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Althusser, Machiavelli, and the PCF

Introduction

Althusser's interest in Machiavelli traverses the most productive theoretical period of his thought, despite the fact that in the work published during his lifetime, Machiavelli's name only rarely appears.¹ However, this rarity is offset by the large quantity of texts dedicated to Machiavelli contained in the archives at IMEC, which are now at least in part published:

- 1) the manuscript of a course held in 1962²
- 2) the manuscript of a course held in 1971–72, of which there is a second version with numerous modifications presumably made in 1975–76, with the title *Machiavelli et nous* [*Machiavelli and Us*] (a version that Althusser continued to correct until the 1980s)³
- 3) an article with the title “La solitude de Machiavel” [“Machiavelli's Solitude”] from 1977⁴
- 4) a note on Machiavelli and Gramsci from 1977⁵
- 5) a text with the title *Que faire?* [*What is to be done?*] with a long digression on Machiavelli, from 1978⁶

¹ Cf. Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu. La politique et l'histoire*, PUF, Paris 1959, p. 12 ; *Pour Marx*, Maspero, Paris 1965, p. 93 and especially Louis Althusser, “Soutenance d'Amiens”, in Y. Sintomer (Ed.), *La solitude de Machiavel*, PUF, Paris 1998, p. 205.

² Louis Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, in *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx*, Seuil, Paris 2006, pp. 207–254.

³ Louis Althusser, *Machiavel et nous*, in F. Matheron (Ed.), *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, t. II, Stock/Imec, Paris 1995, pp. 42–168.

⁴ Louis Althusser, “La solitude de Machiavel”, in *La solitude de Machiavel*, pp. 311–324.

⁵ Manuscript in the Althusser Archive at IMEC with the label ALT2. A57-01.09. (now published: *Que faire?*, ed. G.M. Goshgarian, PUF, Paris 2018.

⁶ Manuscript in the Althusser Archive at IMEC with the label ALT2. A26-05.06 / 07.

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- 6) the part dedicated to Machiavelli in *The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter*, from 1982⁷
- 7) two excerpts from the autobiography, given the title *The Only Materialist Tradition* by the editors, from 1985⁸
- 8) a manuscript text from 1986 entitled *Machiavelli philosophe*⁹

This series of texts merits consideration. I will not closely track variations in the details of Althusser's interpretation throughout each text here. Instead, I will try to isolate the most significant moments and highlight the continuities and discontinuities. In order to synthesize, I think we can observe four phases of Althusser's reading of Machiavelli across this series, within which we can trace some discontinuities:

- 1) The 1962 course
- 2) *Machiavelli and Us* from 1972–76
- 3) Althusser's new confrontation with Gramsci in 1977–78
- 4) The writings of the 1980s

However, before considering these phases it is necessary to establish a premise that allows us to frame Althusser's overall relationship with Machiavelli. Althusser declares at the beginning of *Machiavelli and Us* that he will read Machiavelli directly, without interpretative filters, as if he were his contemporary. However, this is actually a misleading suggestion. Althusser reads Machiavelli as a Marxist and a communist: in this sense the question he poses to Machiavelli concerns an essential question, that of the party. But to understand the theoretical framework of the question it is necessary to keep in mind a fundamental mediation of Althusser's reading of Gramsci, namely Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli, which Filippo Del Lucchese has the merit of already emphasizing for us.¹⁰

⁷ Louis Althusser, *Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre*, in F. Matheron (Ed.), *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, t. I, Stock/Imec, Paris 1994, pp. 539–579.

⁸ Louis Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste", *Lignes* 18 (1993), pp. 71–119.

⁹ Manuscript in the Althusser Archive at IMEC with the label ALT2. A29-06-07.

¹⁰ Filippo Del Lucchese, «Sul vuoto di un incontro: Althusser lettore di Machiavelli», in AA.VV., *Rileggere il Capitale. La lezione di Louis Althusser*, parte seconda, Mimesis, Milano 2009, pp. 31–49.

Without fear of exaggerating it can be said that Althusser's encounter with Machiavelli takes place entirely through Gramsci,¹¹ and if something new happens in his reading of Machiavelli, this *novum* must be thought in light of his work on Gramsci.¹² In one of the two autobiographical writings dedicated to Machiavelli in 1985, Althusser recognized this debt: Machiavelli's thought must be read as the project of the "historical realization of Italian national unity."¹³ He then adds: "Gramsci has seen this extremely well, although he has blundered with everything else."¹⁴ Here Althusser recognizes an important debt, but liquidates the rest, which in my view leads critics astray. Actually, Althusser's debt to Gramsci is much larger, although it is certainly animated by this key point.

The 1970s course, as well as the 1962 course, has as its fundamental interpretative framework the question of the unitary national state. This framework allows Althusser, on the basis of Gramsci, to reject the horns of the dilemma between monarchy and republicanism for a much deeper and more complex democratic reading: the absolute monarchy that is allied to the people against the feudal elements of society. And yet Althusser fully accepts the definition of *The Prince* as a manifesto and a utopia in Gramsci's sense, i.e., not as a yearning for an ideal state, but as a project of political intervention. Moreover, the entire reading that Althusser proposes of the principalities, armies, and the political practice of the prince is nothing but the full development of what Gramsci had only sketched out concerning the analytic chapters and rhetorical conclusion of *The Prince*: the entire analysis is carried out from the perspective of the construction of the strategy of the new prince in the Italian conjuncture. Althusser also accepts Gramsci's key reflection on the army and on the primacy of politics over the military element, on the anticipation of Jacobinism in the creation of the mixture between city and country, just as he also extends the logic of Gramsci's argument regarding the political value of the infantry over the cavalry. He also accepts the definition of the political practice of the prince, the definition of

¹¹ Cf. Emmanuel Terray, "An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli", trans. A. Callari and D. Ruccio, in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH 1997, p. 258.

