**MACHIAVELLI AND THE CONSTELLATIVE USE OF HISTORY**

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**Introduction**

It is common for readers of the political thought of Niccolò Machiavelli to begin their inquiries by noting the diversity of interpretative conclusions that have been drawn regarding his thought, as well as the multitude of often times mutually irreconcilable philosophical and political positions that he has been forced into.[[1]](#footnote-1) And yet few of these readers attempt to critically scrutinize the foundation of such interpretative operations, assuming on the contrary that their own specific methodological modes – from precise contextual analyses of the historical environment in which Machiavelli’s work was produced to deep textual readings emphasizing the esoteric or concealed content open to the eye of the sensitive interlocutor – are capable of penetrating to the truth of Machiavelli.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is thus, for example, not a problem for such a close reader of Machiavelli as Harvey Mansfield to write, in reference to the interpretative work of Leo Strauss, that “as far as I know, among hundreds of statements in *Thoughts on Machiavelli* susceptible of mistake, not one single mistake has yet been exposed.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The possibility of an objectively correct reading of the intrinsic meaning of the Machiavellian texts is not only achievable, but perhaps already achieved.

What I would like to suggest in this article, however, is that the very effort to read Machiavelli in terms of the schematic representation of a fixed meaning or intention itself constitutes a violation of the spirit of the Machiavellian project. Critical reflection on the nature of the Machiavellian methodology, specifically on Machiavelli’s unique deployment of those historical examples which form the background to his political thought, opens up to us a unique vantage-point from which to evaluate the meaning of his theoretical project. This paper will attempt to reassess the well-known tension in Machiavelli’s thought between the claim to novelty and the appeal to the wisdom of the ancients. Rather than implore the contemporary actor to slavishly repeat established modes of doing and being, Machiavelli encourages him or her to redeploy the principle of creativity that lay at the source of those examples that are highlighted for the sake of the stimulation of political activity in the present. Aiming not at a literal representation of the sequence of historical events, Machiavelli selectively re-appropriates ancient examples and arranges them in specific organizations of thought in order to affirm the uniquely human capacity for political creation. This methodology, I suggest, is best thought of as a type of thinking in constellations such as was most systematically articulated in the twentieth-century by Walter Benjamin. This approach, whereby Machiavelli imaginatively constructs universals through the juxtaposition of conceptual particulars, is considered by him as the most effective strategy for countering the type of uncritical historicism that assumes a fixed trajectory of events that forecloses the possibility of meaningful human intervention in the world. Machiavelli’s appeal to the past is in the final instance made for the sake of a breaking free from the past, for the sake of the affirmation of the human potential to upset the order of things through the institution of the new. One of Machiavelli’s enduring contributions to the study of political theory is his reorientation of it, from a form of rational argumentation grounded in certain universal rules of reading and interpretation, to a mode of aesthetic practice considered in terms of the creative redistribution of meanings, a creative redistribution that perpetually keeps open the potential significance of the political text.

**Active vs. Contemplative Historical Appropriation**

It is by no means original to point out the apparent contradiction in Machiavelli’s use of history as a means for articulating a political ethos which emphasizes the virtues of novelty and innovation. In the words of Claude Lefort, “the thinker who was aware of innovating absolutely and whom posterity has indeed judged to have opened a new path to political thought, this man wished to erect Antiquity into a model.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Hence in the Preface to the *Discourses on Livy* Machiavelli’s simultaneous proclamation of his decision to “take a path untrodden by anyone,” and his criticism of the inability of contemporary actors to properly imitate ancient examples.[[5]](#footnote-5) The contradiction between novelty and imitation in Machiavelli’s exhortation to return to the study of ancient examples, of course, is only an apparent one, his return to antiquity never taking the form of a simple repetition. It constitutes rather, in the case of the *Discourses*, an imaginative reconstruction of the image of the Roman republic, made for the sake of the production of an alternative mental image of Rome that is capable of stimulating a practical imperative that stretches into a future marked by the production of the new. Machiavelli thus contrasts his own critical and reflective form of engaging with antiquity with those of modes of appropriating the past which dominate the present-day, and at which he can only “marvel and grieve.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Specifically, he will criticize those forms of historical appropriation that reduce Rome to a merely aesthetic object meant to be passively contemplated by a disinterested observer. Hence a typical mode of contemporary Florentine appreciation: “a fragment of an ancient statue has been bought at a high price because someone wants to have it near oneself, honor his house with it, and to be able to have it imitated by those who delight in that art.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The goal is the extraction of a private pleasure that is achieved through the contemplation of the static form of the object.

