

FUTURE UNKNOWN

Machiavelli for the Twenty-First Century

FOR A HUNDRED YEARS after 1848, defeats for the Left typically came in two, tightly intermeshed, forms. Crushing blows—1849, 1871, 1919, 1926, 1939—alternating with unexpected bouts of prosperity, could contain, for a time, the aspirations of those demanding more than the owners of society and their allies were prepared to concede. In the West, the great rebellions of the late sixties broke with this pattern. The unprecedented affluence of the first postwar decades had shaped a generational milieu resistant to an older, middle-class work and leisure ethic, and receptive to insurgencies of the downtrodden. The subsequent sharp upswing in working-class militancy in the core, and setbacks for American imperialism on the periphery, briefly made it seem to some as if distant pre-revolutionary situations were looming in the homelands of capitalism.

In attenuated local forms, various legacies of these overlapping moments have survived the sweeping rounds of capitalist restructuring that followed the world economic downturn of the mid-seventies. Despite this impressive feat of adaptation, such pockets of opposition have had difficulty coming to terms with the formidable staying power of a conservative/neoliberal ascendancy that is now in its third decade. In a parallel perhaps to the legendary failure of the interwar Left to comprehend the advances of fascism, opponents of this passive revolution have been unable to account for its great successes, as so far it seems to possess the historically unique ability to invent the standards by which it is judged. What accounts for the ease of its victories, often scored with sparing doses of coercion—‘democratically’—and yet in a context of declining fortunes for large majorities? The enervation of collective

resistance under these conditions seems to signal the advent of an order of things in which praxis itself has become an enigma.

Times of open conflict between proponents of different social orders are, of course, historically exceptional. The keenest observers of 19th-century politics—Tocqueville, Heine, Donoso, Marx, Burkhardt, Nietzsche among them—underscored the novelty of a society in the throes of a chronic, publicly staged legitimation crisis. In 1929, Carl Schmitt captured the culmination of this historical experience in an epigram: ‘We, in central Europe, live *sous l’oeil des Russes*.’¹ While organized counter-offensives played a significant role in the eventual neutralization of this threat to the West, during the last decades of the 20th century these specifically political thrusts were overtaken and subsumed by a broader structural transformation that has bypassed classical forms of both hegemony and resistance.

It is difficult to gauge the possibilities of effective intellectual intervention in such an opaque historical situation. The crux of the exchange between Stefan Collini and Francis Mulhern in these pages has been whether critical discourse needs to be anchored in deep political commitments in order to orient its targets, scope and polemical intensities. The burden of Mulhern’s case is that it is only in a political mode that society can be put into question, through sovereign affirmations and negations of its fundamental premises. One does not have to endorse Collini’s notion of politics as a potentially open and endless conversation to recognize that both views seem to presume the existence of a largely superseded public sphere, where society once revealed its sensitivity to the pin-pricks and salvos of critique. It could be that this contemporary closure of the political is merely a conjunctural, and thus reversible, effect of a quarter-century of sweeping victories for capital. Alternatively, we may be in the midst of a deeper transformation that has scrambled the very phenomenon of agency, relegating classical partisanship to the status of more or less eccentric, ideological preferences. Perhaps in a more ominous sense than he intended, this development confirms Collini’s position.

In the waiting chamber of the present, to what texts should we turn in determining a critical stance adequate to our situation? Thought experiments with previously inconceivable constitutions were the hallmark

¹ Carl Schmitt, ‘Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen’ (1929), in *Positionen und Begriffe im Kampf mit Weimar-Genf-Versailles, 1923–1939*, Berlin 1988, p. 120.

of classical political philosophy; it may be useful to revisit this genre, whose peaks had cast a shadow over every institution of human society in the long intervals before their actual negation seemed possible. From the Republic to *Emile*, this art of estrangement had the effect of making the most drastic transformations conceivable, if only in theory. Generally, however, even the most antinomian forms of this tradition have had little determinate relationship to political practice. The writings of Machiavelli form an exceptional case within this history, for instead of a critical, essentially idealistic, discourse on the absence of legitimacy, they offer a novel method for exploring the sheer potentiality of praxis: thinking through the inception, full scope and limits of the constituent power to construct new orders.

