

The Althusserian Swerve:
Machiavelli's Materialist Philosophy

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At the end of *Machiavelli and Us*, Louis Althusser salutes Machiavelli as “the greatest materialist philosopher in history.”¹ Machiavelli, he posits, is the “equal of Spinoza, who declared him ‘*acutissimus*,’ most acute.”² But he quickly adds: “Spinoza considered him *acutissimus* in politics. He would appear not to have suspected that Machiavelli was also most incisive in materialist philosophy.”³ Formulated thus, what appears as an assertion of the parity of importance of both figures turns out to affirm Machiavelli’s indisputable, though unrecognized place in the history of philosophy. In positing Machiavelli on par with Spinoza, Althusser redefines him as a *materialist* philosopher. Further, by evoking the inadequacy of Spinoza’s appreciation of Machiavelli (limited, as it was, only to politics), Althusser also insinuates that Machiavelli is not only “most incisive in *materialist philosophy*,” but, in effect, *the* “most incisive” materialist philosopher, whose importance went unsuspected or unrecognized or, at least, not fully recognized, by the greatest minds that came after him.

¹ Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. François Matheron, trans. and intro. Gregory Elliott (London and

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

This is a claim not to be taken lightly, if only because the same Althusser, rejecting the charge of structuralism, confesses to being “guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion” – that of being *Spinozist*.⁴ Explaining this passion, Althusser clarifies: “we made a detour *via* Spinoza in order to improve our understanding of Marx’s philosophy. To be precise: since Marx’s materialism forced us to *think out* the meaning of the necessary detour *via* Hegel, *we made the detour via Spinoza in order to clarify our understanding of Marx’s detour via Hegel.*”⁵ While the Spinozist road traversed a significant distance toward understanding the “mystification of the Hegelian dialectic,” such as the telos inherent in the “negation of the negation,” contributed a theory of ideology, and helped construct a conception of “immanent causality” to account for the relation between the parts and the whole, Althusser nevertheless questioned the sufficiency of the effort: “is it enough to get rid of them [the mystifications of the Hegelian dialectic] in order to introduce the materialist dialectic of Marxism, by a simple process of subtraction and inversion? That is not at all sure, because, freed of these fetters, the new dialectic can revolve endlessly in the void of idealism, unless it is rooted in *new forms*, unknown to Hegel, and which can confer on it the status of materialism.”⁶

If the incessant search for the new forms of the dialectic that would ensure its materialist character paved the path to Machiavelli, the journey was propelled by Althusser’s admission that the Spinozist road failed to reach the desired destination: this road was a path burdened by a shortcoming, the absence of contradiction in Spinoza’s

⁴ Louis Althusser, “Essay in Self-Criticism,” *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Graham Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976), 132.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

thought, whose effect was the neglect of class struggle in ideology and a certain theoreticism. Not a false path, but a detour, or perhaps a swerve that, in retrospect, turned out to be necessary but not sufficient. Regardless of whether or not Althusser's self-critique concerning the ultimate inadequacy of the Spinozist road in the attempt to rethink materialism is a fair estimation, it would be fair to note that this critique is nevertheless the driving force that seems to have taken Althusser to Machiavelli.⁷ In Machiavelli, Althusser wants to recover the elements of a materialism that neither had been inflected by the Hegelian dialectic nor would be prone to lose sight of contradiction. It will be recalled that the same search had previously led Althusser to propose the concept of *overdetermination*, as a principle of the properly materialist dialectic, which he contrasted with that of Hegel, a dialectic that he indicted not only for being inherently teleological but also, and relatedly, for having a simple notion of contradiction.⁸ "The simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction is made possible *only* by the simplicity of the *internal principle* that constitutes the essence of any historical period," Althusser writes, a principle to which the whole of a society is reduced.⁹ The contradiction is simple because simplistic and reductive: "the reduction of all the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social,

⁷ For an evaluation of Spinoza's role in Althusser's thought (and the thought of his close collaborators), see Warren Montag, "Preface" in Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowden (London: Verso, 1998), vii-xx; Montag, "Spinoza and Althusser Against Hermeneutics: Interpretation or Intervention?" in *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 51-58; G. M. Goshgarian, "The Very Essence of the Object, The Soul of Marxism and Other Singular Things: Spinoza in Althusser 1959-1967," *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, ed. Katja Diefenbach, Sara R. Farris, Gal Kirn, and Peter D. Thomas (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 89-111; Caroline Williams, "Althusser and Spinoza: The Enigma of the Subject," in *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, 153-63.

⁸ For the concept of overdetermination, see Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 1969), 87-128. For the concept of underdetermination, see Louis Althusser, "Is It Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?" in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 163-207.

⁹ Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," 103.

political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical events: wars, battles, defeats, and so on) to *one* principle of internal unity, is itself only possible on the *absolute condition* of taking the whole concrete life of a people for the externalization-alienation (*Entäußerung-Entfremdung*) of an *internal spiritual principle*, which can *never definitely be anything but the most abstract form of that epoch's consciousness of itself: its religious or philosophical consciousness, that is, its own ideology.*"¹⁰

