

Anti-revolutionary republicanism

Claude Lefort's Machiavelli

Knox Peden

Amidst the enthusiasm marking the five hundredth anniversary of Machiavelli's composition of *The Prince* in 1513, there is one recent publication that risks being overlooked. Last year saw the belated appearance in English of the French political philosopher Claude Lefort's most substantial work, his 1972 doctoral thesis: *Le travail de l'œuvre Machiavel*. This volume, abridged in English and retitled *Machiavelli in the Making*,¹ would turn out to be the only major monograph of Lefort's publishing career, but the impact of its translation on the wider world of Machiavelli scholarship is likely to be minimal given its prohibitively technical quality and relentlessly phenomenological idiom. Proustian is indeed the polite term for its style, and the one Lefort says his doctoral adviser Raymond Aron used to describe it – 'by no means a compliment' (ix). If its fortunes among Machiavelli's enthusiasts and detractors remain to be determined, what is already clear is that consulting Lefort's study, and historically situating it alongside comparable engagements with Machiavelli, yields insights into the project of a philosopher whose influence on contemporary French political thought remains at once evident, obscure and contested. Although the book was prepared under Aron, the sociologist and liberal political philosopher, its main intellectual influence was no doubt Lefort's mentor Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty had died suddenly of a heart attack shortly after beginning his tenure at the Collège de France in 1961, and Lefort took it upon himself to bring Merleau-Ponty's posthumous publications to order.² This scholarly work followed upon a period of spirited political activism that began during the Second World War when Lefort joined up with Trotskyist elements of the French Resistance, and lasted through the 1950s when Lefort served as the co-leader with Cornelius Castoriadis of the leftist group Socialisme ou Barbarie. Over the course of the 1960s, Lefort, like many, would become disillusioned not simply with the travesty of really

existing socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but with what he viewed as the authoritarian style of left politics more generally. Disillusion with Trotskyism followed, as did a more general rejection of the party form and the revolutionary agenda.

If the last years of Merleau-Ponty's career witnessed an increasingly robust critique of his own erstwhile Communist sympathies, a critique which took the form of a phenomenological rejection of all totalizing ontologies, Lefort's intellectual project continued Merleau-Ponty's effort to no small degree, seeking to develop the consequences for political philosophy of Merleau-Ponty's naturalist and anti-holistic ontology.³ Clues towards the direction such an inquiry might take were left behind by Merleau-Ponty himself in one of the most enigmatic texts of an oracular corpus, his 1949 'Note on Machiavelli'. Composed in the interval between his apologia for Stalin's show trials, *Humanism and Terror* (1947), and his indictment of 'ultra-bolshevism' in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), Merleau-Ponty's note defended Machiavelli against his detractors and reinscribed him in the legacy of Renaissance humanism, albeit a humanism now bearing the traces of a distinctly phenomenological concern for notions of political community:

If by humanism we mean a philosophy of the inner man which finds no difficulty in principle in his relationships with others, no opacity whatsoever in the functioning of society, and which replaces political cultivation by moral exhortation, Machiavelli is not a humanist. But if by humanism we mean a philosophy which confronts the relationship of man to man and the constitution of a common situation and a common history between men as a problem, then we have to say that Machiavelli formulated some of the conditions of any serious humanism.⁴

Presenting the notion of humanity as a problem, and the 'common' as a site of contestation, Merleau-Ponty saw in Machiavelli the contours of an ontological

conception of politics that squared with his own efforts to exit a Marxist paradigm that too often took politics for granted rather than for the existential ground of modern history. What Merleau-Ponty's note provided was a schematic of the nascent visibility of this ground; what it didn't provide was an argument.

The argument at the core of Lefort's book on Machiavelli is the argument that would identify him as a leading philosopher of France's 'anti-totalitarian moment' of the 1970s and the Republican turn in French political thought that has arguably dominated the field from the 1980s to the present.⁵ Developing his mentor's ideas, Lefort's work sought via the texts of Machiavelli's corpus and its reception to identify and explore an existential concept of 'the political' grounded in the experience of social discord and conflict. For Lefort, the main error of Marxism and modern sociology more generally was to conceive of society as a totality. But social reality is shot through with incommensurability and is fundamentally an incomplete thing. With the collapse of medieval orders, modernity has given rise to 'the disincarnation of society'.⁶ With the loss of sovereignty as a discrete entity – paradigmatically the figure of the king – the locus of sovereignty has become a void, an empty place, the very site of society's non-identity with itself. Totalitarianism occurs when a figure – a charismatic leader, the party, a state bureaucracy – seeks to fill the empty space, to occupy the void. In this occultation of the void, there also occurs an occlusion of 'the political'. For the genuine political experience is one of incessant non-closure, openness to the future, and a willingness to negotiate the contingencies of fortune with a measure of fortitude at ease with the fact that it is grounded in no divine knowledge of the world as a whole or of what the future portends. In other words, a genuine experience and understanding of the political is not unlike the one Machiavelli describes in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. By polemically returning to the main theoretical source of secular politics, Lefort is also keen to isolate a moment of 'the political' prior to the advent of industrialization and modern philosophies of history. This 'recovery' of 'the political', and its ostensible secularity, would resound throughout multiple French projects, from the ambitious philosophical histories of secularization and the advent of democracy produced by Lefort's student Marcel Gauchet to the historian François Furet's epochal rejection of the Marxist historiography of the Revolution in the name of a recoding of the Jacobins as proto-totalitarian occupiers of the empty space of democratic legitimacy.⁷