¹² Cf. Adam Holden and Stuart Elden, "It cannot be a Real Person, a Concrete Individual": Althusser and Foucault on Machiavelli's Political Technique", *Borderlands* 4 (2005), p. 2, who refer to Althusser's "neo-Gramscian" reading.

¹³ Louis Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste", *Lignes* 18 (1993), p. 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

religion as an all-pervasive ideological element of the time, as well as the two levels of force and consent on which the prince must act, and also the theory of violence directed against the feudal world.

But that's not all. If Gramsci's suggestion of the deep unity of *The Art of War* and *The Prince* is indeed taken up by Althusser, he also reads the unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* with the help of hints from Gramsci. Whereas Gramsci speaks of the two works as the moment of dictatorship (the individual) and hegemony (the universal), Althusser speaks of the absolute beginning and the "settlement of the laws and emergence from solitude," to which correspond the metaphors of foundation and taking root. In the 1977 text "Machiavelli's Solitude," Althusser will use the Gramscian term dictatorship, making the debt explicit even from a terminological point of view.¹⁵ There is thus no contradiction between a monarchic and republican Machiavelli, but rather unity: in the *Discourses* Machiavelli searches for the example of a state that lasts, a state founded by kings, but capable of becoming popular.

Is Althusser's reading thus a simple repetition of Gramsci? Such a claim would probably be unjust because Gramsci's reading, while being extremely powerful, is actually only hinted at: it would be more accurate to claim that Althusser grasps the profound internal logic of Gramsci's interpretation, developing it as far as possible. In a certain sense, it could be said that Althusser, in his course from the 1970s, wrote the book on Machiavelli that Gramsci could not have written, drawing out all of the analytic and synthetic consequences that, certainly in retrospect, appear to us as ineluctable, which does not mean that they were such prior to being drawn out.

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Having said that, some elements of the originality of Althusser's reading should also be outlined. First of all, we should emphasize the element of the encounter between *virtù* and *fortuna*, of the occasion, the conjuncture, the element that in the 1962 course will come to be identified as an "insoluble contradiction"¹⁶ of Machiavelli's thought. During the 1970s course and with even greater emphasis in the writings on aleatory materialism, precisely the impossibility of assigning

¹⁵ "[...] the first moment of the State [...] is [...] the monarchic, or dictatorial moment." Althusser, "La solitude de Machiavel", p. 316.

¹⁶ Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, p. 233.

a name and space to this beginning will constitute one of the points of force of Machiavelli's political thought and what Althusser calls his philosophy. From the viewpoint of political theory, this point marks Machiavelli's alterity to subsequent political philosophy, to the theory of the accomplished fact, to the state, whereas Machiavelli thinks the fact in its unfolding, and is capable of thinking the violence of the birth of the state and the radically aleatory character of its boundaries, what Althusser calls "primitive political accumulation"¹⁷ in "Machiavelli's Solitude." Now, this element of the aleatory has some consequences on the level of the conception of the Modern Prince, the party, which was clearly the question behind both Gramsci and Althusser's readings. If for Gramsci the Modern Prince is a historical given,¹⁸ which is necessary in order to think strategy, for Althusser it is subjected to the same contingency that characterizes the birth of the state and cannot renounce the figure of the "fox," which introduces the element of fear and cunning. In this context Machiavelli and the place from which *The Prince* is formulated returns, which has epistemological consequences: Gramsci claims that *The Prince* is "a self-reflection of the people,"¹⁹ that "Machiavelli himself becomes the people, is confused with the people, but not with a people "generically" understood, but with the people that Machiavelli has convinced with his earlier treatment, of which he becomes and feels the consciousness and expression, feels himself."²⁰ What Gramsci thinks through the categories of "myth" and "concrete fantasy,"²¹ the fusion of ideology and science on the one hand and the prince and people on the other, Althusser thinks through the category of the gap: the gap between science and ideology and between prince and people.²² The gap means that the theory must be inscribed in both the political and ideological conjuncture, but cannot become popular consciousness transparent to itself, and the prince must implement a popular politics, but cannot identify himself with the people, being a simple expression of them, but rather that the people will be produced as such by the political practice of the prince ("in the army common to them, the men of

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¹⁷ Althusser, "La solitude de Machiavel", p. 320. Cf. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. G. Elliott, Verso, London 1999, p. 125.

¹⁸ "This organism is already given from historical development and it is the political party." Q13, 1, 1558.

¹⁹ Q 13, §1, 1556.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Q 13, §1, 1555–1556.

²² Cf. Terray, "An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli", pp. 257–277.

the towns and countryside begin to become – learn to become – one and the same people.)”²³ It is here, in the definition of these “gaps,” that Althusser finds his Machiavelli, the Machiavelli of the materialism of the encounter and of the “fox,” which he will insist on in his writings in the 1980s.²⁴

But this extraordinary reading, I want to emphasize one last time with force, is not found simply because of work on Machiavelli’s text. Althusser’s Machiavelli is the Gramsci’s Machiavelli, and if one wants to put the correct light on what Althusser says, one must start from the work internal to this reading. In Quaderno 13, taking distance from the Sorelian myth, Gramsci writes:

The modern prince, the myth-prince cannot be a real person, a concrete individual, he can only be an organism; a complex element of society in which the concretization of a collective will recognized and partially affirmed in action has already begun. This organism is already given by historical development and is the political party, the first cell in which are summarized germs of collective will that tend to become universal and total²⁵.

I will propose a reading of Althusser’s writings on Machiavelli from the specific perspective of the way in which, through them, he re-elaborates the relationship with the party on a theoretical level. And not an abstract sense of the party, but precisely his own relationship with the PCF, which Althusser was a member of throughout the post-war period after joining in 1948.

