrace” Machiavelli’s thought. After all, Althusser was a philosopher who distanced himself from philosophy:

“The further I go, the more I am convinced, to my great regret, that I am not a philosopher. And yet I must be, because from this point on it is possible and necessary to be one. But it is not for me. I know little and have no more time to learn anything. I am a political agitator in philosophy. There must be such types to open new paths. Others, younger, better equipped with all kinds of knowledge will be the philosopher that I cannot be.”³

And so it was that “this” Althusser sought to make Machiavelli, that is, someone who clearly isn’t a philosopher in the traditional sense, precisely a philosopher, or at least a theoretician. Machiavelli is foreign to the world of the “classical” concepts of philosophers: it was in this way that Althusser began the notes to his 1962 course, the first written text he devoted to Machiavelli.⁴ To his thought—and here is the paradox—which exudes theoretical significance, the philosophers denied any theoretical significance. It is here that the challenge begins. It requires—argues Althusser—nothing less than a redefinition of “the very nature” of the theoretical object as understood in the classics:

“What I want to suggest is that the contradiction of the practical or latent recognition of the theoretical meaning of Machiavelli’s thought on the one

hand and the denial of any theoretical significance to this very thought by the same theoreticians themselves, on the other, is perhaps the occasion and the means of posing the problem of the very nature of the theoretical object in the classics. If Machiavelli has a theoretical value, it is the theoretical value of the object of political theory that finds itself concerned, its pretensions contested and in a sense judged by this preliminary calling into question that is Machiavelli's unrecognized theory."⁵

It is thus a question of a paradoxical encounter that from the outset gives rise to a solemn vow: nothing less than a redefinition of "the theoretical object."

This important and solemn vow will be kept. Machiavelli will become a vertebra in the spinal column of the proper redefinition of theory and of philosophy that will [become] aleatory materialism. But in an apparently paradoxical way, what emerges is rather the "emptiness" (*il vuoto*) of an encounter. It is a matter of an often ambivalent or fragmentary and, in many cases, not very original reading. Neither as original nor as powerful as Machiavelli's theoretical presence in the dispositive of aleatory materialism.

Powerless solitude

One of the themes that most interested Althusser in the 1962 course was the relation between anthropology and politics in Machiavelli within the broader context of modern political philosophy. On the one hand, speaking neither of man nor of human nature but of "men" in the plural, Machiavelli—such is Althusser's not particularly penetrating conclusion—was not interested in nor did he construct a political anthropology, as would for example Hobbes or Spinoza. On the other hand, if some form of anthropology can be found in Machiavelli, it has no explicit or direct connection to politics. The minimal use that Machiavelli makes of anthropology corresponds to a rejection of any ethical or religious foundation for social behavior. But this anthropology remains "negative and critical," and is never positive, that is, there exists no "genetic deduction of social and political forms on the basis of a theory of human nature."⁶ This is "Machiavelli's solitude," the fortuitous expression that Althusser continued to use and which appeared early on.⁷ This is not, however, the solitude of an original critique, but rather the solitude of "failure," of impotence and powerlessness:

“It cannot be said however that this solitude of Machiavelli’s is the solitude of a critique. Machiavelli is not beyond the classical theoretical operation; he is inside it. We might even say that the failure of his anthropological and historico-philosophical endeavors (tentatives) testified more to an impotence of fact, an incapacity to express what he had to say in the sanctioned philosophical concepts, than to a genuine critical consciousness”⁸ (244).

It would be possible to dispute this conclusion, in large measure on the basis of Machiavellian texts, as well as his relation to the Moderns, even while acknowledging the obvious differences in chronological perspective. Moreover, it would be possible to demonstrate that Machiavelli develops a political anthropology with which Modernity felt a profound need to carry on a dialogue.⁹

Nevertheless, rather than contrast Machiavelli’s texts to Althusser’s reading, it seems more useful to test the latter’s conclusions against the much larger consideration of Machiavelli’s position in the history of philosophy. The theses concerning Machiavelli’s “failure” and his “incapacity” are quite different from the references to Machiavelli in some of Althusser’s later texts. Let us take as an example the famous and striking parallel between Marx’s Capital and Machiavelli’s Prince that Althusser proposes in “Machiavelli’s Solitude.” By describing primitive accumulation, Marx destroyed the illusion of an edifying history of the origin of, and encounter between, capital and labor. In the same way, Machiavelli described “primitive political accumulation” in response (in the theoretical rather than chronological sense) to theories of natural right and of the modern State:

“I would say that, all things being equal, Machiavelli responds in somewhat the same way to the natural right philosophers’ edifying discourse on the history of the state. I would even go so far as to suggest that Machiavelli is one of the rare witnesses to what I call “primitive political accumulation,” one of the rare theoreticians of the beginnings of the national state. Instead of telling us that the state is born from law (droit) and nature, he tells us how a state that seeks to endure and to be strong enough to be the state of a nation must be born.”¹⁰

Althusser—from within this powerful comparison-- seems not to notice that Marx’s demystification and refutation of the bourgeois individual, of the independent worker and his economic spirit, corresponds to a great extent to

the demystification and refutation that Machiavelli carried out through an “anthropology” in the classical sense of the term. When Althusser speaks in 1962 of Machiavelli’s “failure”, he seems not to see that the foundations of this “failure” are precisely the foundations that make possible, from a theoretical point of view, the rapprochement between Machiavelli’s realism and that of Marx, which is in fact proclaimed in “Machiavelli’s Solitude.” Even more curious is the fact that the most powerful challenge to the notion of the abstract individual in modernity was that posed by Spinoza, a challenge based explicitly on Machiavelli’s anthropological realism.¹¹

Let us take another example. Althusser focuses on Machiavelli’s use of Polybius to break free from a linear and cyclical conception of history according to which the destiny of states would be inscribed in their origins, a theme, of course, of capital importance to any Marxist. Althusser correctly stresses the way in which Machiavelli distances himself from Polybius: states do not follow the trajectory of the generation and corruption of the different forms of government in a linear manner because they encounter along the way other stronger and more powerful states—and therefore, war—that interrupt and oppose this cycle, which would otherwise continue infinitely.¹²

The most powerfully original element in the heterodox use to which Machiavelli puts Polybius is the connection between war and “class struggle.” The difference in power between states in conflict depends directly on the conflict between the people and the great internal to each state¹³. What is truly new in Machiavelli’s analysis is his linking indissolubly (or perhaps his unmasking of the ideologies that separate) external war and internal class conflict.¹⁴

Thus not only does Althusser not capture the originality of this argument, but he goes on to affirm that Machiavelli’s force lies in his valorization of “mixed government.” The union of the three forms of good government—neutralized as singular forms—permits a way out of Polybius’s circle and of his philosophy of history:

The theory of cycles is called into question by the constitution of this mixed government that unites the advantages of the three good governments: the prince+the great+people. How can we interpret this synthesis if not as a synthesis that allows the hope of escaping the law of infinity itself in the

constitution of a government that combines (by mutually neutralizing) the specific and beneficial principles of the three fundamental governments? I would therefore say: the infinity of the cycle of history is abstract. The concrete is the struggle between the states that interrupts the infinity of the cycle at the point at which it arrives at that mixed state, so well ordered that it is itself a challenge to the infinity of the cycle¹⁵.

On the theoretical plane, as I have noted, this is Polybius's reading and before him, Aristotle's.¹⁶ Althusser's reading thus lacks any reference to Machiavelli's originality in relation to his classical sources that, nevertheless, plays a powerful role in his theory of conflict.

In contrast to what Althusser says concerning the theme of anthropology, the reading of this particular element in Machiavelli does not appear to change in any significant way even in the later writings. Once again the solution is a "synthesis" of the three forms Machiavelli supposedly extracted from Polybius:

"Such, in its simplicity, is the cyclical theory of history, the typology of governments, as partially borrowed by Machiavelli from Polybius. By means of the third thesis on the cyclical character of history, Machiavelli seems to have achieved, brought off, a "synthesis," in the vulgar-Hegelian sense, between the first thesis (immutable order) and the second (universal mobility). What is the historical cycle if not the immobile motion, the immutable movement, of the recurrence of the same changes (37-38)?"¹⁷

We cannot fail to see the allusion—all the more enigmatic when we grant the terms used by Althusser their proper weight—to a language that recalls Aristotle's concepts.

What Althusser reproaches Machiavelli for—his not entirely knowing how or being capable of expressing his revolutionary thought—seems to be reflected in his own analysis: Althusser intuits the originality of Machiavelli—and here begins his "intimate" relation, which will lead to an "identification"—which paradoxically is not to be found in his texts where there is nothing absolutely original.

The discussion in Althusser's later writings reworked up until 1986, collected in the second volume of the Écrits philosophiques et politiques might appear different. It differs, however, only in appearance insofar as this Machiavelli is much more mature and powerful when read from the perspective of the late Althusser and of aleatory materialism. Further, this projection onto aleatory materialism is more often than not merely apparent and is carried out on a purely linguistic level.