Lefort's philosophical work played an ambiguous role in the coalescence of this revisionist historiography and political thought, which already by the end of the 1970s had assumed a nominally centrist perspective, and in the 1980s took an emphatic shift further to the right. This shift involved a reconciliation not only with the Restorationist account of the Revolution, via the resurgence of such figures as Benjamin Constant, François Guizot and Alexis de Tocqueville, but also with a market-oriented liberalism that was of a piece with an international political climate dominated by Reagan and Thatcher. Long associated with Aron, the critique of totalitarianism had been a marginal though not insignificant element of French thought since the days of Sartre's fellow-travelling, when it was inextricable from national reflections about France's mercurial status in the formation of a Cold War alliance opposed to the Soviet Bloc.⁸ The Cold War context had shifted by the 1970s, however, when the figures of Eastern European dissidence had begun to offer the prospect of a 'left' critique of the communist project that focused on its statism and was not easily derided as reactionary. This leftist bona fides quickly became inscrutable in France, however, where these figures of dissidence were mobilized in a local struggle against the perceived threat of national political sclerosis should the Common Programme of Socialists and Communists gain political power.⁹ By the 1980s, the right-wing political alignment of anti-totalitarianism was international and unmistakable.

Amidst all of this, Lefort developed a highly refined mode of political philosophizing that synthesized Aron's fanatical anti-totalitarianism with Merleau-Ponty's more sophisticated refusal of ultra-Bolshevism. Like Gauchet after him, Lefort tended to dismiss the label 'reactionary' as patronizing and effectively obstructionist in its relation to political theory.¹⁰ But what counts as reaction is of course for the revolutionary to decide (and for the 'reactionary' to find unpersuasive, virtually by definition).¹¹ For Lefort's part, he considered his existential investigations of 'the political' to be of a piece with his longstanding commitment to democratic pluralism and the value of an egalitarian ideal in 'savage democracy'.¹² But Lefort's moral compunctions and earnestness are, in a way, beside the point. What matters most in terms of the political theory he proffers are the claims themselves, and the philosophical form in which they are developed. Alongside revisionist historiography and a renewal of a distinctly French conception of liberalism, Lefort gave these efforts a philosophical ground in French phenomenology. His study of Machiavelli

is saturated with efforts to ontologize ‘the social’ so as to existentialize ‘the political’. To be sure, the ontology in question is distinctly modern and secular. Grounded in a rejection of scholasticism and based in a notion of infinite finitude that gives us temporality all the way down, it resonates, albeit in a profoundly anachronistic way, with much of the substance of Machiavelli’s thought. But the core of his reading of Machiavelli – like his philosophy in general – remains an exercise in ontology all the same, an ontology of a distinctly post-Heideggerian cast.

While this new conception of politics was gaining traction in France, a thinker who had fallen out of favour in the wake of the May events of 1968 was also engaged with Machiavelli’s thought. After his death in 1991, Louis Althusser left behind a treasure trove of works in his personal archive. Among the loot was a book-length study that Althusser titled *Machiavelli and Us*, and that was initially prepared in late 1972, stimulated in no small degree, as Althusser acknowledges in the text, by the appearance of Lefort’s study.¹³ But this text was no isolated episode in Althusser’s trajectory. For he clearly revised the text intermittently throughout the 1970s and on into the 1980s, at which point he introduced the language of an ‘aleatory materialism’, grounded in a nominally epicurean rather than a Marxist tradition, that he was attempting to develop at the time.¹⁴ But the contents of the 1972 manuscript also recapitulated the contents of a course that Althusser had delivered in 1962 in which he heralded Machiavelli above all for his rejection of Christian and ethical anthropologies in the name of a new anthropology that is so dispersed in its descriptions that it turns out to be no anthropology at all.¹⁵ It is instead a fundamental rejection of the concept of human nature or essence as a legitimizing source, and thus also a rejection of all forms of natural law or theories of the social contract. In view of this protracted engagement, the publication of Lefort’s *Machiavelli in the Making* doesn’t just shed light on the nature and impact of his political thought, but on Althusser’s as well, showing yet again that Althusser was sincere in his repeated pronouncements that his thought was always driven by the demands of the conjuncture, intellectual or otherwise. What follows will first assess Lefort’s Machiavelli on its own terms and in relation to similar models of anti-revolutionary republicanism, in particular the presentation of it found in J.G.A. Pocock’s classic *The Machiavellian Moment*.¹⁶ In the second part, Althusser’s Machiavelli will help make clear some of the complications – to use a lauded term in Lefort’s vocabulary – attendant to Lefort’s own effort.

Machiavelli in the making

A tour de force of philosophical hermeneutics, Lefort’s *Machiavelli in the Making* begins with a long essay devoted to establishing the enigmatic quality of Machiavelli’s work, evidenced in the fact that every major reader’s attempt to locate the key to his political thinking has resulted in a profound conceptual instability or indeterminacy. In the end, the labour of the work – *le travail de l’œuvre* of its French title – is the conceptual space it opened and the reception history it inaugurated. A major portion of Lefort’s study, excised from the English version, is in fact devoted to readings of readings, the most modern of which are those of Leo Strauss, Gerhard Ritter and Antonio Gramsci. In a statement of his method that counterpoises itself to Althusser’s ‘scientific’ reading of Marx, Lefort justifies his hermeneutic, and its positive assumption of indeterminacy, in no uncertain terms:

The field of scientific knowledge of the œuvre ... cannot be separated from the global field of interpretation, because the latter is itself symbolic through and through, because all determination of the elements is simultaneously a determination of the status of the œuvre, of its insertion in time, in a history of thought, but also in a history of the world – a determination, in sum, of a *reality*, with respect to which and in the midst of which the critic is situated. (*MM*, 9)

This passage merits several remarks, the most important of which is that it establishes the governing metaphor that structures Lefort’s entire inquiry. This is the metaphor that links a notion of reading as infinite interpretation and infinite reception with Machiavelli’s conception of ‘the political’ as above all an ‘experience’ of non-knowledge that nevertheless demands a kind of orientation and negotiation. It will be noted here that the non-identity of the two terms related in the metaphor – reading and politics – is itself exemplary of the content of both poles of the metaphor, to wit the experience of non-identity. The other key phrase of this passage is Lefort’s remark on ‘the œuvre’s insertion in time’. It is the introduction of temporality into politics, and consequently into the notion of thinking about politics, that is crucial here.