The 1962 Course

Althusser’s 1962 lecture course is dedicated to a close analysis of *The Prince* and limited to this work. As I noted, the basic framework, although only referred to *en passant*, is Gramsci’s interpretation: the new prince must constitute the national state by giving a new form to an already existing matter. Now, according to Althusser, Machiavelli’s anti-utopianism consists in “*the insertion of the polit-*

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²³ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 87.

²⁴ I refer here to my essay, “La storia come ‘revoca permanente del fatto compiuto’”, in R. Caporali (ed.), *La varia natura, le molte cagioni. Studi su Machiavelli*, Il ponte vecchio, Cesena 2007, pp. 125–140.

²⁵ Q13, 1558.

*ical plan in the matter itself, in the existing political structures themselves.*²⁶ The problem is that the status quo requires the constitution of the new state, but at the same time “renders impossible or almost impossible to assign a point of application, its beginning.”²⁷ This is because the initial matter is in such disorder that it is impossible to fix the birthplace of the form in advance. In this sense, Althusser emphasizes the originality of Machiavelli’s concept of matter, which has nothing to do with Aristotelian or Hegelian matter: “matter is pure void of form, pure formless expectation of the form.”²⁸

This radical exteriority of form to matter justifies the analysis of the first eleven chapters. These are nothing more than the analysis of existing negative forms, the recognition of the “*radical contingency of the application of the New Form.*”²⁹ Althusser first analyzes the treatment of hereditary principalities, and then focuses on chapters III and IV where the question of mixed principalities is at stake. Here there is “crucial question for Machiavelli,” that of the “enlargement of the State by annexations.”³⁰ The annexation does not present problems in the case of states with the same customs and language. If instead language, customs and governments are different, “fortune and ability are necessary.”³¹ Beyond Machiavelli’s suggestions, what is the question at stake here? For Althusser, the constitution of the national state is at stake: for Machiavelli, Italy does not have the same customs and the same language everywhere. Naples, for example, is “*almost foreign to the rest of Italy,*” being “old state marked by the Norman conquest, which established a very powerful feudal order, feudalism in the French way.”³² Thus we do not have to deal with an “unreal or foreign imaginary variation to the horizon of real problems [...] but [rather with] one of the specific problems of this constitution.”³³ Althusser reads chapters V–XI similarly, but we can leave the detailed analyses aside to arrive at Althusser’s conclusion. Is Italian matter really empty and is its enumeration neutral? In reality the enumeration of matter provides a series of suggestions:

²⁶ Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, p. 207. All emphasis is Althusser’s unless otherwise noted.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³³ *Ibid.*

- 1) From some states there is nothing to expect: the hereditary principalities, the ecclesiastical ones and those established by sheer wickedness “which are outside [...] the political as such, because historical monsters.”³⁴
- 2) New principalities, made up of men who owe their political promotion to luck, virtue or a social force, are quite interesting: these show that “the agreement [*l'accord*] between the Prince and the people constitutes the true ‘foundation’ of his power and his durability.”³⁵
- 3) Finally, the absence of the republics, because Machiavelli does not believe possible the creation of the national state starting from the republics for the reason that they “exist in Italy only in a corrupted form.”³⁶

The enumeration thus provides a series of indications, an enumeration dominated by the chapter on mixed principalities which “draws the near future of the new state: the conquest and annexation of other provinces, to constitute the national state.”³⁷

The analysis of chapters XII–XIV on the army presents us with a similar enumeration, whose purpose is precisely to provide indications. The prince must have his own army and a new military organization. Althusser summarizes: “the good army: *national troops*”³⁸ and adds immediately:

Machiavelli’s project. To create urban and peasant militias: to enlist peasants in the militias as well as the citizens of the cities. That is to say, to make of the army something that resembles to the future project of Jacobins: the amalgam, the crucible [*creuset*] of national unity (see Gramsci).³⁹

And again:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Primacy of the infantry. A kind of military democracy. [...] All technical problems are for him subordinated to the force constituted by the union [*réunion*] of the citizens in the national army: example *the artillery*.⁴⁰

What is the general meaning of these analyzes?

- 1) Military force is a necessary tool for the project of the national state.
- 2) But this force must be itself national and popular. Machiavelli in the tradition that leads to Clausewitz and Lenin is the first “theorist aware of the political nature of war and the need to give to the forms and means of violence a political content.”⁴¹

Althusser goes on to analyze chapters XV–XXIII on the methods of government that contain:

- 1) A theory of violence
- 2) A theory of appearance
- 3) A theory of relations with the people

According to Althusser, the theory of violence states one “internal law to violence that commands or prohibits it use.”⁴² The use of violence is justified only in the case of a just end: “the foundation or the preservation of a state.”⁴³ The end, that is, justifies the means only if it is a good end: *«in the general element of violence, which is the reality of Italian matter, we can only come out of violence by means of violence, provided that it is constructive, restorative and positive, resolute.*”⁴⁴

In commenting on the figure of the centaur, Althusser emphasizes how politics is “haunted by the law and yet most often rejected towards force.”⁴⁵ But force alone is not enough; the lion alone is vain, and this is the meaning of the fox: “to

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 223

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

be fox: to know how to dominate the use of the force with intelligence, to adapt it to its goal.”⁴⁶

As for the theory of appearance, Althusser emphasizes that the fox also has another meaning: the fact that the action of the prince takes place in the context of the opinion of men, an opinion dominated by moral and religious qualities. Acting politically means acting on two levels: “the real means and ends, but also the imaginary and ethico-religious ideological element in which the people move.”⁴⁷

According to Althusser there is a strong proximity between Machiavelli and Spinoza on this point, although in Machiavelli it functions in a practical state, in the identification of an organic link between “ideology and the essence of politics” and at the same time in the recognition of the unreformability of this “spontaneous ideological consciousness.”⁴⁸