According to Althusser, the simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction has devastating theoretical consequences: not only does it render the peoples in real history embodiments of different moments of the Idea, whose fortunes rise and fall as the result of an arbitrary “play” of dialectics driven by this simple contradiction, but, more importantly, it eliminates the possibility of a real “rupture” in history and, therefore, “any radical beginning.”¹¹ In this light, it is possible to say that it was not only the search for a form of contradiction, absent in Spinoza and reductively present in Hegel, that led Althusser to Machiavelli, in order to work out the new forms in which the dialectic can be “rooted” or anchored so that it would not “revolve endlessly in the void of idealism.” It was also the search for the theorization of rupture and the possibility of a new beginning.¹² However, this swerve from Spinoza to Machiavelli, which rerouted Althusser’s path in search of materialist philosophy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and which left behind the posthumously published manuscript, *Machiavelli and Us*, was at once an advance, a stop on the way, and a return home – an *anabasis* of sorts, considering that Althusser’s encounter with Machiavelli dates

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In this line, Terray argues: “Machiavelli appears to him [Althusser] to be a theoretician of the revolution.” Emmanuel Terray, “An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli,” in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition* ed. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 264.

back to 1961.¹³ “Ever since I have tried to read Machiavelli, to understand him, I have ceaselessly returned to him,” Althusser wrote.¹⁴

Althusser’s keen interest in *new forms* seems to have found a strong resonance in Machiavelli’s thought, both in Machiavelli’s self-proclamations about the originality of his own work, when he declares in the preface of the *Discourses*, “I have decided to enter upon a new way as yet untrodden by anyone else,” for example, and, should we hesitate to take Machiavelli at his word, in the discoveries he makes on that path, which even if it had been trodden by others, did not seem to lead anyone, according to Althusser, to the same “unknown lands and seas.”¹⁵ This resonance finds expression in Althusser’s strong assertion that highlights Machiavelli’s novelty in the form of a *solitude* that remains unperturbed, not simply because he “was alone in stating a new truth,”¹⁶ but also, and more importantly, because, no one has followed him, even imperfectly, despite Machiavelli’s own statement in chapter 6 of the *Prince* that “men almost always walk on paths beaten by others and proceed in their actions by imitation.”¹⁷ On the contrary, Althusser contends, Machiavelli has not been followed; he remains alone because “no one has thought in his thought,”¹⁸ either with him or more devastatingly, of course, ever since.

¹³ Xenophon, *The Anabasis of Cyrus*, trans. Wayne Ambler, intro. Eric Buseti (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008). According to Elliott, Althusser’s “discovery” of Machiavelli goes back to the summer of 1961, and his first lecture course on Machiavelli was held in 1962. The manuscript was first published in 1995. Gregory Elliott, “Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli,” *Machiavelli and Us*, xiv, xi.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, “The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza,” translated by Ted Stolze, in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 14.

¹⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. and intro. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker, rev. tr. Brian Richardson (London: Penguin, 2003), BI, Preface, 97.

¹⁶ Louis Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” *Machiavelli and Us*, 123.

¹⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 2nd ed., trans. and intro. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Chp. 6, 22.

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” *Machiavelli and Us*, 123.

It is this dual quality that Althusser attributes to Machiavelli that I would like to extrapolate and attempt to sharpen further, as encapsulating the specificity of Althusser's interpretation among the vast literature that Machiavelli has inspired: Machiavelli as a theorist of the *new* and Machiavelli as a *new* theorist. On the one hand, Machiavelli puts forth a theory of beginnings, of the foundations of the modern state – a new political form; on the other hand, Machiavelli begins a new “mode of thinking,” a new method of theorization, which if not inaugurates then at least sanctions a materialist philosophy, or a materialist position in philosophy, with important political implications. Before I move to take up these two qualities in turn, let me elucidate briefly what this “new” entails, since it is doing much of the theoretical work in distinguishing Althusser's discourse on Machiavelli. Althusser contends:

Novelty can only repose on the surface of things; it can only affect an aspect of things, and fades with the moment that induced it. In contrast, the beginning is, so to speak, rooted in the essence of a thing, since it is the beginning of *this* thing. It affects all its determinations, and does not fade with the moment, but *endures* with the thing itself. If one considers the thing which begins, and is novel because it begins, before it there was something else, but nothing of it.¹⁹

Thus, newness qua beginning is not a superficial feature, one among others, that is bound to the fleeting temporal moment in which it arises. It is a constituent characteristic that travels in time with the thing it marks, imbuing it with permanence. What Althusser therefore posits as new, he quickly qualifies: the new is both what stands in distinction from the old and what ruptures from it, what stands in opposition to it by its difference. In other words, the new points to a diachronic shift and a synchronic opposition, one that

¹⁹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 6.

endures with the thing and contrasts with the already existing, or the old. Thus, the new is not simply what is novel; it is an inauguration, an irruption, an emergence [*surgissement*], already antagonistically structured and structuring both what precedes it retroactively and itself as unprecedented. The new is Janus-faced: it is an advent, an arrival, which is, at the same time, the starting point; it is what marks a passage but without passing; it arises as a departure but is carried along as part of what departs and differentiates; it has an originary positivity but is already striated by antagonism. With these connotations in mind, I would now propose to turn to Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli as a theorist of the new and a new theorist and the implications of this dual quality.

The Secret of Primitive Political Accumulation

According to Althusser, Machiavelli advances a theory of founding, of the foundation of a unified national state in Italy. Such a reading is not completely unfamiliar to scholars of Machiavelli, who have encountered it most forcefully in Antonio Gramsci, through whose prism Althusser approaches Machiavelli (despite Althusser's disagreements with Gramsci).²⁰ As Gregory Elliott also notes, a similar argument that positions Machiavelli as the theorist of Italian unity is “[a]nticipated by Hegel in 1802, elaborated by De Sanctis in 1870, and adopted by Gramsci in the 1930s.”²¹ As a result, interpreters have argued that Althusser resumes an already existing tradition of interpretation of

²⁰ Antonio Gramsci, “The New Prince,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 123-205. For Althusser's critique of Gramsci, see his “Marx in his Limits,” *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. and intro. G. M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 138-50.