In a posthumously published manuscript, Louis Althusser sought to convey the philosophical significance of Machiavelli's fragmentary thoughts on the traumatic origins of new states.² The point was not to offer a new interpretation of Machiavelli but rather, he reasoned, to recognize the impossibility of a definitive solution, as the creative statute of a new mode of political thought. The ellipses and antinomies of these texts were the nodal points of a buoyant ontology, enabling readers to imagine and to think the onset of action through a new literary form: the parable of innovation. I would like to propose that a more concrete thesis can be developed from this speculative point of departure, one that consists of two parts: Machiavelli's innovation was, firstly, to raise the distinctively modern problem of the actuality of the most radical projects of transformation; and secondly, to provide an attentive reader with a method of reflecting upon and generating effective practical stances with regard to continuing, renewing or abandoning such projects. This thesis can be tested by examining the decisive episodes in the centuries-long reception of Machiavelli's thought, and posing for our own times the question that earlier commentators considered to be the defining problem of the modern historical situation: what in the human condition can be changed through political praxis?

I

An initial problem is whether classical political theory or philosophy can retain any relevance today, within the labyrinth of mediatic society.

² Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, London 2000, p. 7.

The charge that such works belong to an antiquarian genre cannot be dismissed out of hand. One influential reason offered for studying these canonical texts is that they provide an opportunity to reflect on alternative political orders, based upon different conceptions of human nature. If this were true, books of this kind should perhaps then be regarded as memorabilia for our post-political situation. While not many intellectuals like to assent to the finality of this verdict, most public discourse more or less enthusiastically accepts the absence of any alternatives to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, with the main outstanding problem being the parameters of cultural tolerance. There are, of course, some volatile elements in this formula: a broad upswing of religious fundamentalism in the us; anti-immigrant backlashes in Europe. Elsewhere, numerous combinations of religion and ethnicity offer challenges but present no compelling alternatives to the governing norm.

This is the setting for the so-called crisis of ‘the political’—a term whose very abstraction seems to signal an anxiety about the obsolescence of state-centred conceptions of politics and a related set of civic virtues. The study of classical political theory is often justified now in terms of an equally indeterminate call for a ‘return of the political’. This takes the form of a number of conservative, liberal and radical variants on the multifarious tradition of ‘civic republicanism’, whose basic idea is that the virtues of active citizenship are needed to counteract the atomistic consequences of a modernity powered by the free play of interests and identities in civil society. Even those who are critical in some way of this mainstream democratese—admirers of Leo Strauss or, alternatively, Antonio Negri—acknowledge Machiavelli as the spiritual forefather of that Magna Carta of republican Empire, the us Constitution. Reinterpreting the Florentine should therefore have significant consequences for assessing the contemporary adequacy of this whole field of civic discourse.

The proposition that the political itself is on the wane might be confusing, as there has obviously been no decrease in politics *per se*. What is meant is an eclipse of ‘high politics’, of arms races between nations and classes in which the structure of society is at stake. The rhetoric of political exhaustion and closure dates from the restorations of the 19th century. Alexis de Tocqueville:

Will we never again [*nota bene*] see a fresh breeze of true political passions . . . of violent passions, hard though sometimes cruel, yet grand, disinterested,

fruitful, those passions which are the soul of the only parties that I understand and to which I would gladly give my time, my fortune, and my life?³

But one might ask: is such a radical repoliticization even conceivable in the most advanced societies, or for that matter desirable? Behind the outpourings of nostalgia for more activist citizenries there lies a profound discomfort with the very idea of abandoning the security of the status quo—our deeply apolitical form of life. The claim that revolutionary praxis leads to totalitarian catastrophe enjoys the nearly universal assent of intellectual opinion. Attachment, openly acknowledged or not, to the status quo is at a historic high point.