As for the theory of the prince-people relation, Althusser’s analysis is only sketched:

Fear without hate or contempt [...] good use of imagination and passions.⁴⁹

Finally, Althusser arrives at the analysis of chapters XXIV–XXVI in order to ask if a theory of action has been sketched there. In the theory of *virtù* and *fortuna*, Althusser identifies a failure in Machiavelli’s thought: the impossibility of thinking the beginning of a national state, the beginning of an absolute monarchy:

All of his theory is summed up in the thought of this event, and all of his theory, all of his own concepts (*fortuna/virtù*, return to principles, enumeration of possibilities, etc.) are only the impotent thought of this event. That is why his theory, at the level of its concepts, is contradictory at this point, and finally comes undone at the very moment where it is made. That is why it exhausts itself in the definition of the New Prince and the New Principality, that is to say, in the obsession of the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

absolutely New, without being able to think the event form of this Novelty. That is why it exhausts itself conceptually in the “tourniquet” of concepts through which it tries to grasp the conditions of this pure event: *virtù* and *fortuna*.⁵⁰

Certainly, Machiavelli captures this irreducible fact of modern history and is the only witness who has tried to think of this as a problem. This explains the enigmatic nature of Machiavelli’s concepts: they are foreign to modern conceptuality, to natural law theories, precisely because the problem with which Machiavelli tries to think “has been recovered by all the later theories of the accomplished fact, that is to say of the solution.”⁵¹

The failure that Althusser identifies in Machiavelli at the height of the 1962 course concerns the concept of *virtù* necessary to the foundation of a national state: it, which must be at the origin of every necessity, is subdued “in the man who must be the bearer, to a radical contingency”⁵²:

The radical voluntarism of *virtù* is itself subject to the irrational necessity of *fortuna*.⁵³

Now, if we transpose the question of the *virtù* of the founding Prince to the question of the *virtù* of the Gramsci’s Modern Prince, what seems to be unacceptable in Machiavelli for Althusser is subjecting the *virtù* of the party to radical contingency, to the irrational necessity of *fortuna*. This in 1962.

Machiavelli and Us

We come now to the course that will be published posthumously with the title of *Machiavelli and Us*. Althusser’s reading in this text is not limited to *The Prince*, but rather is an interpretation of the unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. And in this course, his reading of Gramsci becomes the explicit starting point and occupies the entire first chapter. Here we find Althusser’s reflections on the “gripping, but elusive [*saissant mais insaisissable*]”⁵⁴ character of Machiavelli,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–247.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁵⁴ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 6.

which pertains to the political and philosophical fields at the same time. On the philosophical level, it is given by the fact that Machiavelli is a theorist of the beginning, “of the beginning that is 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.”⁵⁵

However, Althusser adds, before the thing begins, there was something else, but “nothing of it.”⁵⁶ The beginning is symbolized by the formula of the effectual truth [*verità effettuale*] that pushes the earlier discourses into the sphere of the imaginary. In this sense, Machiavelli’s silence on the political theories of Aristotle, Cicero, and Christianity has, according to Althusser, the meaning of a declared rupture: “It was enough for Machiavelli to speak differently to denounce the imaginary character of the reigning ideology in political matters.”⁵⁷

But it is in the political field that this character provides the greatest surprise. In order to illustrate it with all its force, Althusser returns to Gramsci. Machiavelli is not simply the thinker who introduced the question of the state, as Hegel thought:

The State that Machiavelli expects from *The Prince* [...] is not the state in general (corresponding ‘to its concept’) but a historically determinate type of State, required by the conditions and demands of nascent capitalism: a *national* State.⁵⁸

Thus, Machiavelli is the thinker who poses the political problem of the constitution of the national state. This is neither constituted spontaneously nor by decree, but is rather the stakes of a class struggle, whose outcomes are determined by a series of pre-existing economic, geographical, historical, linguistic, and cultural factors, but also by international relations of force.

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Gramsci claims that *The Prince* is a revolutionary-utopian text because we are dealing with “a theoretical text [...] affected in its modality and dispositive by political practice.”⁵⁹ In this sense, Althusser can say that Machiavelli is the first

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10. English translation modified.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

theorist of the conjuncture, insofar as he does not generally think about the question of national unity, but starts from the existing determinations and circumstances, not in order to simply enumerate them, but rather to transform them within the project of national unity and these circumstances. As Gramsci claimed, the effectual reality is not a static reality, but the effect of relations of force that change the meaning of a project. The problem then becomes which political practice is adequate to group together the positive forces of the Italian conjuncture.

According to Althusser, this produces a “vacillation” of the status of the theoretical propositions which is undermined by political practice. The theoretical space in fact has no subject, while the space of political practice has no meaning except for its subject: the new prince. The theoretical analysis of the conjuncture thus has meaning if it allows an identification of an “empty space” in which the action of the ‘subject’ [*sujet*] (a term that, due to its ambiguity, Althusser proposes to replace with agent, and which Gramsci had designated with the term ‘will’) to be inserted. Althusser adds:

I say empty, to mark the vacillation of theory at this point: because it is necessary for this place to be filled – in other words, for the individual or party to have the capacity to become sufficiently strong to count among the forces, and strong enough again to rally the allied forces, to become the principal force and overcome the others.⁶⁰

However, there is not only one empty space, but two, as Gramsci’s definition of *The Prince* as a manifesto indicates: the second empty space is the one through which the text stages this political practice. The text, in order to be politically effective, must be inscribed “*somewhere in the space of this political practice.*”⁶¹ The manifesto must declare itself to be a partisan and gain partisans. In other words, Machiavelli treats his text as a means, transferring political practice into the element of ideology. In order to do this, he constructs a topological space and fixes the viewpoint of his text: the people. In this sense, we can claim that Machiavelli is neither a theorist of tyranny, nor of the state in general, but rather of the popular state. However, if the viewpoint is that of the people, the text is

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

addressed to the prince. This implies the rejection of the democratic reading that identifies the viewpoint of the text with the addressee: the reflection of the people on itself, to which Gramsci refers, does not transform the consciousness of the people into a political force, but prepares for the advent of the prince.