Althusser speaks of Machiavelli's thought as the thought of "the singular conjuncture," of "the singular aleatory case," of "aleatory dialectical determination." But François Matheron's editorial notes opportunely remind us that these are all—with unvarying regularity—"late handwritten addenda." It is as if Althusser, as seen through these additional notes, had, over the years, read through different lenses what he had earlier done and simply "stuck" the language and categories of aleatory materialism on to his earlier reading of Machiavelli. This is interesting because in reality what Althusser describes in these texts differs significantly from and coincides only superficially with that authentic theoretical "arsenal" that goes by the name "Machiavelli," with the status it conferred and the role it played in the establishment of the materialism of the encounter.

He attempts to describe through the potent and evocative language of aleatory materialism a "distant" theoretical object, as for example in the following quasi-definition Althusser offers of "thinking in the conjuncture." It concerns what it means for Machiavelli to think the problem of the unity of the Italian national state in the conjuncture:

"what does it mean to think in the conjuncture? To think about a political problem under the category of the conjuncture? It means, first of all, taking into account all the determinations, all the existing concrete circumstances, making an inventory, a detailed breakdown and comparison of them. . . . This inventory of elements and circumstances, however, is insufficient. To think in terms of the category of conjuncture is not to think on the conjuncture as one would reflect on a set of concrete data. To think under the conjuncture is quite literally to submit to the problem induced and imposed by its case [a late handwritten addendum]: the political problem of national unity and the constitution of Italy into a national state. . . Machiavelli merely registers in his theoretical position a problem that is objectively posed by the case of [a

late handwritten addendum] the conjuncture: not by simple intellectual comparisons, but by the confrontation of existing class forces and their relationship of uneven development—in fact by their aleatory future [late handwritten addendum].”¹⁸

Other examples, relative to Machiavelli and Us, merit our attention. The first that particularly demands our scrutiny is the distinct way Althusser speaks of Machiavelli using the Aristotelian categories of “matter” and “form.” Machiavelli, it is true, uses this language but once again employs only the words and not the concepts, which he transforms, using a rhetorical strategy dear to Spinoza, by reversing them. For Machiavelli (in this case an authentic “son of the earth” against the “friends of the forms”) seems to grant clear priority to matter over form. Matter that is intact or matter that is corrupt offers political actors the “occasion” to demonstrate their virtù.¹⁹ It is thus the opposite of the passive element conceived by Aristotle: Florence is matter that is apt to be ordered as a republic and whoever seeks to bring about the contrary will necessarily fail. It is not by chance that the couplet matter/form was usually employed with that of fortune/occasion.²⁰

Althusser explained this with greater clarity in the 1962 course, clearly separating Machiavelli from Aristotelian categories and concepts:

“The political “matter” of which Machiavelli speaks when he has the Italian situation in view is not even comparable to Aristotelian *energeia* (puissance) that at the same time lacks , but aspires to, its form and contains (like a block of marble in which certain veins suggest the form that the sculptor will give it) its future design. It is still less comparable to the interior form contained by the Hegelian moment of history (that prepares within it, without knowing it , the implicit form that, once rejected by the previous form, appears in the advent of the new epoch). No: matter is the pure void (vide) of form, the purely unformed attempt at form. The Italian matter is an empty (vide) *puissance* that awaits a form that will be brought to and imposed upon it from the outside²¹.

Here it is a question, adds Althusser, of the recognition of the “radical contingency” by which the new form comes to be “applied” to the existing matter. The necessity of a new form has as its condition the radical contingency of a new beginning.²²

Now, from this conclusion, so clearly argued in 1962, there follows in the later writings a more ambivalent and obscure position. What is the form—asks Althusser—under which all the positive forces available to realize the political objective of national unity can be united? This form is the Prince, an exceptional individual endowed with exceptional virtue that, in exceptional circumstances, would be capable of mobilizing the necessary forces.²³ What emerges from this Machiavellian principle is almost a philosophy of history:

Machiavelli's prince is an absolute sovereign to whom history assigns a decisive 'task:' "giving form" to an existing matter, a matter aspiring to its form--the nation. Machiavelli's New Prince is thus a specific political form charged with executing the historical demands 'on the agenda:' the constitution of a nation.²⁴

Naturally, behind these considerations is Gramsci's reading and the new prince. Even as he advocates a critical assessment of Gramsci's words, Althusser shares and values his political and cultural project: "this is how, in the dark night of fascism, Machiavelli 'speaks' to Gramsci: in the future tense. And the Modern prince then casts its light on the New Prince: Gramsci calmly writes that the The Prince is a 'manifesto' and a 'revolutionary utopia.' For the sake of brevity, let us say 'a revolutionary utopian manifesto.'