²¹ Elliott, “Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli,” xvii.

Machiavelli's thought, without much originality. Timothy O'Hagan, for example, notes: "[I]f Althusser's Machiavelli is solitary, his reading of Machiavelli is not."²² Similarly, Filippo del Lucchese argues that Althusser's reading is "a matter of an often ambivalent or fragmentary and, in many cases, not very original reading,"²³ which gains its power only when situated within the tradition of aleatory materialism, the subterranean materialist tradition in the history of philosophy that the late Althusser wants to reconstruct and revive against dominant materialisms through the figures of Epicurus, Lucretius, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, and Heidegger, along with Machiavelli.²⁴ By contrast, according to Mikko Lahtinen, Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli is an important contribution not only to Machiavelli scholarship but also to political theory, which is further pronounced in light of aleatory materialism.²⁵

However, what tends to go unacknowledged in these commentaries is that the conventional interpretation of Machiavelli as the theorist of the founding is qualified soon after it is adopted by Althusser: on the one hand, Machiavelli not only theorizes the founding of the national-popular state but does so by disclosing its violent and conflictual nature, i.e., he expounds a theory of "primitive political accumulation"²⁶; on the other hand, Machiavelli is also a theorist of the functioning and reproduction of such a state

²² Timothy O'Hagan, "Machiavelli's Solitude: An Introduction," *Economy and Society* 17, no. 4 (1988), 466. Also quoted in Elliott, "Introduction: In the Mirror of Machiavelli," xvii.

²³ Filippo Del Lucchese, "On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli," trans. Warren Montag, *Décalages* 1, no.1 (2010), 2, <http://scholar.oxy.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=decalages>.

²⁴ Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, 167. Machiavelli's is a "curious *philosophy which is a 'materialism' of the encounter*' thought by way of politics, and which, as such, does not take anything for granted" (Ibid., 173).

²⁵ For an in-depth exposition of aleatory materialism in light of the Machiavelli connection, see Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolo Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*, trans. Gareth Griffiths and Kristina Köhli (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

²⁶ Althusser, "Machiavelli's Solitude," 125.

once founded, for which he articulates in broad strokes the complex relationship between force and consent that will crucially inform Gramsci's theory of hegemony as well as Althusser's theory of ideology, though in different ways.²⁷ As such, Althusser argues against the artificial polarity between the founding and the reproduction of the state, as well as that between the absolutist and republican interpretations of Machiavelli's political theory, subsuming both as different moments in the problematic that concerns the *founding of a state that endures*.²⁸ This founding, moreover, is one that must take place in the void, as it were, in which favorable conditions are absent.²⁹ As Antonio Negri has convincingly stated, "[a]fter recuperating the traditional interpretation of Machiavelli, Althusser, in fact turns it upside down: it is no longer the project that counts, but, rather, the radicalism expressed by Machiavelli's thought when it clashes against the impossibility of realizing the project: the thought of the new, therefore, in the absence of its conditions."³⁰ This iteration of the argument transforms Machiavelli into a theorist of *rupture*: a break from the political forms of the past, which are not commensurate to the task of creating national unity, as well as a break from the ideologies of the past: Christian theology, ancient political philosophy, and

²⁷ On the relationship between Gramsci and Althusser, see Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1-39.

²⁸ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 47; "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," 175.

²⁹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 64; "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," 171. According to Ichida, the void is that of a Schmittian decision that is groundless (*ex nihilo*) but grounding of the form. See Yoshihiko Ichida, "Subject to Subject: Are we all Schmittians in politics?," *Borderlands* 4, no. 2 (2005), URL: http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/ichida_subject.htm. However, according to Morfino, "Althusser's interpretation in reality has nothing to do with this problematic, which is fundamentally a juridical one." Vittorio Morfino, "History as 'Permanent Revocation of the Accomplished Fact': Machiavelli in the Last Althusser," in *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, 69-70.

³⁰ Antonio Negri, "Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser," trans. Olga Vasile, in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, 54. For Negri (though not necessarily for Althusser), this is to argue that Machiavelli is the theorist of *constituent power*. See, Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37-97. For a similar interpretation of the "new prince" as a constituent actor, see Andreas Kalyvas, "Hegemonic Sovereignty: Carl Schmitt, Antonio Gramsci, and the Constituent Prince," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 3 (October 2000): 343-76.

the humanism of Machiavelli's own times.³¹ According to Emmanuel Terray, Althusser's Machiavelli is "the first *modern* theoretician of politics. The first, in all senses of the term: from a chronological point of view but also from the point of view of importance and historical role."³²

Althusser's interpretation is important in several respects. First, it acts as a corrective against readings of Machiavelli that posit him as a figure of *transition*: between feudalism and capitalism, according to a reductive Marxist reading, between theological politics and modern theories of sovereignty or a political theology, between Florentine humanism and the Enlightenment. For Althusser, Machiavelli appears as the theorist of the new state-form, not as the antecedent of modern sovereignty but its *pioneer*, both its starting point and already its arrival, in antagonistic relation to the political forms that precede it. He comes forth not as a transitional figure between the medieval, moral tradition of political thought and the philosophy of natural law, in which the bourgeoisie as the ascending class found its self-representation. Rather, he stands as an *exception*, one that cannot be subsumed into what comes before, nor can be eradicated by what comes after. "Machiavelli's solitude," says Althusser, "lay in his having freed himself from the first