Lefort develops this notion in broadly existentialist terms in his reading of the later chapters of *The Prince*, and the rejection of scholastic and Aristotelian ontologies that one finds there. He writes:

As long as one imagines society as the place in which all things tend to rest in the fullness of the natural form, the unstable, the moving, and the discordant are signs of a degeneration of Being. But

Being, we are to understand [that is, from Machiavelli], only allows itself to be grasped in relation to what happens, in the interconnectedness of appearances, in the movement that prevents appearances from becoming fixed, and the incessant return of the already accomplished into what is once again at stake. (*MM*, 181)

Machiavelli's 'critique' is not a critique of what appears in the name of some 'truth in itself'. Rather, 'it finds legitimacy in the necessity of its exercise.' At this point, Lefort consummates the conceptual equivalence he has established between Being and society, when he writes: 'The required politics is the one that is in keeping with the being of society, welcomes opposites, is rooted in time, arranged in such a way as to stand alongside the abyss on which society rests, and to abut the limit constituted for it by the impossibility of human desires' (*MM*, 182).

The profoundly phenomenological nature of Lefort's study is clear from these passages, and the themes of phenomenological historicity only gain in thickness in Lefort's overwhelmingly detailed engagement with *The Discourses* in the book's second half. Here Machiavelli recasts Rome out of myth and into the hermeneutic indeterminacy of history. As noted, the main debt is to Merleau-Ponty and in particular his late work arguing for a chiasmic ontology of the senses structured by indeterminacy through and through. But we can also see how Lefort's work is inscribed in one of the major traditions of twentieth-century thought, the one inaugurated by Heidegger's establishment of finitude as the key to the human condition, to borrow the title of Hannah Arendt's classic work of political philosophy. This concern for temporal finitude as the foundational problem for modern political entities is also what ties Lefort's engagement with Machiavelli to Pocock's classic study of 'the Machiavellian moment' and its role in fomenting a distinctly Atlantic notion of Republicanism in the early modern period. This comparison of a French post-Trotskyist political philosopher with a heterodox founder of Cambridge School contextualist intellectual history might seem like a digression, but I think it is helpful for understanding the allure of Machiavelli as an object of political study and recuperation for two thinkers exasperated in different, though not unrelated, ways by the radicalism of the 1960s.

In both cases, you have at root a focus on finitude as central to the secular politics of the republic and a manifest impatience with the notion that transcendence of this condition is either possible or desirable. In Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* this is all pursued in his own inimitable idiom, grounded in an erudite

engagement with a variety of early modern historians and political thinkers, though in the end he does acknowledge his debt to Hannah Arendt's thinking.¹⁷ This link to Arendt is significant because it also helps explain the otherwise incongruent valorization of Aristotelian republicanism – based in the *vita activa* – in Pocock's work even as the same work reads Machiavelli as engaged in a critique of an inherited scholastic ontology that had Aristotelian categories at its base. More important, it helps make sense of the striking conceptual proximity of his claims on behalf of secular temporality with Heidegger's existentialism, the root problematic for Arendt, Merleau-Ponty and Lefort as well.¹⁸

Heidegger's version of existentialism – not to mention its romantic pathos – is not part of Pocock's work. But the thematic of finitude is just as prevalent, where it is ascribed to Machiavelli's political thought and itself hypostatized into the concept of 'the Machiavellian moment' which names the instability that is constitutive of the Republic, the cause of its endurance and its frailty, regardless of when and where this moment occurs. Lefort's recoding of Machiavelli's thought as a rejection of scholastic ontology finds echoes in one of Pocock's dialectical formulations:



The quarrel between civic virtue and secular time has been one of the main sources of the Western awareness of human historicity; but at the same time, the continued conduct of this quarrel – largely because it is anchored in a concern for the moral stability of the human personality – has perpetuated a premodern view of history as a movement away from the norms defining that stability, and so as essentially uncreative or entropic where it does not attain to millennium or utopia.¹⁹

This ‘concern for the moral stability of the human personality’ that Pocock laments is the same quest for truth in itself or a holistic ontology that Lefort also rejects. The ‘awareness of historicity’ that is the positive outcome of Machiavelli’s focus on the irreconcilable dialectic – the ‘quarrel’ – between civic virtue and secular time is the same point valorized in Lefort’s description of a politics alert to the impossibility of human desires and the fact that appearances mask nothing beneath them, but are in the truest sense all that is. In both cases, the point is explicitly made against the notion of ‘mere’ appearance, or temporal finitude as a devolving from Being and thus something to be bemoaned, regretted or indeed overcome. In a final Hegelian flourish, Pocock concludes *The Machiavellian Moment* with a potent observation: ‘There is a freedom to decline moral absolutes; even those of the polis and history, even that of freedom when proposed as an absolute.’²⁰ The point is Hegelian not only in its form and content, but also in the fact that it alludes to Hegel’s own critique of the French Revolution and the Terror grounded in the compulsion to ‘absolute freedom’.²¹