On the one hand, the philosophical charge of this language could not have escaped Althusser, although, on the other, he seems in contrast to tend to force Machiavelli into conformity with Gramsci's reading. If Althusser distances himself in many ways from Gramsci, as, for example, on the question of the interpenetration of force and consent,²⁵

here, in contrast, he seems fully to adhere to him, going so far as to say that

"If the novel relations to theory and antiquity are original and positively fertile, it remains the case that they are not devoid of a certain illusion: the utopian illusion. If it is true that every utopia scans the past for the guarantee and shape of the future, Machiavelli, who seeks the future solution to Italy's political problem in Rome, does not escape the illusion of utopia."²⁶

A utopian Machiavelli and thus a prisoner of an illusion and of the limits of his own analysis. It would be possible to bring to light other examples to

show the ambivalence and weakness of the Althusserian reading of Machiavelli. But I believe it is more interesting at this point to pose a different problem in relation to these texts, to cease our reading for a moment to concentrate on the theoretical problem that emerges from the encounter between Althusser and Machiavelli. "It is necessary to consider—writes Althusser—not the formal letter of Machiavelli's texts, but their functioning"²⁷ In the same way, it might be useful to set aside the "formal letter" of Althusser's texts in order to examine their theoretical functioning. The best way to do so is precisely through Gramsci, in part to show the limits of his reading without, as so often happens, forgetting its potential, but also because this same potential has an historical as well as theoretical importance. And from this "mix" of Machiavelli—Gramsci—Althusser theoretical elements of extraordinary importance are born.

Commentators often insist on the linearity of the Gramscian reading and the difficulties that result from the "translation" or from the political use of Machiavelli's Prince from the perspective of a political party. A typical example of the problematic nature of such a translation would be the connection Gramsci established between the Jacobins and the context of Physiocracy, asking if Machiavelli in some way had "anticipated those times" and had anticipated in some way a demand (*esigenza*) that later found expression in the Physiocrats.²⁸

Nevertheless, taking into account here again the stratified and complex character of these texts, the excessive linearity that emerges from Gramsci's Machiavelli and that without a doubt attracted the attention of Althusser, is not as banal or naïve as might appear at first glance. It suffices to see that if Althusser's intention is to make Machiavelli a philosopher, it is precisely because it is on this point that the Gramscian critique of Croce's position of the re-evaluation of the "political-practical" of both Machiavelli and, at the same time, of Marx is based.²⁹

From the point of view, then, of a conception of history, of its openness and of the possibility of intervening in it—a theme as dear to Machiavelli as, for different reasons, to Althusser—there is nothing naïve about the Gramscian reading of *virtu* as the principle of intervention in the "conjuncture." Concerning military organization, Gramsci writes:

“The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organized and long prepared force which can be put in the field when it is judged that a situation is favorable (and it can be favorable only insofar as such a force exists and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact and self-aware. This is clear from military history, and from the care with which in every period armies have been prepared in advance to be able to make war at any moment. The great Powers have become great precisely because they were at all times prepared to intervene effectively in favorable international conjunctures—which were precisely favorable because there was the concrete possibility of effectively intervening in it.”³⁰

It would be difficult to imagine a description closer to the Machiavellian idea of the intervention of *virtù* in the conjuncture. The entire of Machiavelli's reflection on the interweaving of politics and war, in particular in the *Art of War*, is designed to develop the idea of preparing the best conditions for intervening in the conjuncture (never the perfect conditions, only the best).³¹

And it is even more significant that Gramsci speaks of this conception through a reference to Albert Mathiez who, in his interpretation of the French revolution, precisely denounced the naiveté of a linear conception of the relation between crisis and ruptures in history.³²

We are thus very far from an attempt to use Machiavelli “as a mere instrument with which to establish a linear process and to sketch out a vulgar philosophy of history.”³³ I wonder if, when Althusser speaks of conjuncture in his texts on Machiavelli—something again quite distinct from the “conjuncture” that appears in his writings on aleatory materialism—he isn't very close to and does not express something very similar to what Gramsci says here. Thus, through these texts it is possible to see, on the one hand, a Gramsci less adapted to a vulgar and linear conception of the philosophy of history, and, on the other, an Althusser who is still working to forge the valuable theoretical instrument that will be the Machiavelli of aleatory materialism.