Turning to an analysis of the *Discourses on Livy* in chapter two, Althusser takes some distance from a republican reading of this work. Machiavelli's main interest in the *Discourses* is Rome, but not insofar as it is a model of a republic: "Rome is the objective experience of the foundation of a state that endured."⁶² What interests him about Rome is its foundation, a republic founded by a king:

Machiavelli's utopianism does not consist in resorting to Rome as the prop for a moral ideology that is required in the present. It consists in recourse to Rome as guarantee or rehearsal for a necessary task, whose concrete conditions of possibility are, however, impossible to define.⁶³

It is thus not an ideological or political utopia, but a theoretical one, insofar as it attempts to think the conditions of possibility of an "impossible task,"⁶⁴ "to think the unthinkable,"⁶⁵ and in this effort, Machiavelli found himself "engaged in forms of thought almost without precedent [*engagé dans des formes de pensée à peu près sans précédent*]."⁶⁶

In the third chapter, "The Theory of the 'New Prince,'" Althusser shows the profound unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, a unity that resides in the project of the constitution of a national state: Rome outlines à la *cantonade* the theory of foundation and duration of a new state. In particular, the example of the history of Rome is instructive as regards the relation between laws and conflict:

There is no doubt that in his theory of the class struggle as the origin of the laws that limit it, Machiavelli adopts the viewpoint of the people.⁶⁷

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

From this, Althusser draws the following thesis: in the conflict between the people and nobles, the king takes the side of the people “by decreeing laws.”⁶⁸ This does not mean, however, that it is necessary to be alone in order to found. Gramsci had spoken of the unity of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* by thinking them under the categories of dictatorship and hegemony. Althusser thinks them through the categories of absolute beginning and duration, that is, the moment of the “settlement of laws” and the “emergence from solitude,” to which the metaphors of foundation and taking root correspond: “so long as their distinctiveness is borne in mind, these two moments can help us to think the difference between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* – in other words, their non-difference, their profound unity.”⁶⁹ Machiavelli is thus neither a monarchist nor a republican. Rather, there is nothing but one position: the definition of the theoretical space of the object of *The Prince*.

Turning to *The Prince*, Althusser more or less repeats the analysis of his 1962 course,⁷⁰ this time citing Gramsci explicitly:

Machiavelli can set up his political problem only on condition of making a clean sweep of existing feudal forms as incompatible with the objective of Italian unity.⁷¹

In other words, the enumeration of the principalities Machiavelli proposes in the first eleven chapters of *The Prince* is not neutral, but rather excludes several types of principalities as not being functional for the project: tyrannies, hereditary principalities, ecclesiastical principalities. Republics are not included in Machiavelli’s list because they are urban forms of feudalism. All of these are excluded as the base of the project, but not “from the political field in which this unity must be accomplished” given that

the body of the nation is not fixed in advance [...] it is in part aleatory, the stake of a struggle whose borders are not assigned [*arrêtées*], and [...] because it is ulti-

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁰ Cf. chapter 1 (“Le point de départ: la revue des principautés”) in Althusser, *Machiavel* (1962), pp. 207–216.

⁷¹ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 70.

mately necessary to envisage the annexation of territories with different languages and customs in order to embody the nation.⁷²

The new principality is identified as the basis of the project and is bound to a double adventure: that of a man “passing from private citizen to ruler” and that of a region “passing from ‘geographical expression’ to national state.”⁷³ A double adventure linked to the encounter or non-encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*. This is the crucial point of the theory, in which, according to Althusser, politics presents itself in the form of a determinate absence, because Machiavelli “leaves the names of the protagonists in this encounter completely blank [*laisse complètement en blanc*]; he provides them with no identity.”⁷⁴

Therefore, the geographical space and individual are by definition unknown, and national unity cannot be accomplished by starting from the existing principalities. To Althusser, however, this seems to be a positive silence: the encounter will take place, but outside of the existing principalities and States. The example of Cesare Borgia shows precisely that this “starting from nothing” is attainable. There is in it a “discrepancy [*décalage*] between the definite and indefinite, the necessary and the unforeseeable. This discrepancy, thought and unresolved by thought, is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself.”⁷⁵

We can now examine chapter four, “The Political Practice of the New Prince,” which is what Machiavelli deals with in chapters XI–XXIII. In this chapter, Althusser partially reprises and partially develops the 1962 course.⁷⁶ According to Althusser, at this height Machiavelli leaves aside the problem of pure beginning as “unassignable” and presupposes that things have already begun: the process of becoming prince and becoming state has already begun. Althusser’s argument is focused on two elements: the army and ideology. As for the army, Althusser claims that Machiavelli’s theses are impressive in their consistency, incisiveness, and political acuteness. Like Gramsci, he maintains that these the-

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 72–73.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷⁶ Cf. chapter 2 (“L’armée et la Politique”) in Althusser, *Machiavel (1962)*, pp. 217–220.

ses anticipate the Jacobins, as well as Clausewitz and Mao.⁷⁷ Machiavelli maintains first that the army is the state apparatus par excellence, that is, he affirms the primacy of force over ideology and laws. Second, the army must be thought *sub specie politica*, i.e., Machiavelli maintains the primacy of politics over military technique. Third, the aforementioned primacy of force must be thought under the aegis of the primacy of politics which is “the prince’s popular and national politics.”⁷⁸ And finally, the prince must rely on his own army.