Not coincidentally, the rejection of Jacobinism – the ur-case of modern totalitarianism – is also the driving force of the majority of Lefort’s political writing. In one of his most famous essays, on the Revolutionary Terror, Lefort wrote:

The image of a society reconciled to itself, delivered of its divisions, can only be grasped in an exercise of purification, which always then leads to extermination. To sever virtue from crime, the people from its enemies is not the means for instituting the Republic; this severing amounts to making the social visible or conceivable, or better, it is the act that generates this vision and knowledge.²²

To make society visible as a holistic entity is to betray its essence as a fractured zone; to make it an object of knowledge is to lose the essence of the political as such. Lefort celebrates Machiavelli in just these terms:

To the supposed knowledge of philosophy and religion he substitutes a not-knowing, in such a way that his analysis of power seems for a moment suspended

in a void; but he opposes the ignorance of the pragmatists, satisfied with the glib sayings of the palace, with the lessons of history.²³

Althusser too will laud Machiavelli precisely for confounding philosophers, for making a systematic exposition of his thought impossible, and for denying the possibility of neutral, abstracted knowledge. But for all the celebration of ‘non-knowledge’ that is central to Lefort’s vision, and its attentiveness to practice and experience, in the end Lefort grounds his assessment of Machiavelli in what he himself terms a ‘singular experience’, an experience Machiavelli’s work institutes, ‘the necessity to which it subjects us to question it in order to question the real, to discover ... the political’ (22). To be sure, Lefort will insist the ‘condition of interpreter is not inscribed in the constitution of the human mind’ (23). In this way, he distinguishes his project from all Kantian or psychologistic frameworks. But the conditions that make this ‘singular experience’ possible are no less generic, or universal. They are rooted in ‘a common foundation’ that in the end amounts to the total absence of foundation. In his final gloss on *The Prince*, and at this point deploying an explicitly Lacanian framework alongside the phenomenological one, Lefort will agree with Machiavelli that ‘the prince must accept the indeterminate’ – ‘an indetermination that is constitutive of the real’ – and that if he ‘accredits’ this indetermination, ‘if he rejects the illusory security of a foundation, he is offered the chance of discovering, in the patient exploration of the possible, the signs of historical creation, and of inscribing his action in time’ (*MM*, 187).

Lefort’s work, like Arendt’s, is grounded in an anthropology of finitude; indeed, his major collection, *The Forms of History*, is subtitled *Essays in Political Anthropology*.²⁴ To be sure, the content of this anthropology is one of infinite indeterminacy, non-identity; ‘savage democracy’ as he’ll call it. But the category itself is, qua category, fixed and set. It is the republican model as a singular model. And even though Lefort might join Pocock in criticizing, with Machiavelli, a scholastic ontology that regards mere appearance and finitude as devolutions from Being, in the end Lefort enshrines an ideal of politics, grounded in an attentiveness to ‘the political’ as an existential condition, against which all political catastrophes are judged as devolutions. So the point becomes not that Jacobinism, Nazism and Stalinism are disastrous politics – rather, they are sites wherein a genuine appreciation of ‘the political’ was occluded or obscured. So it’s not that they were political in a bad way; it’s that they were bad because they weren’t political.²⁵ This is a criticism

often levelled at Arendt's work, and it holds here too, namely that politics as such is a heroic instance that has been overwhelmed in the modern age by the rise of the social – 'the attack of the Blob' as a book on Arendt puts it – that is not unlike the 'commerce' that forms the downbeat to the 'virtue' of Pocock's dialectical historiography.²⁶

Althusser, Machiavelli and us

It is too infrequently remarked that the work Althusser is most famous for – his structuralist rereading of Marx – was in fact a distraction from the main research agenda he had planned for his career: a history of early modern political thought, focused on eighteenth-century France. The main output of this work was Althusser's study of Montesquieu published in 1959.²⁷ Althusser had a peculiar status as a French academic. As the *agrégé-répétiteur* at the École Normale Supérieure, he was in charge of preparing students for the *agrégation* exam, the barrier to entry to a career as a philosophy professor in the French lycées. This meant that the content of his teaching was in effect decided by the state, as the philosophers and themes covered on the exam changed from year to year. To be sure, Althusser was granted the time to pursue seminars of his own interest and the famous *Capital* seminar was one of these. But by and large Althusser's teaching was driven by concerns for method rather than content precisely because the content was beyond his control. As for his work on Marx, it is well documented that precocious students played a leading role in goading Althusser into increasingly public, and increasingly provocative, interventions in the field of Marxism and French Communist politics.²⁸ The criticism of the post-Stalinist turn to humanism was his own, of course. But the pugnacity of it owed something to the milieu in which it developed.