2

Have Washington's international and domestic offensives of the last few years—with their still incalculable fallout—brought an end to this neutralized post-Cold War scene? For all the acrimony of the latest political season, the main control centres of responsible opinion still cleave to the neoliberal prescriptions of the past quarter-century. The flexibility of the system should never be underestimated yet, paradoxically, the absence of large-scale opposition has not prevented the main fixtures of the world political situation from entering into solution: the controversial shift from 'human rights' to 'anti-terrorism' as the ideological dominant of foreign policy; the unexpected sharpening of tensions between the us and core Europe; the military credibility of the American state put on the line for the first time in thirty years, as partisan war rages on the Tigris; growing strains on anti-proliferation accords; and, perhaps most significantly, looming economic turbulence stemming from the unsustainable American deficits that keep the whole world economy afloat. The current fiscal and financial environment, suggests a conservative historian of international bond markets, has all the makings of a perfect storm.⁴

In the era of neoliberalism, the great powers have dismantled much of their own regulatory capacity and unleashed the risk society, as if the harvests of market turbulence could be reaped forever. The reflux of this Great Transformation is putting into question some of the main

³ Tocqueville, letter to Corcelle, 19 Oct 1839, *Oeuvres complètes* xv, Paris 1951, p. 139.

⁴ Niall Ferguson, 'Going Critical: American Power and the Consequences of Fiscal Overstretch', *National Interest*, Fall 2003.

trend-lines that seemed to be locked in place after the end of the Cold War. The optimistic narrative of globalization—the dominant ideology of the last decade—is in retreat. Polanyi’s account of the 19th-century era of world market capitalism as setting the stage for the hard landings of the inter-war era offers an instructive precedent. The only reason why a crisis of such proportions still seems improbable is that there are currently no powers of any consequence that could see their interests furthered by capitalizing on this disorder.

3

This is the context for a return to Machiavelli, a figure that comes into full force within a historical situation whose outlines and possibilities cannot be grasped within the existing terms of political thought, as a result of the increasingly problematic reality—even irreality—of praxis. His own formative moment came with the abrupt collapse of the world of Italian city-states at the end of the 15th century, in the wake of invading foreign armies and domestic regime changes. In the midst of this flood, Machiavelli announces a break in time; or rather, the emergence of a new politically constituted temporality of epochs. The advent of discontinuity comes with a founding gesture of radical disjunction from the recent past—‘these corrupt centuries of ours’⁵—demarcated from a classical period, and a present that opens onto a dramatically widened horizon.⁶

The opening Preface of the *Discourses on Livy* could be said to have two introductory paragraphs. The first begins with a comparison of the dangers of finding new methods and systems to those faced by an explorer seeking ‘unknown waters and lands’; and with a declaration of intent: ‘I have decided to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone.’⁷ The second begins with a blunt dismissal of Renaissance antiquarianism as poor imitation of the ancients, whose greatness did not reside in carving statues but rather in the sovereign art of making history. This Janus-faced beginning underscores the perspectival problems of the narrative categories with which we attempt to grasp the structure of historical situations. In

⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book II, ch. 19, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, Chicago 1996, p. 172.

⁶ For a brilliant discussion of the problem of the ‘break’ that initiates modernity, see Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London 2002.

⁷ *Discourses*, Book I, Preface, p. 5.

the Preface to the second book of *Discourses*, while Machiavelli concedes that it is impossible to know history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* from the disparate, tendential accounts of victors and survivors, there is nevertheless a method of interrogating the reasoning of these accounts, of seeing how conditions have varied from ‘province to province’.⁸

There is no shortage of social theories that purport to explain large-scale historical crises and transformations, and which address more directly the dynamics of the contemporary world-system. What can one learn from reading Machiavelli’s texts today that could not be found in the writings of Marx, for example? The latter, it is often said, did not adequately account for specifically political categories, forms and praxes. The previously missing dimension of citizenship, nationality, party and so on, introduced to supplement—or, alternatively, supersede—Marx, is invariably ideological, in the Althusserian sense of a language of subjective orientation. Reading Machiavelli in this context offers us the prospect of a philosophical interrogation of the ideologies of agency that inform these political—actor-oriented—conceptions of history.