The consequences of such a mode of historical appropriation can only be conformist. To the extent that it takes as its object a fixed image of the being of the city, an object that can be aesthetically contemplated to the degree that it is seen as complete and perpetual, it is fundamentally conservative, and hence an instrument for those who have an interest in the reproduction of the existing political status quo. The conservative reading of Rome that was dominant in the Florence of Machiavelli’s time was an ideological representation that was oriented toward the symbolic maintenance of the current structure of the city, covering up the contingent fact of patrician domination. In Martin Breaugh’s words, “This representation of Rome stemmed from the humanist tradition whereby the inhabitants of the Eternal City were unquestionably the Florentines’ direct ancestors, the humanists’ objective being to consolidate and strengthen the patrician institutions of Florence.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The extent to which Machiavelli methodologically diverts from traditional humanist historiography cannot be understated. Felix Gilbert notes that in fact, humanist historiography was explicitly political in character: “It was meant to present significant events in an impressive form so that the readers’ political pride and moral courage would be strengthened.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Although for Machiavelli the practice of historical analysis was also political in form, its aim should be not the valorization of select past events for the sake of the strengthening of contemporary patriotic sentiment. Even in the case of the *Florentine Histories*, for example, the object of Gilbert’s analysis here, where Machiavelli is not explicitly affirming an ideal mode of human doing or being, his focus on the corrupt and dysfunctional elements or moments in Florence’s history suggests a project that is fundamentally critical in orientation.