³¹ In this vein, Hannah Arendt is accurate to suggest that Machiavelli is "the 'spiritual father of revolution,' where revolution is understood as both the desire for liberation and the foundation of the new. Even though Machiavelli never uses the concept of revolution in this sense, the idea of *founding* a body politic, Arendt contends, is "central, if not paramount" in his thought. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 36, 38-9. Arendt also posits a more or less direct line of descent between Machiavelli and Robespierre, especially in terms of the centrality of violence: "When Robespierre justifies terror, 'the despotism of liberty against tyranny,' he sounds at times as if he were repeating almost word for word Machiavelli's famous statements on the necessity of violence for the founding of new political bodies and for the reforming of corrupt ones." Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1961), 139. Althusser does not venture such a link between Machiavelli and Robespierre (a link which is rather tenuous, in my opinion), but even if it were to be demonstrated, Althusser would hardly share Arendt's deep distrust toward the continental revolutionary tradition.

³² Terray, 267, my emphasis. Cf. Lahtinen, 177, 309.

tradition before the second submerged everything,”³³ that is, in commanding the ability to articulate the violent birth throes of the modern state without reference to either an ontological predisposition of human beings as *zoon politikon*, which tends to *naturalize* the state, or the bourgeois myth of the state’s natural and lawful emergence from a “state of nature,” which tends to *neutralize* the state.

Althusser restores Machiavelli’s originality, without losing sight of his historicity, both in terms of Machiavelli’s innovative ability to capture his own temporality in theory and his ability to do so without recourse to the philosophical traditions inherited from the past; indeed, by breaking with them. He does so, moreover, in a way whose newness does not fade or cannot be erased by what comes after: in a sense, Machiavelli is even more “ahead” or “advanced” than his historical successors, as he presents a critique of liberalism’s erasure or neutralization of the violent origins of the modern state even before liberalism. Machiavelli anticipates Marx in the field of politics: what Marx’s work does to the “ideologists of capitalism” (though after capitalism is already in place, after the accomplished fact), by disclosing the process of enclosures and dispossession, or the “story of pillage, theft, exaction” that underwrites their origin-narrative which consists in “labor, thrift, and generosity,” Machiavelli’s thought does to the “ideologists” of the modern state (and as a critique articulated before it becomes fact).³⁴ Put another way, Machiavelli’s originality lies in the resistance of his thought to being subsumed into the liberal-humanist ideology that rises to dominance after him even as the phenomenon he theorizes, and which liberal humanism sanctifies, i.e., the modern state, becomes the prevalent and

³³ Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” 124.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

hegemonic political form. Consequently, Machiavelli does not only theorize a rupture, he is himself the rupture: his thought is the advent of a *new* era to which he causes embarrassment with his audacity by disclosing the real story of its founding.

Machiavelli, the Materialist

But this is only part of the picture. Althusser asserts that Machiavelli does not only theorize the *new* in politics. He also reconfigures the endeavor of theorization itself. This brings me to the second element of Althusser's interpretation: Machiavelli as a new theorist, whose uniqueness lies in his ability to grasp the role of contingency in history and to theorize the singularity of each conjuncture, bringing political practice into the domain of philosophy. Althusser finds Machiavelli to be in the company of Marx in that they were the only thinkers who "never entertained any illusions about the 'omnipotence of ideas,' including [their] own."³⁵ They were materialists; their theoretical practice was marked by the analysis of politics in a materialist way.

Part of Machiavelli's materialism is what Althusser calls "thinking *in* the conjuncture." This is not merely the analysis of the conjuncture, i.e., reflecting on a political problem by taking into account the concrete circumstances, its constituent elements, and their relations of force. For Althusser, this is grasping the "contradictory system" of the elements of the situation and what that contradictory system dictates as a political problem, granting it with a corresponding solution and, hence, the contours of and content for political practice, i.e., "the forms, means and procedures of [t]his political

³⁵ Althusser, "Marx in His Limits," 47.

practice”).³⁶ Thinking *on* the conjuncture is a theoretical practice, but thinking *in* the conjuncture transforms elements of the conjuncture into “real or potential forces in the struggle for the historical objective”³⁷ – it is a form of action, a political practice, an intervention into the conjuncture. With this emphasis, Althusser’s new materialist approach strives not simply to present the factual analysis of a conjuncture but involves, fundamentally, translating that analysis into the political practice entailed by that conjuncture. This translation is not simply the definition of “what is to be done” but, by way of articulating it theoretically, intervening in that conjuncture in order to call for (or, better, call into being) the very agency to perform those necessary political tasks that will bring about the solution dictated by the conjuncture itself. If Machiavelli therefore talks of a new prince, he calls forth a new prince: he stages an intervention in his own conjuncture conceived as a political void, a void in which the *virtù* of the prince must encounter *fortuna* so that a state can “congeal” or “take hold.”

But part of Machiavelli’s materialism, or his new “mode of thinking,”³⁸ according to Althusser, is revealed by a *theoretical dispositive*, which “establishes particular relations between the discourse and its ‘object,’ the discourse and its ‘subject.’”³⁹ Such a formulation, of course, signals that we are entering a different terrain, no longer that of history and politics as such, but of philosophy, or of the philosophical inquiry of the status of Machiavelli’s historical and political analysis. This move is an evocation of *Reading Capital* where Althusser puts forth a practice of reading that involves putting into question the

³⁶ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 18-19. On this point, see also Matheron, “Louis Althusser, or the Impure Purity of the Concept,” 520.