Here Gramsci is again the fundamental point of reference for Althusser’s interpretation. Althusser broadly repeats his analysis from the 1962 course of the chapters on different types of troops as well as Gramsci’s conclusions on the popular army, founded 1) on recruitment from the popular strata of town and country (“the blending of town and country”⁷⁹) and 2) on reorganization based on the primacy of the infantry over the cavalry. These are profoundly revolutionary ideas: on the one hand, the armed campaign has a political significance against the feudal lords, and on the other, the primacy of infantry over cavalry reverses the social hierarchies of the time. Althusser refers extensively to Gramsci in order to conclude that “the men of the towns and countryside begin to become – learn to become – one and the same people.”⁸⁰ Thus, the army is necessary for the construction of the national state, but not as a simple means for an exterior end. Recruitment makes the goal internal to the medium: “The army,” Althusser writes, “can serve as a means to a political end only if it is already the realized form of the relevant end.”⁸¹ In other words, the army is not only a force available to the prince to reach national unity; it also creates consensus by acting on the minds of the soldiers: “the military apparatus simultaneously exercises an ideological function.”⁸²

Turning to the analysis of the side of consensus understood in a Gramscian sense, that is, as ideology, Althusser divides the field of Machiavelli’s treatment into religion and the image of the prince. The former, as Gramsci emphasized,

⁷⁷ Here it is interesting to compare the 1962 course, where instead of the name Mao, we find the name Lenin (p. 219).

⁷⁸ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 84.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁸² *Ibid.*

is a dominant ideology of the masses (“without the support of ideology, no popular consent to the state”⁸³), which the latter, as a very particular ideological form, i.e., the representation of the prince, stands upon. On this point Althusser distances himself from Gramsci by emphasizing, in the figure of the centaur, the splitting of the beast into force and cunning. The latter

possesses no objective existence: it does not exist. If cunning is a way of governing, given that it has no existence, it can be employed only when it is based on laws or force [*en prenant appui sur les lois ou sur la force*]. Cunning, then, is not a third form of government [*une troisième forme de gouvernement*]; it is government to the second degree, a manner of governing the other two forms of government [*elle est un gouvernement au second degré, une manière de gouverner les deux autres formes de gouvernement*]: force and laws.⁸⁴

However, this ideological politics must be subjected to the primacy of politics: that is, the prince must compose and control his image politically not by conforming himself to the spontaneous ideology in a demagogic way, but by inserting himself into spontaneous ideology with his own political project. In this sense, the thematization of fear without hate has a clear class meaning according to Althusser, because hate is the hatred of the people against the nobles:

The theory of ‘fear without hatred’ is the theory of the political precondition for ‘popular goodwill’ towards the Prince. It is also, factually, an acknowledgement of the popular state’s double function: the unity of coercion and popular consent that so struck Gramsci in Machiavelli.⁸⁵

Machiavelli is therefore not a utopian thinker. Rather, in the way in which he thinks the conditions of existence and class of absolute monarchy, he thinks the conjunctural case and goes directly to the truth of the thing with concepts that make him “the greatest materialist philosopher in history.”⁸⁶

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⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

We thus arrive at a crucial point. What in the 1962 course was considered a veritable setback of Machiavellian thought, a concept of *fortuna* that dominates that of *virtù*, becomes in the analysis of *Machiavelli and Us* his true point of force: the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna* cannot be theoretically anticipated, or rather, to use the words of Althusser itself, politics presents itself in theory in the form of a determinate absence: “he leaves the names of the protagonists in this encounter completely blank; he provides them with no identity.”⁸⁷ This absence is for Althusser the force of Machiavellian theory.

Now, *Machiavelli and Us*, unlike the course of 1962, is not a draft, but a text ready for printing. Althusser leaves it in his drawer, showing it only to some of his collaborators. Why? My hypothesis is that this reading of Machiavelli, of the new prince whose name cannot be anticipated by the theory, would feed back into the question of the Modern Prince, whose identity could not be established by decree or by genealogical rights, but could only be given in the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*. Starting from nothing means that there is no Subject, the PCF (legitimized by the PCUS), prior to the relationship with the masses, but that is precisely in the encounter (or non-encounter) between party and masses that opens the space of the *novum*.

“La solitude de Machiavel” and Que faire?

“Machiavelli’s Solitude” is a text written in May 1977 for a conference held on June 11th of the same year at the Fondation National de Sciences Politiques in Paris. Here Althusser repeats the interpretative lines in the earlier treatments, on which therefore we will not insist. It is enough to emphasize the parallel that Althusser proposes between the primitive accumulation reconstructed by Marx against the ideologies of capital and the primitive political accumulation mentioned by Machiavelli against the “Edifying discourse held by philosophers of natural law on the history of the state”:

Instead of saying that the state is born from right and nature, he tells us how a state should be born if it wants to last, and be strong enough to become the state of a nation. He does not speak the language of the law, he speaks the language of the armed force indispensable to constitute any state, he speaks the language of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

the cruelty necessary to the beginnings of the state, he speaks the language of a politics without religion which must at all costs use religion, of a politics which must be moral but if necessary not be moral, of a politics that must reject hatred but inspire fear, he speaks the language of the struggle between classes and as for right, laws and morals, he puts them in their place, subordinate. When we read him, as well informed as we are of the violence of history, something in him catches us: a man who, long before all the ideologues have recovered the reality with their stories, is able not to live, not to endure, but to think the violence of the birth of the state.⁸⁸

Machiavelli's thought illuminates in a crude way the birth of bourgeois societies, but even more it sheds light on the "*aleatory character of the formation of national states*":

Because for us they are written on the map, as forever fixed in a destiny that would always have preceded them. For him, on the contrary, they are largely random, the borders are not fixed, it takes conquests but how far? At the limits of languages, beyond? At the limits of the force? We forgot all that. When we read it, we are seized by it as by our forgetfulness. By this strange familiarity, as Freud says, of a repressed.⁸⁹

