



'The implication is obvious: to achieve his national and popular goals, the Prince must start out by respecting the people's ideology, even – especially – if he wants to transform it. He must take care that every political act, each form of political practice, intervenes and resonates as a matter of fact in the element of this ideology. He must therefore take charge of it, accept responsibility for the ideological effects of his own political practice, anticipate them, and inscribe them in it. And since the Prince is literally the public face of the state, he must take care that the people's representation of his figure is inscribed in popular ideology, so as to produce effects beneficial to his politics' (p. 97).

Althusser's robust conception of ideology and hegemony make for this interesting interpretation of the Prince's role in politics. It is also a clear statement of the pragmatic aims of Machiavelli's *oeuvre*. Althusser's popular position shines through most clearly in this statement, with Machiavelli's work no longer being a tyranny or satire, but instead a popular government of the People in the name of the People - the suppression of the class struggle through the Prince's person. The political leader is responsible and accountable to the people, and his own person inscribed in popular discourse. This somewhat negates the cold cruelty and ends-justify-the-means that is often ascribed to Machiavelli generally and *The Prince* specifically.

This conclusion is perhaps a pragmatic concession, but definitely an important one. The gem that is present in this book flows from the above quotations - that of the popular prince as responsible to people as the person of the national State. A much more fascinating interpretation of a political theorist than is offered in the philosophical historiography of Machiavelli, this book is well worth reading and certainly a must read for anyone interested in political philosophy in general and Machiavelli's contribution to philosophy specifically.

Althusser's central thesis is that 'Machiavelli's New Prince is thus a specific political form charged with executing the historical demands 'on the agenda': the constitution of a nation' (p. 13). He contends that Machiavelli is neither a Monarchist, apologist for tyranny nor a closet republican. Instead, Machiavelli is a philosopher of the nation-state, and *The Prince* 'is the formulation of a concrete political problem' (p. 16), a problem only a strong ruler can solve. But that would not capture the nuance of Althusser's argument.

Althusser presents a picture of Machiavelli in contradiction to the two major streams of interpretation - though, by his own admission, it is not strictly an interpretation. The work is not especially dense and gives a good outline of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. For anyone looking for an introduction to Machiavelli's work, and more loosely an introduction to Marxist politics, one need look no further. That said, the last essay is more or less a restatement of the first 120 pages, and can be skipped without losing much of the content.

The main thesis, which is built from the beginning and does not take a clear shape until the very end, is that Machiavelli is one of the greatest, if not the greatest materialist philosopher in history. Throughout the book, Althusser rejects the Gramscian charge of utopianism and draws a picture of a "fragmented" philosophy, which we can reason to be the only possible materialist philosophy in charge of a political objective. Of note are Althusser's handling of spatial metaphors and his foreshadowing of the theoretical dispositive.

The encounter in question is that of the two great entities of Renaissance political ontology, fortuna and virtù. Italian humanists were agreed on the power of chance in worldly affairs, the essential fickleness of 'fortune'. In this they were already anti-teleological, attracting criticism from those who continued to uphold Augustine's providentialist

understanding of human destiny. However, their standard assumption was that goodness would be rewarded by circumstance, that the steady practice of public virtù would tend to moderate fortuna; and in this way, their thinking was itself providentialist. Machiavelli made no such assumption. For him, the blessings of chance were as temporary as its blights were lasting. Political outcomes were settled in the variable encounters of fortuna and virtù; desired outcomes emerged from the adequate exercise of the latter in the given conditions. The reality of those conditions, including their horizon of possibility, would disclose itself only to 'experimental' inquiry involving careful historical comparison (with the Roman Republic, for example, or, closer in time, the career of Cesare Borgia). And virtù, the cardinal value in public affairs, was not reducible to 'virtue'. Here, for Althusser, is the moment of the break.

This Machiavelli is the pioneering theorist of 'the conjuncture'. In two senses: he acknowledges the operation of general 'laws' but does not centrally concern himself with them, knowing that they do not account for specific historical situations and their possible outcomes; and his practice of writing itself observes the discipline of one such situation and its political tasks, thus taking the form of a 'manifesto'. The Prince is recognizable in this account, even though the pages given to Machiavelli's philosophical reasoning seem wilfully over-complicated, and at times mistaken. It is tempting to say that this lengthy treatment of his theoretical 'dispositive' (dispositif) is itself a literary 'device' (one of the meanings of the French term) by which Althusser has Machiavelli illustrate, in his own writing procedure, the form of his substantive political recommendations. However, the theoretical heart of this discussion is the familiar concept of 'conjuncture' – familiar to any reader of Althusser,

The Prince seems, as it were, to filter the strong, Althusserian concept of conjuncture, retaining only the pure liquor of 'situations' – the 'conjunctural' in Gramsci's strictly limited, because contrastive, sense. Structures can thus be discounted as the inert ground of agency, whose vital element is alea. This, in a putative last distillation, would be the metaphysics of voluntarism. Historical uncertainty and openness are the ordinary work of structured, structuring processes, not a primordial counter-force called 'chance': this was the apparent lesson of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (which, indeed, Althusser wrote not long after his first lectures on Machiavelli). But in that text too, it must be said, there were signs of theoretical instability – notably in the perverse declaration that 'the last instance never comes'. This Renaissance looking-glass only magnifies them.