³⁷ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 42, 63, 80.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

relation of the discourse to its object (though not to its subject – I will return to this),⁴⁰ and through this relation, articulating the procedures and epistemology of analysis appropriate to that object and elaborating its relation to truth. What are the distinguishing features of Machiavelli's dispositive?

First is its epistemological status. Machiavelli's discourse is not scientific. True, it appears as a science of politics because of Machiavelli's explicit distancing from "imagined republics" and commitment to go to the "actual truth of the thing" [*verita effettuale della cosa*]. However, Althusser insists, Machiavelli's thought escapes the systematicity of a scientific discourse; his reflections remain fragmentary, contradictory, and without a unifying focus. In contrast to the definition of science advanced in *Reading Capital*, where there is no constitutive subject (science does not depend on a subject),⁴¹ or what is at stake is no longer the "subject which sees" but a field "that sees itself in the objects or problems it defines,"⁴² Machiavelli's discourse retains a subject, or rather, *subjects*. At first, these subjects are doubled and antagonistically posited, in the metaphor of the mountain and the plain, and thus the meaning of everything that Machiavelli says *depends* –

⁴⁰ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 14.

⁴¹ Accordingly, "[a]ny object or problem situated on the terrain and within the horizon, i.e., in the definite structured field of the theoretical problematic of a given theoretical discipline, is visible. We must take these words literally. The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of 'vision' which he exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems. Vision then loses the religious privileges of divine reading: It is no more than a reflection of the immanent necessity that ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of its production. It is literally no longer the eye (the mind's eye) of a subject which *sees* what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which *sees itself* in the objects or problems it defines – sighting being merely the necessary reflection of the field on its objects." *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*

on whether one is of the mountain or of the plain.⁴³ Moreover, however, this duality of the subject is multiplied into an infinite possibility of subjects who may become the new prince – undefined, unspecified subjects who are invited or, better, incited to occupy the “empty place” of political practice awaiting to be filled.⁴⁴ This multiplicity is further compounded by the encounter between *virtù* and *fortuna*, whose unspecifiable and unpredictable quality is inscribed in its very definition.⁴⁵

But Machiavelli’s discourse also differs from science, especially its empiricist form, because the concept of the thing does not dominate or subsume its concrete manifestations.⁴⁶ A case is not taken up by Machiavelli as a particular instantiation of the universal; rather, the exposition of each case drives what fragments of the universal will be called upon in order to shed light on that case. The singular is the universal. This is a strategic appeal to the universal, much like the way history is selectively utilized in the service of the present. Althusser maintains that Machiavelli’s examples from the past are not applied to the present when they are invoked for comparisons but *juxtaposed* instead. Each time, it is the specific case that determines what of the historical will be marshaled, strategically, in order to illuminate it.⁴⁷ At stake in this illumination is not an illustration or a demonstration, but by way of comparison, a *distanciation* – in other words, Machiavelli holds on to and actively cultivates an irreducible tension between the concept and the

⁴³ It is worth quoting the “Dedicatory Letter” to *The Prince* as the original and much discussed site for these metaphors (though not the only such site): “For just as those who sketch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places place themselves high atop mountains, similarly, to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people.” Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 4.

⁴⁴ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 76; Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” 172.

⁴⁶ For Althusser’s critique of empiricism, see Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 35-41.

⁴⁷ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 47-8.

reality it is purported to capture. In this light, I would submit that in considering Machiavelli's epistemology as an *antithetical* one, we should take into consideration not only the conflictual reality that he conceptualizes as the precondition of knowledge, with a remarkable fidelity to the reality that is neutralized by many who came after him, as Étienne Balibar has proposed, but also the trace of antagonism that Machiavelli preserves in the relation between the concept and its referent.⁴⁸ Each concept in Machiavelli, viewed through Althusser's analysis of his dispositive, has the paradoxical effect of deferring a final definition of or statement on reality, as a consequence of which the ineradicable singularity of reality is privileged over the generality of the concept, to which reality always remains in a certain distance. Viewed thus, we are already closer to a new answer to the question of the relationship between the concept and the real, a relationship which had plagued Althusser's former claims about the distinction between scientific and non-scientific knowledges and cast doubt on the science-ideology dichotomy that undergirded the thesis of the "epistemological break" because it remained unresolved problem of his materialist epistemology.

The second attribute of this dispositive, and, to my mind, the key to what situates Machiavelli's reflections in the domain of materialist knowledge, as separate from either science or ideology, lies in the *ordering* of his reflections for Althusser. It will be recalled that Althusser put a great emphasis on the ordering of concepts in a hierarchical structure visible only in its effects as the materialist claim to objectivity (that is not positivist or empiricist). This concern also imbues his reading of Machiavelli. Althusser argues that the

⁴⁸ Étienne Balibar, "*Esser principe, esser popolare*: The principle of antagonism in Machiavelli's epistemology" in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy and Language*, ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 355.

relation between different elements in the sequence of Machiavelli's apparently contradictory theses is what uniquely constitutes Machiavelli's new "mode of thinking."

Althusser demonstrates that the arrangement of Machiavelli's theses on history is such that, by way of consecutive contradictions, it proceeds to produce concepts that are not deducible from these theses themselves.⁴⁹ Let us review this arrangement briefly: first, a general thesis on knowledge (the immutability of the world) is posited, in order to establish the possibility of objectivity as well as the ground of conducting comparisons across space and time. However, this thesis is negated in its very positing (and further determined in the process of negation) by the thesis of contingency (the continual motion of the world), which founds the basis of variations and variability. Afterward, the contradiction between the two is putatively resolved by reference to an apparent synthesis, which adds further determinacy: this is the cyclical theory of history, which combines the immutability of the world with change, but now according to different forms of government. This is the third thesis. So far, one can only express surprise at this proto-Hegelian reading that Althusser has grafted upon Machiavelli. However, and this is the real mark of the Machiavellian procedure, the Polybian synthesis is posited only to be completely rejected in the fourth thesis (all governmental forms in the Polybian cycle are defective because they are either bad or transient) and by a new negation, which Althusser calls a *displacement*, we arrive at something completely new: a shift in the definition of the *object* of knowledge (from *temporary* forms of government to a *state that endures*). This is an object, Althusser remarks, which is also a practical-political objective and which requires a practical-political solution

⁴⁹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 34-44.