But still more interesting is the relative ambivalence toward the conception of the Prince and the knot of problems that derives from it. Here, with the conception of the party as modern prince, we are no longer following Machiavelli's interpretation, but rather a notion of an "instrumental" use that seems totally adapted to the politics of Gramsci's time. Nevertheless, this usage, so modernized and appropriated for political purposes, seems paradoxically to produce interesting theoretical effects. Effects that emerge as much from Althusser's reading as from the role that Althusser has played or could play in contemporary philosophico-political debates.

II. The Prince, Partial Principle.

The "Notes on Machiavelli" open with a portrait of the leader who represents in "plastic" and "anthropomorphic form," the symbol of the "collective will."

"The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party—the first cell in which there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total."³⁴

The Jacobins (this was the parallel traced by Gramsci) were the "categorical incarnation" of Machiavelli's Prince and the "theory" of the new Prince should include a component devoted precisely to the political and collective will and to its historical, but partial, affirmation. Here Gramsci takes aim at Sorel and a certain conception of revolutionary spontaneity that is doomed to defeat and disintegration.

Beyond the obvious anti-Sorelian aspect (and Gramsci's avoidance of the Rousseauian expression "general will" in favor of "collective will" is significant), this interpretation has an obvious and profound theoretical interest beyond its historiographical accuracy, that has nothing to do with, and in fact goes far beyond, the political problem of organization and the party. Its interest consists in showing how the Prince, for Machiavelli, is an element of the part, a partial element, an actor in the struggle. His virtù is

not displayed in the organization of a superior principle that governs from above and organizes the conflict from a transcendental position, but only works within and through the conflict in a radically immanent way.³⁵

The importance of this conception goes far beyond an interpretation of Machiavelli. In fact, in recent philosophical-political debates, a discussion has developed around Althusser's reading of Machiavelli and in particular around the conception and role of the Prince. Here again Althusser's reading seems particularly ambivalent. The Prince as political manifesto, the importance of the "disequilibrium" discussed in the Proem; the distance that Machiavelli, the writer who became part of the people to speak of the prince, violently stresses: the theoretical agreement between The Prince and The Discourses; all these themes show how Althusser, like Gramsci, understood the relevance and the value, both philosophical and political, of Machiavelli. The Prince is irreducibly a partial principle, which is also plural, multiple, collective and conflictual. Because it does not represent the people (reduced to unity as in Hobbes's model of sovereignty): the Prince is the people against the great.³⁶

At the same time, however, Althusser seems sometimes to slip into what might be called, perhaps exaggeratedly, a "voluntarist" position.³⁷ Althusser writes in Machiavelli and Us:

"Admittedly, Machiavelli adopts the viewpoint of the people. But while the Prince who is assigned the mission of unifying the Italian nation must become a popular prince, he is not himself the people. Equally, the people are not summoned to become the Prince. So there is an irreducible duality between the place of the political viewpoint and the place of political force and practice; between the 'subject' of the political viewpoint—the people—and the 'subject of the political practice: the Prince. This duality, this irreducibility, affects both the Prince and the people. Being uniquely and exclusively defined by the function he must perform—that is to say by the historical vacuum he must fill—the Prince is a pure aleatory possibility—impossibility. No class membership disposes him to assume his historical task; no social tie binds him to this people whom he must unify into a nation."³⁸

Here, once again, “aleatory” is a later addition. More problematic, however, is the “void” stuck on to the figure of the Prince, the “absolute” will, that emerges from and is affirmed on the basis of the “vacuum” of historical conditions. In a certain sense, the Prince is “subtracted” from the dynamic of the conflict, the contingent encounter of elements in the struggle, making him, in effect, a “pure” principle.

Distancing Machiavelli's manifesto from that of Marx and Engels, Althusser—in an admittedly ambivalent way—maintains that while the latter is internal to a class viewpoint, the former maintains a distance from any class perspective, because the Prince neither becomes the people nor the people the Prince. Political practice in this sense is installed in an empty (vuoto) space that must remain empty (vuoto).³⁹

Thus, it seems to me that the best way of interpreting these texts is to preserve their ambivalence, complexity and stratification without collapsing Althusser into a non-existent Machiavelli in order to convert Althusser into a theoretical instrument in the service of “a democracy without conflict.” In fact, this would only obliterate what is most powerful and original in Machiavelli's legacy: that political success is always only partial and conflictual, that the Prince only operates within and through the conjuncture, without in any way being able to determine, from the outside and in a transcendental way, this conjuncture.