The parallel that Althusser establishes between the primitive accumulation described in chapter 24 of *Capital* and the primitive political accumulation, the insistence on the element of force and cruelty necessary for the birth of the state, have a precise political meaning: they clearly take a position against the PCF's abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. If the Althusser of *Machiavelli and Us* desacralizes the party through the theory of the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*, the Althusser of the 1977 conference takes a position within the party, against the Eurocommunist transformation that was taking place. It is not a case that, differently from the previous texts, he speaks of the Prince as "moment of the dictatorship." In this sense, to reinforce my hypothesis, there is also a passage from the 1978 text *Que faire?* in which Althusser takes Gramsci back up at an overall level, because he seems to consider him the inspiring phi-

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⁸⁸ Althusser, "La solitude de Machiavel", p. 320.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

osopher, via Poulantzas and Buci-Glucksmann, of Eurocommunism. Althusser introduces Machiavelli into the text starting from Gramsci's admiration for him:

What did Machiavelli do? He was the first to speak of the class struggle and of the domination of classes by active bourgeois over the idle and usurious nobility. He has shown that the class domination of the productive bourgeoisie can be assured only by a definite political force, that of the absolute monarchy of 'one', which relies not on the nobility but on the bourgeoisie to found a national state, and to govern the people by virtue and cunning, and by this capacity to subordinate (moral) virtue to cunning and sham (and to the worst means of lust and cruelty), which leads to him the unique, untranslatable name of '*virtù*'.⁹⁰

Everything is already in Gramsci, the beast-force and the human-consensus. But in Machiavelli there is more than in Gramsci why "*la bête chez lui se dédouble*"⁹¹ and *virtù* is the ability of the fox to use force or consent, according to the occasion (the conjuncture). Machiavelli goes further than Gramsci, showing that ideology is constitutive of all state power.

Whether in the form of religion, necessary to create the best consensus, that in any case that is best suited to hold a united army, but also a people, because it produces the best and safest, because the most constant of the forms of consensus of the masses of the people, in the form of the military amalgam, which mobilizes all the men of the people in the army, and giving to the infantry (of the simple men, of the peasants) the step on the cavalry (the traditional body of the nobles, owning horses), is not only a military principle, but a means of producing ideological transformation effects among citizen-soldiers, a real political school that teaches them in practice the unity of the discipline granted, and treating the nobles on horseback as they deserve: as auxiliaries and not the leaders of the real soldiers, the producing citizens.⁹²

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And he adds:

⁹⁰ Althusser, "Que faire?" (ALT2. A 26-05-06),

⁹¹ *Ibid.*.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

We see how much Gramsci, who exalted Machiavelli, is poor compared to his master. For Gramsci never supported, like Machiavelli, the primacy of the moment of force (the army) over hegemony in the state. Highly present in Machiavelli, force appears in Gramsci only to prepare his pure and simple disappearance in the concept of state as hegemony. And when he invoked it, Gramsci never considered force except as brutal and bare force (the Machiavellian figure of the lion, which is only muscles and has nothing in the skull). Gramsci never suspected that the force could be productive, fruitful, and fit to enter a strategy where it can produce effects of hegemony (the political education of the citizens by the amalgam of the army). Finally, Gramsci never suspected that the beast may be anything other than force (the lion) but the trick (the fox), that singular beast infinitely more intelligent than man (which represents the recognition of moral virtues and the good), since all his reason consists in the power to feign. And Gramsci never understood that pretence was consubstantial with the state, or rather with the Prince's political strategy, and that it had above all the effect of producing this representation, this image of the Prince for the use of the people, without which there is no state power, since to exist this power must be recognized by the people who can recognize the state power only by recognizing themselves in him: precisely in the ideological image of the Prince as head of state rendered indisputable by it. In this way, Machiavelli responded to Gramsci's total silence on the question: but what can make the hegemonic apparatus work? He responded to Gramsci's total silence about the ideology considered in his major function, his political function.⁹³

On this point Althusser does not introduce new elements compared to the 1962 course and *Machiavelli and Us*. What is new is the anti-Gramscian accent of a reading that in reality owes a great deal to Gramsci, an emphasis which however can be explained in the context of a controversy with Gramsci as inspiration for Eurocommunism.

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From The Underground Current to Machiavel philosophe

Now we arrive at the group of writings from the 1980s dedicated to Machiavelli. In the *Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter*, written in 1982, Althusser seems to provide the 'philosophy' of Machiavelli promised in *Machiavelli and Us*. As is well-known, the fundamental concepts of this period

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

are those of encounter and void and from this perspective (an Epicurean one), Althusser reads Machiavelli.

Encounter between a man and a region, encounter between fortune and virtue, from which, from a nameless man in a corner of Italy without a name, the great project of national unity can arise. Nothing new compared to *Machiavelli and Us*.

The political *void*: it is in the political void that the encounter must produce itself by starting from what must take hold for national unity. But this political void is above all a philosophical void:

There is no Cause that precedes its effects, no Principle of morality or theology (as in all the Aristotelian political tradition: the good and the bad regimes, the decadence of the good ones in the bad ones), one does not reason there in the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in the contingency of the fact to be accomplished⁹⁴.