Machiavelli’s writings are a sustained investigation into the limits of political enterprise without the closure of any anthropological essentialism. It is true that he often seems interested in the foundation of new political orders—religions, states, peoples—as a way of framing the anterior problem of the plasticity of ‘human nature’. But the disparate reflections he offers on the latter do not form the basis of either conservative prudence or utopian desire, but rather act to constantly unsettle both. The ‘badness’ Machiavelli refers to is political rather than moral, still less theological: it does not stem ‘from the wicked nature of men, as they used to say’.⁹ Further, this badness, it turns out, is not all bad, politically speaking:

Men are desirous of new things, so much so that most often those who are well off desire newness as much as those who are badly off. For as was said before, and it is true, men get bored with the good and grieve in the ill.¹⁰

⁸ *Discourses*, Book II, Preface, p. 123. A formulation from Fredric Jameson illuminates the politico-epistemological problems Machiavelli confronted: ‘Writers tend to organize the events they represent according to their own deeper schemas of what Action and Event seem to be; or . . . they project their own fantasies of interaction onto the screen of the Real’. Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, London 1998, p. 27.

⁹ *Discourses*, Book III, ch. 29, p. 277.

¹⁰ *Discourses*, Book III, ch. 21, p. 263.

To radicalize the problem of founding a state reveals the possibility of a new art of founding peoples, raising armies and winning battles. This in turn brings into view the radical, inhuman virtues¹¹ of those who aim to reinvent human beings. The movement of Machiavelli's thought is startling. First he tells us: 'I do not know whether this has ever occurred or whether it is possible'. Then, that it would be a 'very cruel enterprise or altogether impossible'. Next, how it could be done:

To make in cities new governments with new names, new authorities, new men; to make the rich poor, the poor rich . . . to build new cities, to take down those built, to exchange the inhabitants from one place to another; and in sum, not to leave anything untouched.¹²

As Rousseau, one of Machiavelli's most astute readers, put it: 'He who dares to undertake the establishment of a people should feel that he is, so to speak, in a position to change human nature'.¹³ In a work ostensibly devoted to the study of republics, the provisional legitimization of such methods explosively broadens the scope of what is thinkable beyond the limits set by the prevailing conventions of civic discourse. Could such a figure of absolute radical agency come into existence today? The answer must take into account an immense variability in the potency and knowledge of men in different times and places: 'the weakness of men at present, caused by their weak education and their slight knowledge of things, makes them judge ancient judgements in part inhuman, in part impossible.'¹⁴

Machiavelli's thoughts on this subject are far from conclusive; he seems to contradict himself interminably when it comes to this very point of how transformable human beings are, how open to change. Before he even begins his account of the lives of the makers and would-be makers of new states, he warns those who would take up arms against their masters, believing they could fare better, that 'they are deceived because

¹¹ Machiavelli was an unusual humanist, if indeed he was one, for he was not averse to calling the peak of virtue 'inhuman'. What is the significance of this frightening word of praise in the Machiavellian lexicon? Roughly the same teaching is conveyed in a steely verse from the Tao Te Ching: 'Exterminate benevolence, discard righteousness: the people will be a hundred times better off.'

¹² *Discourses*, Book I, ch. 17, p. 47; ch. 18, p. 51; ch. 26, p. 61.

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book II, p. 163; from *The Basic Writings*, trans. David Cross, Indianapolis 1987.