Emmanuel Terray, for example, has written that Althusser has demonstrated his understanding of Machiavelli by such phrases as “founding on a void” and the “solitude” of the founder.⁴⁰ Founding on the void means remaining outside of the conflict and overcoming original natural violence to found the state.⁴¹

A more articulated version of this is the concept of “radical democracy” elaborated by Miguel Vatter, based precisely on the void (vuoto), on the “solitude” and on the distance that separates the Machiavelian Prince from the political and from conflict.⁴²

Machiavelli, writes Vatter, maintains that there exists a substantial difference between the desire of the great to dominate and the desire of the

people not to be dominated.⁴³ Thus, popular politics would always be this side (al di qua) of every political form, of every will to domination, of any constitutive project. It would be for its part a pure retreat into a zone of neutrality, indifference and “negative freedom.” The power (potenza) of the people would be the inverse of Spinozist power (potenza).⁴⁴ It is a force that remains indifferent to its own realization, a pure possibility whose sole desire is not to be governed.

To define this type of power, Vatter draws on the one hand from the Arendtian tradition of *isonomia* with its notion of “no-rule” and on the other from Giorgio Agamben's idea, developed in *Homo Sacer*, of a possibility or a potentiality, conceived in non-Aristotelian terms, indifferent to its own actualization. Vatter proclaims in Machiavelli, particularly Althusser's Machiavelli, a “sovereign in-difference of the people toward the government,” pointing towards a democracy that would not be a form of “government,” in the sense of kratos that is that would not be a form of domination, but a new concept of liberty in the post-marxist context.⁴⁵

The passage from the “civil” Prince to civil society, based on a “pacification” of the very conflicts in which it originated is, to say the least, a distortion of Machiavelli's text. His originality consists precisely in developing a theory of conflict that neither prefigures nor, from a distance, corresponds to the idea of natural conflict as expressed later in natural law theory, nor even less concludes with the creation of “civil society.” As we have seen, Althusser's reading in its ambivalences leaves a wide margin for interpretation, but it is inappropriate to deny these ambivalences in order to construct a reading of Machiavelli that forgets and obliterates the theory of conflict.

The theoretical force of Machiavelli emerges without ambivalence for Althusser in the writings on aleatory materialism, much more in fact than in the writings devoted to Machiavelli himself. Althusser's encounter with Machiavelli—to cite Terray again—first occurred through Montesquieu and the eighteenth century reaction to contractualism, and a bit later through Gramsci. He must have also encountered Machiavelli through Spinoza, as Terray says, but there is no textual evidence of such an encounter.⁴⁶ If this is so, it can be said that up to this point, on the theoretical level, there had been no “encounter” at all. Instead, it was precisely with Spinoza and more

generally within the underground current of materialism, that Machiavelli “burst” into Althusser’s thought.

Thus, in the light of aleatory materialism we can re-read Althusser’s “self-accusation” as being outside of philosophy, as well as his claim of being “only” a political agitator in philosophy in the light of aleatory materialism. It is a very strange non-philosopher who produces such powerful effects within and against philosophy. His self-accusation is practically a carbon copy of Machiavelli’s “admission” that he is only a man of the people who has the presumption to speak to the Prince.⁴⁷ As it is necessary not to be the Prince in order to produce effects on the Prince, so it is necessary not to be a philosopher in order to produce effects on philosophy.

The entire dispositive of aleatory materialism is placed in the service of this enterprise and not only Machiavelli who is merely one of the atoms that comprise it. Among the most salient points in this materialist attack on philosophy is the revolt against the homogeneous continuity of history: the idea of knowledge (*conoscenza*) as “construction” passes as much through Machiavelli as through Spinoza. Another would be the opposition of contingency not to necessity, but to teleology. The void and the atoms, wrote Althusser in “The Underground Current,” are not the foundation of freedom, but rather a guarantee of the absence of any plane prior to the encounter. Nothing but the factual circumstances of the encounter has prepared the encounter. This is a powerful, original and revolutionary use of Machiavelli that paradoxically, once again, does not emerge in the writings devoted to Machiavelli, but arises forcefully in those in which Machiavelli is placed in the theoretical container of aleatory materialism.

“We no more choose our masters than our time.”⁴⁸ So wrote Althusser and so we must interpret this encounter, both contingent and necessary, between his “non-philosophy” and the “non-philosophy” of Machiavelli. To confront this encounter is a little like confronting the encounter between Spinoza and Marx. It is a matter of encounters that give meaning to the void (*vuoto*) in which they take place, or perhaps, more precisely, are produced in the giving itself. The void is that of an “impossible linearity.” Just as the encounter between Spinoza and Marx resists any linearity, including the construction of a tradition, however materialist, so can the encounter between Althusser

and Machiavelli be described this way: an encounter that most often proceeds by means of deviation, loss, mystification and ambivalence.