Comparing Althusser's Machiavelli with Lefort's throws the particular qualities of Lefort's Republicanism into sharper relief. Broadly speaking, we can read Lefort's Machiavelli as a 'Republican' and Althusser's as a 'Revolutionary'. The term is no doubt anachronistic when applied to Machiavelli, as Althusser is well aware. The acknowledged precursor here is Gramsci, who in his *Prison Notebooks* famously reconceived the party as the 'modern Prince' and, placing special emphasis on its exhortatory conclusion, suggested that *The Prince* can be read as the first instance of a political manifesto – a piece of political writing that is not only also a political act, but one structured by a sense of futurity, creating the conditions for its accomplishment in the very act of its composition.²⁹ While Althusser's

Machiavelli bears affinities with the Lenin of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' – the political genius alert to the contingencies of the 'conjuncture' – the concern in Althusser is much less with questions of the party-form or collective will raised by the Jacobin experience. Althusser's almost wholesale rejection of voluntarism is one of the most idiosyncratic features of his Marxism, and his engagement with Machiavelli is no exception in this regard. But as a critique of anthropological conceptions of political theory – ones that do in the end rely on some kind of essential human condition, however historicized – Althusser's Machiavelli can prove instructive. For what we find in Althusser's writings on Machiavelli is a variation on the critique of phenomenological and existential ontologies that was central to the critique of Marxist humanisms and historicisms that he pursued in the 1960s. In so far as Lefort's project remains indebted, if not tethered, to the existential ontology at the base of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy, and Althusser's own project was originally conceived in response to phenomenological Marxisms,³⁰ Althusser's arguments yield critical purchase on the terms, and indeed the political implications, of Lefort's republican effort.

In the end, although there are many similarities between Lefort's and Althusser's Machiavellis, the key difference between them is crucial, and its subtlety belies its importance. For Lefort, Machiavelli gives us a concept of 'the political' as an existential condition that is generic in the most literal sense – it is an inclusive condition, neutral in itself, that names and allows for a space in which partisanship and discord flourish in an inexhaustible way. For Althusser, by contrast, Machiavelli is a thinker who teaches us that to even begin to think 'the political,' or rather to attempt a theorization of politics, is, in itself, a partisan act. In other words, with Althusser there is no attempt to think a generic concept of 'the political' as an existential condition, because to think about politics one cannot establish in advance a 'generic' space in which partisanship takes place. To name the generic is already to take a partisan stance. This isn't to be confused with some deconstructive notion of the 'always already', a kind of ontological slippage that cannot but bridle and compromise our decisions. Rather, for Althusser, the main virtue of Machiavelli as a political thinker lies in his full assumption of the partisan view as a positive condition of political thinking over and against a concern to found a generic anthropology of 'the political' in which the limitations of the partisan stance are only redeemed in the flourishing discord that results.

Like Lefort, Althusser too sees in Machiavelli a fundamental rejection of scholastic ontology. But for Althusser the virtue of this is not that it results in a new ontology of finitude, but rather that it eliminates the political function of ontology altogether through an avowedly non-philosophical understanding of the place and function of contingency in history. If the key metaphysical term reworked in Lefort's Machiavelli is Being, for Althusser the key terms are in fact two sets of pairs: form and matter, and contingency and necessity. These two polar frames structure Althusser's *Machiavelli and Us* and they provide the key to the rejection of political ontology that forms the crux of Althusser's argument. Before addressing the substance of this argument, it will be helpful to consider the formal differences between the two works, for the difference in style is itself suggestive of what's distinctive between the two projects.

Where Lefort's prose is Proustian, Althusser's is laconic. Where Lefort buries himself in Machiavelli's digressions, finding in these digressions the essence of Machiavelli's recursive conception of politics, Althusser pursues a formalist and abstracted reading that isolates key turns in Machiavelli's arguments. The difference in style comes down to this: Lefort, quite literally, pursues a metareading of Machiavelli, in that what his own text describes is the reader's experience of Machiavelli's text. For example, describing the shift from chapter 5 to chapter 6 in *The Prince*, Lefort writes: 'How would the reader not be concerned about such twists and turns, and begin to lose confidence in the logic of the discourse? This upset increases with the reading of the two following chapters' (MM, 98–9). So the point is not what Machiavelli says, but what the reader feels. By contrast, Althusser describes what happens in 'Machiavelli's discourse', and the way it confounds philosophical efforts to resolve its putative contradictions. In other words, this discourse is regarded as an objective thing, not the occasion for a reader's experience.³¹

But how does Althusser regard this object that is Machiavelli's discourse? His vision is focused through the two metaphysical pairings noted above: form and matter, and necessity and contingency. In one respect, Althusser argues, we can read Machiavelli's famous dialectic of *virtù* and *fortuna* as a recoding of Aristotelian form and matter. If matter is pure unformed contingency, then *virtù* is in principle what bestows form on this matter – it is a form responsive to *fortuna*, but harnessing it at the same time. There is also a Kantian element in this formulation; *fortuna* is the in-itself of contingent matter, *virtù* is the bestowal of

transcendental forms to this matter, endowing them with the necessity of their appearance. But of course the whole point is that neither of these glosses – Aristotelian or Kantian – gets at what Machiavelli is saying. The problem with these views is that they presuppose some kind of extant matter that is unformed, simply waiting for some voluntaristic act, be it human or divine, to give it form – a metaphysical thesis par excellence – and yet this found matter needs to already have some kind of form to even be recognized as such. In other words, these formulations presuppose an 'object' that has objective qualities, but that nevertheless only becomes objective in our relation to it. But the genius of Machiavelli – what makes him a political thinker and not a 'philosopher' – is that there is no given object on which he works. Rather, in an explicit rebuke to phenomenology and its notion of the object as constituted by intentionality, Althusser writes: '[Machiavelli] anticipates what he intends; his "object" is in fact a determinate objective' (MU, 43).³² Machiavelli's objective is simple, and in fact Althusser cuts through the morass of debates about Machiavelli's politics when he writes: 'Machiavelli is only interested in one form of government: that which enables a state to endure.' In other words, the form Machiavelli approves is well and truly formal – a purely functional definition, wholly indifferent to content. Which is why his concept of *virtù* is formal, evacuated of moral virtues; it is simply that which works.³³