¹⁴ *Discourses*, Book III, p. 275.

they see later by experience that they have done worse.¹⁵ One could provide a long list of observations and maxims from *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* that negate each other, leaving the reader looking for a solution. The most disconcerting of these concerns the epistemological legitimacy of strategic reasoning in terms of historical precedents and counterfactuals. While Machiavelli seems to scorn those who judge that ‘imitation is not only difficult but impossible—as if heavens, sun, elements, men had varied in their motion, order and power from what they were in antiquity’, he later goes on to write: ‘because like causes happen rarely, it will also occur rarely that like remedies avail’.¹⁶

What is the significance of these seeming aporias? As Althusser noted: ‘the central point where everything is tied up endlessly escapes detection’.¹⁷ In classical political philosophy, such signals of doubt arguably convey a teaching about the wisdom of moderation. This is not what happens in Machiavelli. The stories he tells prompt the reader to reflect on how to discern, how practically to orient oneself towards potential courses of action in exemplary situations. Here aporias raise questions that do not paralyse, or moderate, but move the reader to recognize the advantages—often tenuously demonstrated—of the impetuous course. Machiavelli concedes that this kind of strategic lore is a very precarious kind of knowing; nevertheless he persistently encourages the most immoderate stances. In the fundamental strategic binary he establishes between ‘temporize’ or ‘strike’,¹⁸ the line of reasoning always tilts towards the latter.

There is perhaps a theoretical justification for this rhetoric of going to the extreme, since such courses of action seem to provide the best food for his manner of thought. The scenarios Machiavelli depicts in his ancient and contemporary parables are constructed to test the mettle of various perspectives and stances towards the world: personalized *Haltung*, to use a Brechtian category, as a mode of transmitting an unfamiliar

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 3, trans. Harvey Manfield and Nathan Tarcov, Chicago 1998. Those who, like Negri, see Machiavelli’s thought as infused with an exultant enthusiasm, miss the dialectic by which such moments emerge out of a drier intelligence. See Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies, Constituent Power and the Modern State*, Minnesota 1999.

¹⁶ *Discourses*, Book 1, Preface, p. 6; ch. 32, p. 70.

¹⁷ Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Discourses*, Book 1, ch. 33, p. 71.

philosophical teaching. This is certainly an unfamiliar kind of political science: it seeks to impart not only an integral knowledge of the structure of the most explosively controversial political situations—revolutions in the order of human things—but also those subjective virtues and dispositions which could inflect the vectors of change. Machiavelli teaches a radicalized form of practical reason, oriented to goals with different time horizons: from the most immediate politics of individual survival and aggrandizement, to projects that could only come to fruition long after one is dead.

The strangely inconclusive nature of Machiavelli's historical judgements and practical counsels make his teachings difficult to summarize. There is no substitute for reading them with open eyes. As we have seen, his fundamental political outlook can seem divided: although he conjures up immense possibilities of political innovation, he is also rightly known as a cold disabuser of utopian illusions. Dismissing 'the many who have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth', he writes that his concern will be to go directly to 'the effectual truth of the thing' and not to our imaginary, enabling fantasies.¹⁹ But while this effectual truth establishes a threshold of historical plausibility, it never functions in his texts as an absolute limit on thought, bolting it to what merely exists. It is more like a sieve, subjecting the most radical proposals to a rigorous criterion of immanence. The notorious anti-utopian formulations of Engels or Lenin convey an approximate sense of Machiavelli's intention here. As this parallel to a later revolutionary tradition suggests, the ban on imagining a new republic is lifted on the condition that one does not shy away from thinking through the hard measures that accompany its origins. This, according to Machiavelli, is very difficult: 'For the greatness of the thing partly terrifies men, so that they fail in their first beginnings.'²⁰

4

The history of turning to Machiavelli to interrogate the structure of the present goes back to the 17th century. Commentaries on this figure from Bacon, Harrington or Spinoza—as from Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire or Rousseau—are moments in the intellectual history of the emergence of

¹⁹ *The Prince*, ch. 15, p. 61.

²⁰ *Discourses*, Book 1, ch. 55, p. 112.

a politico-philosophical consciousness of modernity. For each of these thinkers, Machiavelli opened the door to an uninhibited exploration of the core problems of this new condition: the future of Christianity, the possibility of republican government, the limits of popular Enlightenment, the decadence and renewal of civilizations, the problematic status of moral and legal limits to the use of political power.