(escaping the Polybian cycle by a mixed governmental form that promotes the longevity and grandeur of the state).

To appreciate this operation, let us recall Althusser's *exhortation* in *Reading Capital*: "We must completely reorganize the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production."⁵⁰ But, Althusser notes, in Marx's *Capital*, this operation remains trapped within a certain circularity: "it is therefore a question of producing, in the precise sense of the word, which seems to signify making manifest what is latent, but which really means transforming (in order to give a pre-existing raw material the form of an object adapted to an end), something which in a sense already exists."⁵¹ I only remark in passing how this passage evokes and alludes to Machiavelli's characterization of the "most excellent princes" (Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus) in *The Prince*, princes to whom fortune provided "the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased."⁵²

What Althusser does not make explicit in his analysis of Machiavelli's dispositive but which we can appreciate in light of his reflections on Marx's materialism is this: that the dispositive in Machiavelli breaks the epistemological circularity in Marx's *Capital*, and does so in two ways: first, by the sequentiality that produces a *new* concept that cannot be found in latent form in the discourse that pre-exists it, and second, by opening the final step of the knowledge operation to "contamination" by the real – where the theoretical object and the political objective, and therefore theoretical and political practice, converge, preventing the closure of the movement of thought. Machiavelli's method, Althusser

⁵⁰ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chp. 6, 22.

contends, is the “negation of the negation of the negation”: in contrast to the Hegelian dialectic where the supersession [*Aufhebung*] preserves the “truth” of the elements that are negated in the higher unity, Machiavelli posits the superseding solution only to be refuted and redirects the negation toward the production of something that did not exist before – a concept that can only arise or be produced by such sequentiality but is ultimately irreducible to its anteriority. But Machiavelli does not stop there, he also opens the concept up to the challenge of its practical singularity, with which it always retains its antagonistic tension, its distance.

The *formal* structure of this sequentiality that leads to the production of a new concept is a possible new form of the dialectic, a structure without which it might, as Althusser feared, “revolve endlessly in the void of idealism,” when severed from its Hegelian features.⁵³ This structure, as the most important feature of the materialist dialectic in Machiavelli’s thought, is the reason why I disagree with Vittorio Morfino’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s materialism through a reformulation of Machiavelli’s theses (in contradistinction to their formulation in Althusser’s account).⁵⁴ Briefly, Morfino keeps the first two theses of immutability and contingency, but then introduces three different theses: the primacy of the encounter over form, the interweaving of temporalities, and the disarticulation of history and memory. While each of these theses may indeed have their

⁵³ According to Ichida and Matheron, the aleatory in aleatory materialism signifies “non-dialectical.” Similarly, Sotiris affirms this position by positing the encounter and the materialist dialectic with opposing, mutually exclusive terms. In light of my reading of Althusser’s Machiavelli, I take distance from their view. Instead of being non- or anti-dialectical, aleatory materialism, it seems to me, is a search for the really materialist dialectic. Cf. Yoshihiko Ichida and François Matheron, “Un, Deux, Trois, Quatre, Dix Mille Althusser?: Considérations Aléatoires sur le Matérialisme Aléatoire,” *Multitudes* 2, no. 21 (2005): 167-78, doi: 10.3917/mult.021.0167, and Panagiotis Sotiris, “The Difficult Encounter with Materialism,” review of *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987* by Louis Althusser, *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008), 172-3.

⁵⁴ Vittorio Morfino, “The Five Theses of Machiavelli’s Philosophy,” in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy and Language*, 147.

place in Machiavelli's thought, the lack of linearity in their presentation, or the underspecified relationality in their ordering tends to disrupt and occlude the movement of thought that produces the concept, which it then opens to the challenge of the real. To elaborate, in Morfino's formulation, neither do we find that the thesis on the primacy of the encounter (thesis 3) follows from the thesis of contingency (thesis 2) as a negation, nor can we specify the relation between the ensuing theses on temporality and those that preceded them. By contrast, it is the very structure of this movement that characterizes Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli's materialism.

Allow me to emphasize this sequentiality, which Morfino tends to overlook, with a different example. It is a curious fact that *Machiavelli and Us* concentrates almost exclusively on *The Prince* and *The Discourses* and, except for a brief reference to *The Art of War*, largely omits Machiavelli's other works.⁵⁵ The reasons for this decision are unclear, especially since the *Florentine Histories* lends much support to Althusser's analysis of theoretical dispositive as the mark of Machiavelli's new method of thinking.⁵⁶ In fact, a similar series of theses (similar in the order of exposition), this time not (only) on history but also on politics could be extrapolated from the *Florentine Histories*.

Thesis 1: Conflict/antagonism as the self-generating and driving force of politics.⁵⁷

Such that the periods without conflict are omitted from the narrative of Florence's history.

⁵⁵ *The Art of War* is mentioned in Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 5.