Indeed, Althusser remarks that the apparently philosophical contradiction in Machiavelli's writings – the materialist claim that history is pure chance, on the one hand, and a political morality that insists on duration, on the other; or, put differently, Machiavelli's dual insistence on the cyclical, recurrent nature of human history, and the imperative for the new – is in fact what makes his work a political act rather than a descriptively neutral political ontology. Regarding Machiavelli's putative utopianism – his valorization of Rome, combined with his dream for a united Italy – Althusser writes:

[T]he discrepancy that makes it a utopia is a discrepancy not between the narrowness of the current sociopolitical context and the necessary universal illusion of moral ideology, but between a *necessary* political task and its conditions of realization, which are possible and conceivable, and yet at the same time *impossible* and *inconceivable*. (MU, 52)³⁴

Althusser means the words quite literally: impossible and inconceivable. Indeed, the whole virtue of a genuinely secular politics that breaks from a divine ontology that assigns every entity its place relies precisely

on the fact that such a politics cannot be conceived in advance. It seems to be a philosophical necessity that contingency cannot but be thought against the backdrop of necessity – an extant order of things – but if history is contingent, and Althusser insists that it is, then it has to be contingency *all the way down*. It cannot stop when it alights on a grounding existential condition that forms a necessary base. Althusser is clear on this: ‘To say that chance is at the origin of societies and governments’, he writes, ‘is obviously to reject any anthropological ontology of society and politics’ (*MU*, 36). The only sense of ‘necessity’ that remains in such a conception is the necessity of an imperative, not one that necessarily inheres in matter, much less human history. The only object of note is an objective. Later on, Althusser proposes the following:

To the question that has forever haunted philosophy and always will – with what should we *begin*? – Machiavelli replies quite non-philosophically but with theses not lacking in philosophical resonance: one should begin with the beginning. The beginning is ultimately nothing. And thus are we plunged into the text of *The Prince* itself. It is necessary to begin with a New Prince and a New Principality: that is to say, literally and ultimately with nothing – not ‘nothingness’, but emptiness. (*MU*, 61)

This last qualifier is the crucial point. Nothingness – *le néant* – is of course a keyword of French phenomenology thanks to Sartre, and Althusser is at pains to insist on the prosaic quality of his claim: by nothing he simply means nothing, not ‘the nothing’, not the ‘abyss’ that serves as Lefort’s variation on groundless ground. Metaphysical and ontological conceptions of the ‘void’ are disastrous, in Althusser’s view, because they translate political tasks into merely philosophical problematics. But when Machiavelli surveys the political conjuncture – an Italy conditioned by feudalism, yet structurally resistant to absolutism – he finds ‘a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed in thought, but only by reality’. But the only goal of this resolution will be a state that endures; ‘We are at the antipodes of any vulgar pragmatism. The result alone counts, but the *goal* is the sole arbiter of the result that counts’ (*MU*, 80). At this stage, Machiavelli’s ‘republicanism’ merges with Communism – for the only foundation of a state that endures is the people, the popular army.

The literature on Althusser’s Machiavelli has assumed, not without reason, that the example of the Soviet Union hovers over the entire work, and that the obsession with duration is a reflection on the manifest failure of Communist revolution in the

twentieth century.³⁵ But perhaps this is an instance, arguably one among many, wherein we find Althusser’s theoretical acumen supervening on his party-political sympathies, and the concern of the work is not with any extant Communist state. It is too often forgotten that Althusser’s critique of humanism was first and foremost a critique of Stalinism – it was a critique of Stalinism that was ‘anti-humanist’. For Althusser, the horror of the Stalinist conception of politics was that it was grounded in a notion of human essence that was occluded, but could only be fully realized or brought to fruition in history; the name for this phenomenon in the Stalinist case was economism. Tendentious as it was, Althusser’s ‘scientific’ Marx was designed as a rejection of all essentialist and expressivist ontologies and anthropologies; the notion that humanity has an ‘essence’ that needs to be expressed. With Lefort, what we find is a resurgence of anthropology that is, at root, part of the same tradition that Althusser claimed ran from Feuerbach to Husserl and on into Heidegger. Indeed, with Althusser we certainly are at the antipodes of a Lefort who believes, as Warren Breckman has aptly put it, that ‘religion reveals something fundamental about the political ... that philosophical thought should try to preserve’, namely the experience that Lefort describes as ‘the experience of a difference which relates human beings to their humanity, and which means that their humanity cannot be self-contained, that it cannot set its limits, and that it cannot absorb its origins and ends into those limits’.³⁶ To be sure, in his late writings of the 1980s Althusser evinces a belated sympathy for Heidegger, one that arguably confuses the substance of his writings. This sympathy was no doubt a result of the force of Derrida’s reading, which finally decoupled Heidegger from the anthropology of his early writings. But what Althusser never ceased to reject was the pathos of authenticity in Heidegger’s work, the notion that an authentic mode of existence is one that assumes the full weight of its finite conditions. A similar pathos of authenticity resides in Lefort’s work too – but instead of being a concern for the authenticity of *Dasein*, or the human, it’s the authenticity of ‘the political’. Nominally political events in which ‘the political’ is obscured are not ‘authentically’ political.