Hegel and Fichte form an intermediate episode between this early-modern Machiavellian moment and a later 20th-century one. German idealism in the Napoleonic age turned to Machiavelli with new concerns, galvanized by the imminent liquidation of the German state. A formulation from Carl Schmitt captures the spirit of this moment, and establishes a crucial focal point for the 20th-century reception. For Schmitt, the actuality of Machiavelli is vindicated in the situation of 'the ideological defensive', when it becomes imperative to think through the experience of historic defeat.²¹

The 19th century witnessed a long decline in this specific genre of reading and commenting on Machiavelli. Outside Italy, he was by and large relegated to the status of a colourful Renaissance period piece, or a distant predecessor of *Realpolitik*. Gramsci offered an intriguing explanation for this hiatus: the 19th-century elevation of 'society' as the master category of the order of human things had eclipsed the previous centrality of political categories; with this epistemic break Machiavelli, the great teacher of the art of politics, was supposedly made obsolete by a new understanding of the laws and dynamics of social development. With the dawning of the Age of Extremes in the 20th century there came a return, as figures across the political spectrum addressed the new orders emerging from the crisis of liberal-conservative constitutionalism and the interstate system that had been based upon it. In the inter-war era, reading Machiavelli on the origins and fate of the European political world was a notable current in the establishment of political science as an academic discipline, in a context redefined by the roughly simultaneous emergence of Bolshevik and Fascist states.

In what respect did Machiavelli stand out, in comparison to Hobbes and Spinoza, as a theorist of modernity? All three came back into intellectual contention during this period, but in one decisive respect Machiavelli was unique: both Hobbes and Spinoza were contemporaries

²¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago 1996, p. 66.

of a Europe-wide civil-religious war and the central goal of their political-theological treatises was neutralization, or depoliticization. Machiavelli's career immediately preceded this era of European thought and his reflections on politics and nature were not subjected to this prime directive of pacification. Early 20th-century encounters with Machiavelli were the occasion for reflections on a horizon beyond liberalism. Forming an arc across the political map, Carl Schmitt, Wyndham Lewis, Leo Strauss, Benedetto Croce, Raymond Aron and Antonio Gramsci, in their own manner, all identified the century as Machiavellian. Others, situated both before and after this period, belong in the same story of theoretical awakening: Maurice Joly from the late 19th century, Isaiah Berlin and Louis Althusser from the late 20th.

5

While the scholarly standard of more recent English-language discussions of Machiavelli and his legacy often exceeds that of these earlier, less exegetical readings, there has arguably been a drop in the appreciation of crucial facets of his thought: those which cannot be so easily pressed into the mould of civic republicanism or of a value-neutral conception of political science. Exhuming these antecedents could provide useful points of entry into reading Machiavelli today. Within the 20th-century constellation, two studies stand out as sobering reflections on the catastrophic ideological bankruptcies of their time. In his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, published at the height of the Cold War, Leo Strauss proposed that the most consequential reading of this author must begin with the supposedly naïve assumption that he was a teacher of revolutionary gangsterism.²² With perhaps a touch of irony, he added that this was a view of things that was against everything America stood for, and by implication could be considered the direct intellectual ancestor of Communism.

For Strauss, the Florentine was the philosophical founder of a modernity whose destiny was the reduction of human nature to the raw material of a techno-politics. Machiavelli's maxim—'make everything new'²³—governs a spiritual dispensation that culminated in the revolutionary tyrannies of the 20th century. Strauss suggested that the West had to

²² Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Glencoe, IL 1959, p. 13.