The most interesting theoretical force and movement, exactly as in the case of Spinoza and Marx, consists in forcing the texts.⁴⁹ In this case, to force Althusser's analysis of Machiavelli and with it, the role and status the latter assumes within the global dispositive of aleatory materialism. To shed light on this tension, together with the ambivalences of the Althusserian text, means again freeing his thought from a purely instrumental use and returning it to its articulated temporality. Further, it is precisely this tension that makes the encounter between Machiavelli and Althusser so fresh and actual. "I am not a philosopher," he wrote in a letter to Franca, "and yet it is necessary to be one. . . . But it's not for me, because there are so many things to learn and I don't have the time." It is precisely this incompleteness, that is the key to the encounter with Machiavelli, who in the preface to the first book of *Discourses* writes: "if poor talent and little experience . . . make this attempt of mine defective and of little utility, it will at least show the way to someone with more virtue, more discourse and more judgment who will be able to fulfill my intention."

¹ "I came to Machiavelli by means of a word, ceaselessly repeated, of Marx's, saying that capitalism was born from "the encounter between the man with money and free laborers," free, that is, stripped of everything, of their abodes, of the means of labor, of their families, in the great expropriation of the English countryside (this was his preferred example). Encounter." Louis Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza." The New Spinoza. Ed W. Montag and T. Stolze. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1997.

² "I began to read a little Gramsci (on the intellectuals) but quickly interrupted my reading to engage myself in reading Machiavelli." Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition."

³ Louis Althusser, Lettres à Franca (Paris: Stock/Imec, 1998) p. 750-751.

⁴ Louis Althusser, Politique et histoire. De Machiavel à Marx. Paris: Seuil, 2006.

⁵ Althusser, Politique et histoire, p 199-200.

⁶ "I therefore emphatically conclude that the absence of a genetic deduction of social and political forms on the basis of human nature reveals the factitious nature of Machiavellian anthropology. Let us say that he invents just that anthropology whose content and concepts (infinite desire) he needs to reject any religious or ethical anthropology; he does not invent enough concepts nor does he takes the trouble of founding on them his political theory, for the fundamental reason that under the superficial appearance of an anthropology (or of a theory of human nature), he in fact describes social and political behaviors. His anthropology remains, to the extent it exists at all, negative and critical." Althusser, Politique et histoire, p. 240.

⁷ [Machiavelli's thought] cannot be grounded either in an anthropology or in a cyclical theory of history (itself of an anthropological nature). This double exclusion of the classical object of political philosophy and of the operation of a foundation for its descriptions and political conclusions is the entire of Machiavelli's solitude" Politique et histoire, p. 244).

⁸ Politique et histoire, p 244.

⁹ On the concept of human nature in Machiavelli, see E. Namer E. Namer, *La nature humaine chez Machiavel*, «Les Études Philosophiques» 16 (1961), pp. 307-312 ; M. Tlili, *Méchanceté de l'homme*, «Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale» 73 (1968), pp. 205-222, pp. 205-222 ; M.F. Sciacca, *La concezione dell'uomo*, «Cultura e Scuola» 33-34 (1970), pp. 56-71; S. Zeppi, *Il pessimismo antropologico nel Machiavelli del periodo anteriore ai 'Discorsi'*, «Filosofia politica» 6(1992), pp. 193-242. On the relation to Hobbes, see for example C. Lazzeri, *Les racines de la volonté de puissance: le 'passage' de Machiavel à Hobbes*, in Y.C. Zarka, J. Bernhardt, (éds.), *Thomas Hobbes. Philosophie première, théorie de la science et politique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, pp. 225-246. On the confrontation with Spinoza see among others V. Morfino, *Il tempo e l'occasione. L'incontro Spinoza-Machiavelli*, Milano, Led, 2002 e L. Bove, *La stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza*, Paris, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1996; F. Del Lucchese, *Tumulti e indignatio. Conflitto, diritto e moltitudine in Machiavelli e Spinoza*, Ghibli, Milano, 2004.

¹⁰ "Machiavelli's Solitude," Machiavelli and Us, p. 125.

¹¹ Spinoza TP 1, 1.

¹² Machiavelli Discourses 1,2.

¹³ Discourses I. 6.