As noted before, the driving force of Lefort’s work was his contempt for Jacobinism and his obsession with totalitarianism as an ever-present threat to democracy. And it would be difficult to gainsay that there is something salutary in Lefort’s scepticism towards the authoritarianism of the party-form. But in Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli we actually find the former

using the latter to develop his own critique of Jacobinism, one that rejects the crude vacillation between horror and scorn that compromises Lefort's approach. Citing the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Althusser writes:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past. It cannot begin its own work until it has sloughed off all its superstitious regard for the past. Earlier revolutions have needed world-historical reminiscences to deaden their awareness of their own content. (MU, 49)

Marx was criticizing the Robespierrest fetish for Romanist garb – the tragedy that presaged the farce of 1848. Althusser is criticizing the Marxist romance with its revolutionary inheritance, and this from a perspective internal to Marxism. In *Machiavelli and Us*, he criticizes the Jacobins thus: '[T]hey needed the excess of the past relative to the present, in order to disguise the narrowness of the actual content of the bourgeois revolution' (MU, 50). The signal virtue of Machiavelli is the denial of this mythic and compensatory excess, one that covers up the fact that a genuine political founding is not under way. How striking, then, to find that for Lefort, the main virtue of the Machiavellian œuvre is that it contains 'an excess of thinking over that which is thought' (MM, 32–3). This 'excess' is hazardous because it grounds politics not in its own effects, but in a metaphysical basis that is just as inscrutable as the divine authorities. To be sure, it's not an 'excess' that can be known – the void or empty place of democracy is precisely a place of 'non-knowledge' – but that imbues it with even more authority as a result. Inscrutability and authority often go hand in hand.

In an ingenious analogy, Althusser says in a 1977 lecture that Machiavelli ultimately gives us an account of primitive accumulation in politics that is not unlike the primitive accumulation that stymied Marx's efforts to produce a coherent account of capitalism (MU, 125). The point of the political founding is precisely that it is not intelligible according to any philosophy of history, and attempts to make it so effectively dissimulate the partisanship attendant to all political acts. In an interview Althusser said: 'One cannot be both a Marxist and coherent.'³⁷ The point is as serious as its expression is jocose. Attempts to develop a coherent ontology of the political cannot but be read as attempts to demarcate the field of politics and, in the same stroke, its possibilities. This is the sense in which Machiavelli was a revolutionary political thinker for Althusser. Where republicans of many different stripes would name the Revolution so as to categorize it and

recalibrate it as effectively anti-political in an ontology of political forms, Althusser reads Machiavelli to disabuse himself of his philosophical prejudices and encounter a way of thinking about politics whose partisanship is formally explicit at the outset and all the more effective as a result. Every time one reads *The Prince* one finds at the end not a conclusion but an exhortation. Incomplete in principle, the revolution in political thinking Machiavelli unleashed five hundred years ago seems anything but over.

Notes

1. Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making* [1972], trans. Michael B. Smith, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2012. Page numbers for references to this volume appear after MM in brackets in the main text.
These reflections on Lefort's Machiavelli were first delivered at the workshop 'The Virtues of *The Prince*: 500 Years of Reception and Influence', School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, 20–21 June 2013. My thanks go to Cathy Curtis and Richard Devetak for inviting me to contribute to the event.
2. The main outcome was Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* [1964], ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1968.
3. See Samuel Moyn, 'Marxism and Alterity: Claude Lefort and the Critique of Totality', in *The Modernist Imagination: Intellectual History and Critical Theory*, ed. Warren Breckman et al., Berghahn, New York, 2009, pp. 99–116. For a broader assessment of Lefort's trajectory, see Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, pp. 147–58. Finally, for a comprehensive overview of Lefort's project, see Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2005.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* [1960], trans. Richard C. McCleary, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p. 223.
5. See Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectual Against the Left: The Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s*, Berghahn, New York, 2004, for a detailed account that situates these shifts in terms of French local politics. To be sure, the dominance of this Republicanism – which is a broad church containing figures as diverse as Marcel Gauchet and Jean-Claude Milner – is contested in France by thinkers who might be more widely known abroad, e.g. Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. But perhaps these latter thinkers are such skilled polemicists precisely because their views are not the dominant ones. Cf. Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Verso, London, 2006, and Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Verso, London, 2009.
6. Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort*, pp. xxiv–xxix.
7. See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World* [1984], trans. Oscar Burge, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997, and François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* [1978], trans. Elborg Forster, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981. For a compelling