Machiavelli's philosophy is a philosophy of the void:

[A philosophy that] begins by evacuating any philosophical problem, therefore by refusing to give itself any 'object' whatsoever [...] to begin from nothing, and from this infinitesimal and aleatory variation of the nothing that is the deviation of the fall.⁹⁵

And again:

Machiavelli who emptied all the philosophical concepts of Plato and Aristotle to think of the possibility of making of Italy a national state.⁹⁶

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It is a materialism of the encounter thought through politics, a materialism of the encounter that does not presuppose anything pre-established: it is a philosophy in which the alternative between the encounter and the non-encounter reigns. But more, this philosophy goes so far as to affirm the provisional nature of each encounter:

⁹⁴ Althusser, *Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre*, p. 546.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 567.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

[N]othing ever guarantees that the reality of the accomplished fact is the guarantee of its durability.⁹⁷

Machiavelli's philosophy, which Althusser reads through the Epicurean concepts of atoms, void and clinamen, is a philosophy *du fait à accomplir*:

History is only the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another indecipherable fact to be accomplished without knowing in advance or ever, where or how the event of its revocation will occur.⁹⁸

Now, through this materialism of the encounter, the real reason for the profound fascination exercised by Machiavelli, Althusser redefines the question of the party. In 1982 Althusser draws all the implications already implicit in *Machiavelli and Us*: there is neither a legitimated political subject nor a place designated *ex ante*, this is the reason for the insistence on the aleatory, on the fact that both the name of the federator and the region are left "blank" by Machiavelli. In other words, regeneration is not to be expected from the PCF: the model is Cesare Borgia, "a man of nothing, starting from nothing, and starting from an unassignable place [*un homme de rien, parti de rien, et partant d'un lieu inassignable*]."⁹⁹

Althusser returns to Machiavelli in two short texts of 1985 which were initially conceived as chapters of the autobiography and then deleted and published posthumously with the title of *The Only Materialist Tradition*. There is also a strong insistence on the categories of void, encounter, and taking hold in these texts. Again, the encounter between *virtù* and *fortuna*, the good occasion (it seems to me that there is an insistence on the concept of occasion that is not present in the previous writings), with an even stronger insistence on the absence of the presuppositions of political action:

The most astonishing thing about Machiavelli, in his theory of the New Prince having to found a new Principality, is that this new man is a man of nothing, without a past, without title or office, an anonymous man, alone and naked. [...] Not only is he like a naked man, but he finds himself intervening in a place that is

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

itself anonymous and stripped of any significant social and political determination, which could hinder its action.¹⁰⁰

In this sense, it is extremely interesting that Althusser identifies the Machiavellian concept of *fortuna*, which in the course of 1962 constituted the failure of Machiavelli's thought, as the very heart of his philosophy:

[T]he unusual greatness of Machiavelli's thought (that it is largely implicit does not matter) to have at the very least conceived the essence of "fortune", as implausible as it may seem, as the nothingness and the void, that is to say the nothing of cause, of essence and origin.¹⁰¹

What relationship does this change of position have with the question of the party? Althusser explicitly declares that the Gramscian theory of the communist party as the new Prince was meaningful if linked with the Third International, "world party with a single center of decision and direction, its office to organize national parties and subject them to the same strategy and political tactics."¹⁰² With the dissolution of the Third International, however, the communist movement "no longer has a center of strategy and common tactics."¹⁰³ Althusser's surprising conclusion is then that "*Machiavelli does not serve us for anything*."¹⁰⁴ Surprising precisely because his philosophy of the encounter designates a political action that does not presuppose a center that directs *ex ante*, but the ability to federate the forces in the field without the presupposition of either a transcendent subject or a material structure of the world that contain the path for the emergence of a subject.

Finally, in a draft from 1986, *Machiavel philosophe*, in which he cursorily repeats a whole series of elements of his previous interpretation, Althusser summarizes Machiavelli's philosophy through four theses:

Thesis 1: die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist ("the world is all that is the case" Wittgenstein).

¹⁰⁰ Althusser, "L'unique tradition matérialiste", pp. 91–92.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Corollary 1: Everything is encounter in the world.

Thesis 2: Primacy of movement over form or structure. Primacy of movement over matter/primacy of energy over mass / primacy of energy principle over inertia principle

Thesis 3: there can be sketched, missed, fugitive encounters, +++ or more or less durable. In this ++++ the encounters give rise to stable or hereditary (in biology) structure

Thesis 4: there are no laws of these structures, except that they present structural invariants¹⁰⁵.

And then in the pages 4-5 he adds:

Note that Thesis 3 has political implications. Primacy of mass movement over any political organization. [Notez que la thèse 3 a des implications politique. Primat du mouvement de masse sur toute organisation politique.]¹⁰⁶

Some interpretative elements remain, but the real novelty consists in the thesis that affirms the primacy of the movement of the masses over the prince, a sort of spontaneity that makes the void not in the absence of presuppositions of political action, but alluding to a sort of power that tends towards actuation, the void becomes the correlative concept not of the encounter, but of the world, of a fullness that must be grasped. This text should be read together with Althusser's *June Theses*¹⁰⁷ and is full with a strong eschatological charge.

Conclusion

It would be completely misleading to try to read every page Althusser dedicated to Machiavelli as a conscious taking of position within the party. It seems to me rather that there is an attempt to rethink through Machiavelli on the one hand the question of the party in relation to the Marxist theory of history and on the other to re-define his own position as a Marxist intellectual within the French communist party. In this sense I think it is relevant that in 1962 Althusser considered the Machiavellian theory of *fortuna* to be aporetic, while in 1972–76 it was precisely this element that became the heart of his interpretation of Machiavellian

¹⁰⁵ ALT2.A29-06.07, p. 3

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

¹⁰⁷ ALT2.A29-06.02.

political theory, and in 1982 the fundamental concept that renders Machiavelli a pillar of the subterranean current of the materialism of encounter. How can this element not be read as a reworking of both the party-history relationship and the party-intellectual relationship? And moreover, how can we not read in this sense also the affirmation of the 1986 text on the primacy of the masses over all political organization? Of course, we must avoid the risk to consider this position as the necessary outcome of his path.

Translated by Dave Mesing

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