Mastery of conjunctures depends on virtù, the crucial concept in this as in any evaluation of Machiavelli. The term as he uses it resists economical translation, above all because 'virtue', the literal rendering, is strictly unavailable. We now enter the shadow of Old Nick – or, as Althusser would say, continuing the long line of his admirers, the light of Machiavelli's 'science of politics'. Virtù, which encompasses 'the subjective conditions' of political capability, is an indispensable positive value that cannot be rewritten as a compound of personal or even civic virtues. That is Machiavelli's fundamental proposition. It is not an argument for amorality: he acknowledges the moral reality of right and wrong and agrees that right is preferable. It is not an argument for pragmatism, which, in perfect consistency, he views as a tactical instrument, not a principle. 'The Prince can be judged by only one criterion: success', Althusser writes, but the meaning of 'success' is given by the nature of the historical task. 'The result alone counts', he continues: 'but the goal is the sole arbiter of the result that counts.' In this fine epigram, Althusser encapsulates his sense of Machiavelli's importance, as the originator of a discourse on values that are not of the same order as the virtues, on a form of practical reason that is neither moralistic nor mere calculus – a discourse on the specificity of politics.

Neither Althusser nor Gramsci could have read The Prince as they did without the contextual presence of Lenin. But no one can simply unwrite such characteristically modern exercises in tradition – nor should anyone on the Left be too quick to try. Machiavelli has been recalled as a contemporary, and not without good reason. Any current reader of this journal of socialist and feminist philosophers has lived through all or part of a historic reversal; no one has been unaffected; many have worked to further the change. Over the past thirty-odd years, there has been a widespread conversion of sensibility on the radical Left, which, for now, might pointedly be captioned 'the rise of the anti-Machiavellian principle'. The gist of this principle is that the forms of organization and practice of the Left should be embodiments of its animating social values, instantiations of its ends – in other words, that emancipatory virtù is virtue militant. The Machiavellian reprise is not that this is undesirable, or merely sentimental, but that it is self-contradictory. Politics is a specific and therefore (conditionally) autonomous form of social practice with a specific object – the maintenance or transformation of the ensemble of social relations in a given space – and specific norms of judgement, which are not reducible to the order of the moral. In an Althusserian term that Althusser might usefully have mobilized for his commentary, political practice is non-expressive in structure: virtù cannot simply and sufficiently embody any 'virtue', including the ones for which it fights. Here, for all his historical remoteness, as distastefully as ever, Althusser's Machiavelli speaks to us.

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It is debatable whether we actually 'need' the example of Machiavelli.

Beginning – the philosophy and politics of a departure without precedent or guarantee – is the leitmotiv of this book, and readers do well to start just there. Althusser's title is one of those in which, as Adorno said of *Romeo and Juliet*, the conjunction is everything. The reading it announces and enjoins upon 'us' involves another 'return' – this time, to Machiavelli.

Students of early modern political thought will recognize the interpretive issues at the centre of the discussion. How, if at all, can the 'monarchist' Prince be reconciled with the 'republican' Discourses on Livy? What is the relationship between political virtù and moral virtue? These are perennial topics. Readers of Quentin Skinner and his co-thinkers will be quick to lay the charge of romanticizing 'anachronism': the 'and' of the title can only be disjunctive, surely. Niccolò Machiavelli was not the heroic solitary of Althusser's depiction. His preference for a 'composite' form of republican government, combining elements of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy, was unremarkable at the time, even if distinguished in its bias against the aristocratic interest. In his preoccupation with mercenaries as enemies of dependable military organization, he reiterated a commonplace of Florentine republican thinking. Seen in a context that included numerous works of the same kind, some bearing the same title, *The Prince* is not quite the 'modern' founding of modern legend. But Althusser would not have been discouraged. His own interpretive tradition – that of Hegel, De Sanctis and Gramsci – values Machiavelli in a positively anachronizing spirit, for his 'actuality'. He 'grips' us, Althusser declares; there is something uncanny in his thought, for readers who come to recognize in it 'the true nature of the battle they were waging'. He asks us here to read 'in the mirror of Machiavelli'.

Althusser's Machiavelli is the strategist of an original historical project, and the original theorist of political practice. The project, as Gramsci and his forerunners had maintained, is Italian national unity. Althusser concurs, while emphasizing the most general historical meaning of the goal, and, in turn, its most general defining attributes.