²³ *Discourses*, Book I, ch. 26, p. 61.

relearn from the Italian source the radical art of setting into motion and turning back great historical waves. The task at hand was a long-term project of restoring limits on human enterprise, wisely insisted upon by the classics of ancient political philosophy, as well as by otherwise antithetical Scriptural traditions—the two modes against which Machiavelli had erupted in rebellion. For this it was necessary to construct asylums in which ancient modes of thought could be regenerated, to oppose the onslaught of demotic mass mobilizations of all ideological stripes. The hope was that a new generation of leaders might be inspired to hold the fort against the nihilist consequences of modernity. For the first few decades of the postwar era, the prospects for such a conservative revolution looked dim, but one could take heart by learning from the enemy: ‘All unarmed prophets, he says, have failed. But what is he if not an unarmed prophet? How can he reasonably hope for the success of his enormous venture . . . if unarmed prophets necessarily fail?’²⁴

Gramsci’s ‘The Modern Prince’ offered an assessment of Machiavelli’s contemporary relevance at a tangent to this one.²⁵ The former head of a revolutionary party, a political prisoner under Mussolini, the Sardinian was an unarmed prophet *par excellence*. But for Gramsci, far from being the theorist of a victorious march of modernity, Machiavelli was the strategist of reactivating defeated radical causes ‘from scratch’. The epochal problem to be deciphered was the European revolution that had failed to materialize. This was no arbitrary projection: the decline of urban republics that Machiavelli confronted was indeed a plausible precedent to his own effort to think through the catastrophic defeat of the European working classes in the age of Fascism and Fordism. For Gramsci, Machiavelli provided the intellectual model of how to conduct a harsh strategic reckoning in the midst of such devastation, as preparation for a very long-term reconstitution of collective praxis through intellectual and material rearmament. This is what he called hegemony. The guiding question of his thoughts on Machiavelli was, accordingly, ‘When can the conditions for awakening and developing a national-popular collective will be said to exist?’²⁶

Like Strauss, Gramsci was struck by the duality in Machiavelli’s thought between a focus on the necessity of tyrannical revolutionary force and an

²⁴ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 84.

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, ‘The Modern Prince’, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York 1972.

²⁶ Gramsci, ‘Modern Prince’, p. 130.

alternative conception of agency as a project of spiritual warfare, slowly unfolding over the course of generations. Christianity was the first religion of unarmed prophecy, the first movement of the war of position. The latter conception of politics manifested itself in a mode of writing addressed simultaneously to the disparate, unreconciled elements of the present generation and to a distant, more sympathetic posterity. For a figure who is often thought to have held that the glory of victory was the sole animating passion of a life of politics, Machiavelli seems to have been unduly preoccupied with how a whole mode of authority ‘little by little, and from generation to generation, may be led to disorder’. Machiavelli articulated the ethical imperative that sustains long-term projects of instauration, transvaluation, revolution:

For it is the duty of the good man to teach others the good that you could not work because of the malignity of the times or of fortune, so that when many are capable of it, someone of them more loved by heaven will be able to work it.²⁷

The appeal to less corrupt, future generations is alien to contemporary sensibilities. As a result the political significance of this mode of address in some of the great works of early modern thought is often missed.²⁸ Such lines speaks to a virtue that has suffered a drastic loss of actuality—namely, fidelity to a cause, even when its great sustaining illusions have been lost. Teaching the Great Method of political innovation was the only ethical imperative that this notorious amoralist seems to have taken seriously.

6

What does the opposition and diversity of Machiavelli interpretations within this conjuncture suggest? Certainly, the always problematic

²⁷ *Discourses*, Book III, ch. 8, p. 238; Book II, Preface, p. 125.

²⁸ Fleeing from the fascist storm, Brecht offered the following guidelines for an art of writing in dark times: ‘to equip a work to stand the test of time, on the face of it a “natural” aim, becomes a more serious matter when the writer has grounds for the pessimistic assumption that his ideas may find acceptance only in the long term. The measures, incidentally, that one employs to this end must not detract from the topical effect of the work. The necessary epic touches applied to things which are “self-evident” at the time of writing lose their value as v-effects after that time. The conceptual autarchy of the works contains an element of criticism: the writer is analysing the transience of the concepts and observations of his own times.’ April 24, 1941, *Bertolt Brecht Journals*, trans. Hugh Rorrison, London 1994, p. 145.