¹⁴ Machiavelli, History of Florence, VI, I.

¹⁵ Althusser, Politique et histoire, p.243.

On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli

- ¹⁶ See Polybius, Histories VI, and Aristotle, Politics IV.
- ¹⁷ Machiavelli and Us, pp 36-37.
- ¹⁸ Machiavelli and Us, p. 18.
- ¹⁹ The Prince, VI.
- ²⁰ The Prince, XXVI.
- ²¹ Politique et histoire, p.208
- ²² Politique et histoire, p.208.
- ²³ Machiavelli and Us. p. 61.
- ²⁴ Machiavelli and us p.54.
- ²⁵ Warren Montag, "Beyond Force and Consent: Althusser, Spinoza, Hobbes" Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory, ed. A. Callari and D. Ruccio. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996..
- ²⁶ Machiavelli and Us, p. 49.
- ²⁷ Machiavelli and Us, p. 50.
- ²⁸ Antonio Gramsci, Quaderni del Carcere III, Einaudi, Turin, 1977, p.1575.
- ²⁹ Fabio Frosini, Gramsci e la filosofia. Saggio sui Quaderni del Carcere, Carocci, Roma, 2003, p. 164-165.
- ³⁰ Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Trans. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971. p. 185.
- ³¹ The most significant and famous example of this "preparation" is, naturally, that of the river and the dikes: The Prince, XXV.
- ³² Gramsci, Quaderni III, p. 1587.
- ³³ On the question of immanence in Gramsci, see Fabio Frosini, "Immanenza e materialismo storico nei Quaderni del carcere di Gramsci," Quaderni materialisti, 5 (2006), pp. 147-158.
- ³⁴ Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p. 129.
- ³⁵ This interpretation and the relation between the Prince and the Discourses more generally are still at the center of a historiographical debate in which the "crudest" aspects of Machiavellian realism are either overemphasized or neutralized, relegating him to the position of protagonist within late humanism and civic republicanism. See Maurizio Viroli, Machiavelli, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- ³⁶ Permit me once again to refer to my Tumult and Indignation: for an opposing view. Viroli, Machiavelli.
- ³⁷ Gopal Balakrishnan, "From Florence to Moscow," New Left Review (2000) 3, pp. 158-164. "Machiavelli addresses the masses via the silhouette of a resolute ruler only because, conceived in that form, decisive action can begin at any time. The Prince, unlike the proletariat, is the 'pure possibility of the event' 'agency out of the void,' 'absolute new beginning'. Machiavelli's writings analyse 'the conditions of the impossible event,' blasting open the continuum of history. It is as if we hear at this point at this point an uncanny, voluntarist echo of Benjamin."
- ³⁸ Machiavelli and Us, p. 26.
- ³⁹ Machiavelli and Us, p. 69: "The undeniable fact nevertheless remains that Machiavelli did not write a text comparable to the Communist Manifesto."

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Terray, "An encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli" in Antonio Callari and David Ruccio, eds. Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist theory, pp.257-277.

⁴¹ A reading of this type, based on the idea of a necessary overcoming and containment of natural violence within institutions, has been argued by n. Baldoni, *Natura e società* in Machiavelli, Studi Storici 10 (1969), pp. 675-708.

⁴² See Miguel Vatter, "Althusser et Machiavel: la politique après la critique de Marx," Multitudes 13 (2003), pp 151-163; "Legality and Resistance: Arendt and Negri on Constituent Power," Kairos 20 (2002), pp. 191-203; "Machiavelli After Marx: the Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser," Theory and Event 7, (2004). Vatter's most important text, still, unfortunately, too little known, is : Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom, Boston: Kluwer, 2000.

⁴³ Machiavelli, Discourses, I, 5.

⁴⁴ Or Negri's constituent power, which Vatter regards as completely superfluous. See Antonio Negri Insurgencies: Political Power and the Modern State. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

⁴⁵ Vatter, "Legality and Resistance."

⁴⁶ Terray, "An Encounter," p. 258.

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, The Prince, Dedication. "I hope it will not be thought presumptuous if a man of low and inferior station dare to debate and regulate the government of princes; for, just as those persons who sketch landscapes place themselves in a low position on the plain in order to study the nature of mountains and highlands, and in order to study the lowlands place themselves high on the tops of the mountains, in like fashion, in order to know well the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to know well the nature of princes one must be of the people."

⁴⁸ Althusser, The Future Lasts Forever.

⁴⁹ This is the global theoretical approach of Vittorio Morfino, Il tempo della moltitudine. Materialismo e politica prima.