⁵⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., intro. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). It might be that the *Florentine Histories* is less revealing of Machiavelli's overarching project of the foundation of a national popular state. At the same time, however, it serves as a firm demonstration of many of Machiavelli's arguments regarding politics in the thickness, conflictuality, and irreducible contingency of Florence's history.

⁵⁷ On this note, Vatter has convincingly argued that, in Machiavelli, Althusser identifies "the self-constitution of the political out of the abyssal 'basis' of an irreconcilable social antagonism." Miguel Vatter, "Machiavelli After Marx: The Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser," *theory & event* 7, no. 4 (2004), par. 19.

At the same time, this conflict is not singular or homogenous, but plural and heterogenous – their constituents are different actors, just as the content of the antagonism is extremely variable – hatred, jealousy, interest, revenge, inequality, even amorous passion. On the one hand, there is the conflict between different noble families. On the other hand, there is the struggle between classes: the nobles, the people (the middle class), the plebians (artisans and the workers, and the “lesser people”). But this is not exhaustive. Then, there is the conflict between factions, sects, guilds, and individuals. Finally, there is the conflict between Florence and other cities, its external enemies. These types of conflict, or what we may call contradictions, are dynamic, interwoven, overlapping, at odds, mutually reinforcing, and so on, in so many ways, providing a stark contrast with the contradiction of Hegel’s dialectic, which, as Althusser has argued, boils down to a *single* principle that is supposed to account for the irreducible plurality and complexity of a society.

Thesis 2: The unity of Florence as the political objective, the performative horizon of Florentine politics: The city is at once a unity and simultaneously a force field crisscrossed by a multitude of antagonisms between individuals, groups, classes. But Florence is also a performance because it is assumed and created, with the explicit intention to forge unity, through multiple conflicts.

So we have a negation – conflict with unity. Thesis 3: The contradiction between the first two theses is resolved by an apparent synthesis: liberty is the unity of the conflicted, contentious city.⁵⁸ Fear of outside enemies, or fear of losing the liberty of the city is what

⁵⁸ According to del Lucchese, “sedition – and conflict in general – is at the root of liberty.” Filippo Del Lucchese, “Sedition and Modernity: Division as Politics and Conflict as Freedom in Machiavelli and Spinoza,” *borderlands* 6, no. 3 (2007), par. 13.

ultimately forges unity with, in, and through conflicts and divisions.⁵⁹ The history of Florence can also be read as the successive attempts to externalize the internal antagonisms upon a foreign enemy in order to protect the liberty of the city and add to its grandeur, while forging its unity, especially as laws and institutions prove insufficient in managing the same conflicts. Thus, the contradiction between the first two theses is resolved by an apparent solution.

Thesis 4: But this seeming resolution is quickly undermined by a fourth thesis: the unity of the city (read, liberty) is becoming more and more difficult to maintain. The history of Florence is also a series of mostly failed attempts to forge and maintain unity: there is a tragic element in the narrative of the *Florentine Histories*: despite the best efforts, there emerges a negative arc of corruption and decline, dispersion and dissolution, which culminates at the end of the book in the death of Lorenzo de Medici. This moment puts the *Florentine Histories* much closer to Machiavelli's other works: in terms not as explicit as in *The Prince*, though still present, the book terminates with the narrative invoking threat of ruin that beckons Italy - the impossibility of maintaining Florentine liberty in the current conjuncture and the need to unite Italy, even in light of its very impossibility. At the background, there is once again the Polybian thesis of the cyclical view of governments, against which Machiavelli casts the fluctuating history of Florentine constitutions, struggles, revolutions, and reconstitutions. Recall how, according to Althusser, Machiavelli's thesis of immutability stands in tension with the subsequent thesis of the contingency in history: the constant irruption of unforeseen events and conflicts. If Machiavelli's solution to the discrepancy between these two theses in *The Discourses* is mixed government, as the form

⁵⁹ Ibid., par. 17.

suitable for states that endure (since Polybian forms are all defective), the Florentine case goes even further and reveals the precarity of this solution: how it is constantly subject to contestation and remaking and how its security is ultimately tied to the project of national unification. It therefore produces another negation, which is at the same time a displacement of the apparent solution, thus producing Machiavelli's new theoretical object – a state that endures.

An unexpected consequence of this procedure, and this brings me to the third distinguishing feature of Machiavelli's new "mode of thinking," is its temporal orientation. This discourse, or the theoretical dispositive that marks it, is ultimately turned toward futurity – to the "fact to be accomplished" instead of the "accomplished fact." In other words, instead of past forms, arguments, concepts dominating the understanding of the present, Machiavelli's discourse is oriented to what is to come. Neither as a teleological movement, nor as a prognostic device, but as a discourse that precludes closure and termination. Because Machiavelli's thought is driven by politics, by a political problem, the sequentiality of the discourse cannot be halted until the solution to that problem in the form of a political objective is formulated – this is the "thinking in the conjuncture." But its formulation is not sufficient – it must be enacted. Since the introduction of a political objective into the space of theory already inflects that space, it is only the realization of the solution in the world of politics that can bring closure. Since the problem is not simply the founding of a national popular state but also making it endure, the problem is not open to a final resolution, either political or theoretical. Hence, the porosity, open-endedness, and uncanny "contemporaneity" of Machiavelli. The materialist dispositive necessitates a

complex analysis of time, just as it requires a complex principle of contradiction. Here, despite my disagreement with Morfino's interpretation on the ground of the necessity to emphasize the formal sequentiality of contradictions, I would concede the importance of his substantive point regarding the plurality of temporalities within Machiavelli's discourse (his theses 4 and 5) – namely, that this openness to futurity in Machiavelli's discourse does not mean that the past is wiped clean each time the new emerges, irrupts as a catastrophe or revolution, or is introduced; on the contrary, the traces of the past are retained in language, in memory, sometimes only in name. Parallel to the way these traces become the substratum upon which the new is erected, so we can think of Machiavelli's rupture from the past as not completely annihilating what came before him but retaining as a substratum a plurality of times whose conjuncture can be generative of new encounters.⁶⁰