status, if not the relativity, of even the most compelling political outlooks on one's own times. But also how such partisan commitments are inseparable from the will to discover the effectual truth of the historical situation in which we find ourselves. A formulation from Gramsci pinpoints the open-ended nature of the kind of political theory needed for historical orientation under present circumstances: 'it is necessary', he wrote, 'to develop a theory and technique of politics which . . . might be useful to both sides in the struggle'.²⁹ Reading Machiavelli can offer an education in how to probe the fundamentals of one's own allegiances without abandoning hope or succumbing to illusions. Famously his own commitments were themselves obscure: for all the occasional vehemence of his diction, he rarely betrayed any exclusive allegiances to either princes or republics, ruling classes or multitudes, or even ancient as opposed to present times.

Machiavelli's equanimity—'pessimism of the intellect'—should be distinguished from that spirit of resignation which prevails in times of restoration. After denouncing the errors of false hope in one chapter of the *Discourses*,³⁰ he turns around in another to offer the following advice on why we should stay with defeated causes, even when we could easily profit by joining the winning side:

Men can second fortune, but not oppose it . . . they can weave its warp but not break it. They should indeed never give up, for, since they do not know its end and it proceeds by oblique and unknown ways, they have always to hope, not to give up in whatever fortune and in whatever travail they may find themselves.³¹

7

There is a long history of commenting on Machiavelli as a theorist of the present as transitional conjuncture, one that needs to be understood in order to bring into focus the lines of a productive contemporary assessment. Reading Machiavelli today opens up the possibility of beginning to develop a radical strategic orientation to some of the core problems of the coming century: the future of the world market, that of the inter-state

²⁹ Gramsci, 'Modern Prince', p. 136.

³⁰ *Discourses*, Book II, ch. 27, p. 193.

³¹ *Discourses*, Book II, ch. 29, p. 199.

system and even, in the coming bio-technological age, that of human nature itself. We lack a conception of politics even remotely adequate to the scale of the dangers and possibilities that lie ahead. The present inability and unwillingness to consider—*sanza alcuno rispetto*—a transcendence of the dominant form of state and society is potentially a very perilous situation. For it is arguable that a lot would have to change even to maintain the essentials of this system through another era of crisis and transition.

The problem Machiavelli raises is that discovering the effectual truth of our historical situation requires a radical engagement. The transformability of human conditions cannot be gauged without interrogating the subject that is the imputed bearer of this project. For Gramsci, this subjective element in revolutionary theory was ‘a peak inaccessible to the enemy camp’.³² In relation to the operative political calculus of historically static times, there is an irreducible moment of such subjective ‘arbitrariness’ involved in adopting adversarial stances that presuppose the possibility of barely conceivable transformations. In his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli brought to light the role played by this irrepressible negativity in the emergence of new historical realities:

Human appetites are insatiable, for since from nature they have the ability and the wish to desire all things, and from fortune the ability to achieve few of them, there continually results from this a discontent in human minds and a disgust with the things they possess. This makes them blame the present times, praise the past and desire the future, even if they are not moved to do this by any reasonable cause.³³

The negativity of this observational stance raises problems that are extremely difficult to resolve empirically and so perhaps should be considered as philosophical. Are there privileged political positions for observing one’s own historical situation? Does the polemical nature of political judgement always do violence to the ironies of history—or conversely, when does understanding a historical situation depend upon precisely this polemical framing of friend and enemy? What viable conception of historical alternatives controls the denunciation of existing conditions? When is the effectual truth grasped in political struggle

³² Gramsci, ‘Problems of Marxism’, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 462.

³³ *Discourses*, Book II, Preface, p. 125.

against the current, and when does it come from floating downstream, away from the immediacy of practice? These are properly philosophical questions Machiavelli raises about politics, which now must be transformed into practical positions. 'Have we got to be lucky?' Brecht writes in his poem, 'To a Waverer':

This you ask. Expect
No other answer than your own.