- argument for the impact of Lefort's thinking on Furet's historiographical work, see Samuel Moyn, 'On the Intellectual Origins of Furet's Masterpiece', *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2008.
8. On the political history of this concept, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995. On France in particular, see pp. 143–56.
 9. See Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, pp. 113–47.
 10. See Dick Howard, 'Claude Lefort: A Political Biography', in *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Martín Plot, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 15–22; p. 19. On Gauchet, see Samuel Moyn, 'Savage and Modern Liberty: Marcel Gauchet and the Origins of New French Thought', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2005, pp. 164–87; p. 172.
 11. For an inadvertently illuminating demonstration of the limited use of the charge 'reactionary', beyond its rhetorical value, see Daniel Lindenberg's polemic *Le rappel à l'ordre: Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires*, Seuil, Paris, 2002, which ranges Badiou and Gauchet together alongside the novelist Michel Houellebecq and currents of American religious fundamentalism, deeming them to share collective responsibility for a new anti-democratic ethos in French intellectual life.
 12. Though Lefort's thought no doubt helped buttress Furet's increasingly virulent anti-Communism, Lefort himself took an ironic distance from Furet's position in the latter's final major work, a diatribe titled *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth-Century*, trans. Deborah Furet, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999. Cf. Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communisms and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, trans. Julian Bourg, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007.
 13. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London, 1999.
 14. Althusser's late development of 'aleatory materialism' has proven to be an attractive topic for discussion in the contemporary resurgence of interest in his thought. It receives extensive attention in multiple essays in Katja Diefenbach et al., *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, and is the subject of an insightful monograph: Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*, trans. Gareth Griffiths and Kristina Köhli, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2009. At issue in the disputes over 'aleatory materialism' is a familiar one whenever previously unknown elements of a thinker's corpus come to light: do these new finds suggest continuity or a break? The answer is disputable, probably endlessly so (just ask Althusser). Regardless, in the case of 'Machiavelli and Us', Althusser's French editors have done an immeasurable service by flagging every instance where Althusser added an amendment to the text in an 'aleatory materialistic' idiom, an apparatus which Gregory Elliott mercifully retained for the English version. These late additions are not impertinent to the claim I will make further on about the text's original purposes.
 15. Louis Althusser, *Politique et Histoire de Machiavel à Marx: Cours à l'École normale supérieure, 1955–1972*, Seuil, Paris, 2006, pp. 193–254.
 16. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* [1975], 2nd edn, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2003.
 17. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 550, 573. On Pocock's complex debt to Arendt and the historical and distinctly American context of *The Machiavellian Moment* more generally, see Mira L. Siegelberg, 'Things Fall Apart: J.G.A. Pocock, Hannah Arendt, and the Politics of Time', *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 10, no. 1 2013, pp. 109–34. Siegelberg's article illuminated for me some of the conceptual issues involved in Lefort's engagement with Machiavelli apropos the revolutionary inheritance in a culturally different – though in surprising ways political similar – intellectual context.
 18. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper Perennial, New York, 2008. See in particular pp. 277ff, for the set of claims consequent from the fact that 'the primordial ontological basis for Dasein's existentiality is temporality'.
 19. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 551. The thoroughly dialectical nature of the 'Machiavellian Moment', both in itself (qua the tension between 'civic virtue' and 'secular time', the latter of which will finally amount to 'commerce' in Pocock's later work) and as it makes its way historically from Florence to the American colonies, puts paid to any notions that Cambridge School contextualism is *eo ipso* incommensurable with dialectical thinking. The argument might be put forward that Pocock has abandoned such philosophically dubious modes of thought in his current work, his five-volume (and counting) magnum opus *Barbarism and Religion*, devoted to an intellectual-historical reconstruction of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But this would square awkwardly with Pocock's admonition in the 2002 afterword to *The Machiavellian Moment*'s second edition: 'Historians often fail to practice the dialectical thinking they should study; they treat every thesis as if it were meant to explain a whole field, oppose it to another for which the same claim is made, and connect the two by such negative linkages as not-but, more-than, and from-to. ... [B]ut it is essential to the concept of a "Machiavellian moment" that diverse principles should form part of the same action, and perhaps that they should be incapable of a final resolution' (p. 578).
 20. Ibid., p. 552.
 21. Cf. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2011, especially ch. 4: 'Revolution at a Distance, or Moral Terror,' pp. 81–117.
 22. Claude Lefort, 'Penser la révolution dans la Révolution française', in *Essais sur le politique, XIXe–XXe siècles* [1986], Seuil/Points, Paris, 2001, p. 113.
 23. Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, p. 157. Further references are in the text.
 24. Claude Lefort, *Les formes de l'histoire: essais d'anthropologie politique* [1978], Gallimard/Folio, Paris, 2000, p. 200.
 25. Cf. Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London, 2001.
 26. Badiou criticizes Arendt's work directly in his *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, Verso, London, 2005, pp. 10–25. See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998. One of Pocock's

main collections is titled *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays in Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985). Again, although Pocock's work is not typically juxtaposed to more 'continental' inquiries into the history of political thought – a consequence no doubt mainly of disciplinary prejudices, on the part of both authors and readers – the dialectical structure of many of his schemata could make for some productive comparisons. At times, his 'virtue' and 'commerce' almost seem to be his *tuché* and *automaton* – reciprocal poles of instance and accretion that form the stuff of history, personal or otherwise.

27. See Louis Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1970.
28. This theme emerges from the interviews collected in Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, eds, *Concept and Form: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Verso, London, 2012, pp. 169–290.
29. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, New York, 1971, pp. 123–205.
30. I develop this point in Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2014.
31. In this sense, Lefort's reading is exemplary of all that Walter Benn Michaels laments in contemporary reading practices, whereas Althusser maintains a salutary commitment to the resistance of Machiavelli's writings, locating their meaning in their purpose rather than their reception. This is ironic given that Althusser's more general formalism grounded in a 'Theory of theoretical practice' might seem anathema to the author of 'Against Theory'. See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2004.
32. From here, page numbers for references to Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, appear in brackets after *MU* in the main text.
33. In Quentin Skinner's view, prior to Machiavelli, 'it had generally been assumed that the possession of *virtù* could be equated with the possession of all the major virtues. With Machiavelli, by contrast, the concept of *virtù* is simply used to *whatever* range of qualities the prince may find it necessary to acquire in order to "maintain his state" and "achieve great things"' (Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Volume 1: *The Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, p. 132). In this regard, Skinner plays the Althusser to Pocock's Lefort. In both pairings, the differences are slight – and arguably just as significant.
34. This is an instance where Althusser added 'because aleatory' to the end of the sentence in the 1980s. My omission of it here is purposive.
35. See in particular Gopal Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics: Capitalism and Power in an Age of War*, Verso, London, 2009, ch. 12, 'From Florence to Moscow,' pp. 253–62.
36. Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic*, p. 159.
37. Cited by G.M. Goshgarian in Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–1987*, Verso, 2006, p. xiv.

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