Finally, Machiavelli's theoretical dispositive is also distinguished by its immense political implications. It undermines any claim to neutrality by openly adopting a partisan function, rallying the claim to truth (“going directly to the effectual truth of the thing”) as the very performance of truth itself. Truth is not an external point of view, outside the conflictual field of forces, but rather shaped in and through them, and it becomes true to its name only by advocating for one side in the conflict, by lending itself to the service of political struggle as a weapon in that struggle. Let us note, then, the concept of truth, too, retains a certain distance from the conflictual reality that it denotes in a partisan way.

What Althusser designates as the “text that is an impassioned appeal for the political solution it heralds,”⁶¹ simply obliterates the possibility of a purely philosophical discourse,

⁶⁰ Morfino, “The Five Theses of Machiavelli's Philosophy,” 161-71.

⁶¹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 23.

by advocating and indeed enacting, the performativity of theory. On the one hand, Machiavelli's dispositive interpellates an agent to occupy the empty space of political practice, rendering itself a tool of that agent. On the other hand, situating itself within the field of forces that it theorizes, a text that argues for political practice, and in fact stages an intervention that is a form of political practice, is constantly threatened by the political practice that penetrates, intrudes, makes incursions into, and drives the text, opening it up to the proliferation of its interpretations and reinforcing the impossibility of completely enlisting the text to one's own forces, or what Althusser calls the difficulty "to enroll Machiavelli in [one's] own ranks."⁶² It is the analysis of this dispositive, which Althusser calls "thinking in the conjuncture," but what I would further qualify as thinking by and through a *distanciation*, an epistemological, dialectical, and political distanciation, that I think really marks the originality of Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli.

An Aleatory Materialist Dialectic?

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that Althusser's interest in casting Machiavelli as a materialist philosopher cannot be considered in isolation from the attempt to rethink historical materialism in ways that break with the latter's teleological conception of history, flirtation with the moral ideology of humanism, and reductionist renditions of determinacy. In Machiavelli, Althusser found the contingency of history, the ineradicability of conflict, partisanship in philosophy, and a brave expression of the "aleatory foundations of the current world" we take for granted. Through his analysis of Machiavelli, Althusser

⁶² Ibid., 5.

put forth the possibility of an epistemology which does not assume an immediate and transparent identity between the “object of thought” and the “real object” but one that rather retains the distance between the concept and the real and thus contributes to the concept’s ability to represent a conflictual social and political reality. Moreover, in Machiavelli’s theoretical dispositive, Althusser discovered a dialectical structure (the “negation of the negation of the negation,” which is a “displacement” and the emergence of something new) that could overcome the idealist dialectic of Hegel, whose idealism, Althusser thought, was not only in the use to which it was put (teleological Universal History), but also inscribed in its very structure, through a simplistic definition of contradiction and the mechanism of supersession (*Aufhebung*), which eliminated the possibility of a real rupture. In this sense, I submit, Althusser’s aleatory reading of Machiavelli was hardly hostile to dialectical thought as such, but rather, an effort to rethink the *materialist* dialectic, to find those “*new forms*, unknown to Hegel, and which can confer on it the status of materialism.”⁶³

When confronted with a question regarding the relationship between Machiavelli and the Marxist tradition, in the beginning of his lecture on “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” (and if we are to take what Althusser says about beginnings seriously, we should infer that this beginning is not a superficial feature that vanishes but one that remains and continues to determine the vector of his reflections), Althusser qualified this relationship as “one of coincidence and repetition, rather than one of direct descent.”⁶⁴ I have tried to show that Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli was his attempt to recover what was lost in Marx’s

⁶³ Althusser, “Essay in Self-Criticism,” 138.

⁶⁴ Althusser, “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” 116.

“detour via Hegel,” which resulted in Marx’s (or Marxism’s) rediscovery of Machiavelli’s insights only by way of an aleatory repetition. Althusser’s path for this discovery was a path of *retreat*, from Spinoza to Machiavelli (and, even further, to Lucretius and Epicurus), a going back to the beginnings, reversing the forward movement of the Hegelian dialectic also within the history of philosophy. In this swerve, like the atom that swerves from the primordial rain of atoms falling in parallel in the void in Epicurus, thereby creating an encounter with another and thus giving rise to a world, Althusser attempted to trace an irruption, an originary act of opening another trajectory, an alternative, subterranean tradition within philosophy. In the contingency of its beginnings, Althusser recognized a new materialist philosophy, one that grasps the world in its facticity, stands in tension with the necessitarian logic of dominant materialisms, and ultimately creates the theoretical conditions of possibility of an emancipatory politics in the wake of Marxism.

If Machiavelli used his examples of antiquity to create a distanciation from his own present, may we not consider Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli as a similar attempt for us: recovering Machiavelli’s memory, the originality of his theoretical dispositive, and the boldness of his claims, and inviting us to re-inhabit his position in philosophy? If, by thinking in the conjuncture but always at an internal distance from it, Machiavelli’s discourse also hails the future concealed in the past, perhaps Althusser, speaking to us from the past and from a path less taken, may still have something to say about the future of materialist philosophy – “the future inherent in the past and the present.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 13.