Machiavelli’s rejection of the aesthetic mode of contemplation as the preferred form of historical engagement is thus a correlate of the rejection of the hypostatization of the existing organization of the city. The activation of the critical attitude and the critique of disinterested understanding functions to break up the unitary image of Rome as a perfectly unified and harmonious society that has achieved an ideal form of being, a form of being that is reproduced in the present distribution of functions in the city.[[10]](#footnote-10) On the contrary, Machiavelli’s consideration of Rome is novel precisely to the degree that it is oriented toward novelty, to the degree that it may be pressed into the service of critical political action, to the interruption of the existent and the reinstitutionalization of the social order. Those who treat the engagement with the classical histories in a disinterested and passive manner deny the specifically political potential that the former may open for us, if we approach them with the proper spirit. The failure of historical imitation results “from not having a true knowledge of histories, through not getting from reading them that sense nor tasting that flavor that they have in themselves.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Machiavelli here seems clear: his preferred form of imitation, that which reflects a “true knowledge of histories,” is not one that aims at the literal reproduction of the trajectory of historical events, but rather one that sensorially penetrates to the indeterminate soul of the work.[[12]](#footnote-12) What this soul reveals to us is the specifically human potential to create the new through the exercise of *virtù*. What must be imitated is not a specific organization of events, but rather the critical spirit that animated the novel historical action.[[13]](#footnote-13) Machiavelli’s use of history is thus an active one: what deserves to be remembered is that which reveals to us the potential for free political creation. Merely aesthetic reflection on the humanistic tradition is subordinated to remembrance that looks to actualize this potential.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Merely aesthetic reflection on the humanistic tradition is thus subordinated to the active and public life. Commentators have usually interpreted this subordination in terms of Machiavelli’s call both for a reactivation of an ethically-oriented mode of critical thinking or reflective judgment, and for the pressing of this mode into the service of a concrete political project aiming at the creation of a new form of political organization on the Italian peninsula. Such was classically recognized by Hegel, for example, in his 1802 essay “On the German Constitution,” where he identifies Machiavelli’s primary political concern as the self-constitution of a popular and independent Italian state. Hegel thus recognizes that Machiavelli, far from being an apologist for tyranny, is attempting to think the practical conditions for the unification of a dispersed people into a political mass; “this is his demand and the principle which he opposes to the misery of his country.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Machiavelli’s theoretical project, articulated primarily through his historical juxtapositions, is thus unintelligible without consideration of what Louis Althusser will identify as his specific political conjuncture. The significance of Hegel’s reading for Althusser lay in his recognition of the historical project of Machiavelli, as well as Machiavelli’s recognition of the conjunctural conditions from which this project must necessarily be launched: “A certain way of thinking about politics, not for its own sake, but in the shape of the formulation of a problem and the definition of a historical task – this is what surprises Hegel, and breaks open the empire of his own philosophical consciousness.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Machiavelli’s historical use of antiquity, the form of the relationship that he establishes between the past and the present case, can only be evaluated within the context of the conjuncture: “Just as Machiavelli does not apply a general theory of history to particular concrete cases, so he does not apply antiquity to present. Just as the general theory of history intervenes solely on condition of being determined by a series of ‘negations’ that have meaning only as a function of the central political problem, so too antiquity intervenes only under the determination of Rome, in order to illuminate the centre of everything – the political *vacuum* of Italy – and the task of filling it.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Although commentators have often stressed the degree to which this image of an active or critical history, a history practically oriented toward the generation of social and political change, is contrasted with a conservative history, a history which takes the form of the passive contemplation of complete aesthetic objects, they have not gone far enough in articulating the form of the Machiavellian historiographical method and its implications for how Machiavelli understands the practice of political theory. An initial entry into this question can be developed through a consideration of the specificity of Machiavelli’s use of Livy. It has been noted that there is nothing systematic in the method by which Machiavelli appeals to the authority of Livy.[[18]](#footnote-18) Machiavelli is clearly not concerned with the simple reproduction of the Livian narrative, as evidenced by the perpetual tendency he has to divert from Livy via processes of elision, exaggeration, and on occasion fabrication. Markus Fischer, for example, will provide two examples of Machiavelli’s deliberate misreading of Livy:[[19]](#footnote-19) in *The History of Rome* Livy reports that Romulus’ murder of Remus was simply the culmination of a fit of rage and jealousy[[20]](#footnote-20), whereas Machiavelli roots it in Romulus’ perception of the necessities of foundation[[21]](#footnote-21); and although Livy tries to demonstrate the degree to which the Roman violation of a peace agreement with the Samnites had a just origin,[[22]](#footnote-22) Machiavelli uses this episode to demonstrate that states need not keep promises that were made under duress.[[23]](#footnote-23) And even when Machiavelli is relatively faithful to the Livian account of events, the interpretation of the political significance of these events is often greatly different.[[24]](#footnote-24) It would thus be fair to say that Machiavelli only “pretends to be a commentator,”[[25]](#footnote-25) or even that “Machiavelli’s Livy is a character of Machiavelli.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In the words of J.H. Whitfield, “the *Discorsi* are not an archaeological inquiry, or even a critical discussion of Livy, seen in historical perspective.”[[27]](#footnote-27) On the contrary, there is a “dual function of Livy and Machiavelli; the first constructs the past, makes it consist; the second seizes what is relevant, in the effort to construct the present, and the make the future consist.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Needless to say, furthermore, Machiavelli’s use of historical sources extends far beyond his appropriation of Livy[[29]](#footnote-29), and yet the same pattern of creative redeployment of source material is identifiable in these other cases. Here we may mention only two of the most well-known of Machiavelli’s appropriations: that of Cicero’s image of the modes of the lion and the fox, and that of Polybius’ theory of cyclical historical movement. Cicero affirms a weak human difference in body and spirit through his account of the human being’s capacity for playing roles, for adopting personae as on the stage. Regardless of individual personae and the fact of this difference, however, there remains a fundamental substratum of universal nature. Our universal persona “is common, arising from the fact that we all have a share in reason and in the superiority by which we surpass brute creatures.”[[30]](#footnote-30) The legitimate scope of individual behavior – the degree to which we can manifest our personae specific to us as individuals – is delimited by universal nature: “Each person should hold on to what is his as far as it is not vicious, but is peculiar to him, so that the seemliness that we are seeking might more easily be maintained. For we must act in such a way that we attempt nothing contrary to universal nature; but while conserving that, let us follow our own nature, so that even if other pursuits may be weightier and better, we should measure our own by the rule of our own nature.”[[31]](#footnote-31) For Cicero the modes of the lion and the fox, of force and deceit, are precisely those types of action that violate our fundamental nature, those which “seem most alien to a human being.”[[32]](#footnote-32) For Machiavelli, on the other hand, the form of activity characterized by the images of the fox and the lion do not represent a violation of human nature, but rather, the very oscillation between the two modes, undertaken as a result of the critical reflection on the nature of political necessity, represents the highest form of human nature.[[33]](#footnote-33) The shifting of appearances, possible to the extent that individuals possess a capacity for self-display and representation, is that which is necessary if one is to actualize the potential for action and assert through time one’s status as a virtuous actor.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Machiavelli also subtly subverts the theory of cyclical historical movements posited by Polybius. For Polybius there is “a regular cycle of constitutional revolutions, and the natural order in which constitutions change, are transformed, and return again to their original stage.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Such changes are the result of “an undeviating law of nature.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Every unmixed form of government is unstable to the extent that it contains within itself its negative malignity, which will eventually pervert it into its opposite. It is generally assumed on the part of readers that Machiavelli’s defense of the mixed regime is the means by which he attempts to overcome the instability of the political realm and stabilize the being of the polity. As Lefort points out, though, it is highly doubtful that Machiavelli intends to take Polybius seriously, as there is no reference to the cyclical theory of regimes after the very beginning of the *Discourses*, and the ideal of the mixed regime is quickly abandoned.[[37]](#footnote-37) Already in the chapter dealing with the cyclical theory is Machiavelli undermining the traditional image of the harmonious mixed regime by emphasizing Rome’s affirmation of the disunion between the plebs and the nobles, thus contradicting the classical position that the virtue of the mixed regime lay in the establishment of a proportioned unity in which each part through performing its social role contributes to the overall concord of the society. By the end of the book it has become clear that the very goal of social stability has been rejected as a normative end, Machiavelli instead theorizing the republic in terms of a political regime that is open to the necessity of being continually restructured so as to adapt to the contingent indeterminacy of history. The necessity of the regime’s openness to institutional interrogation is affirmed by Machiavelli in numerous places[[38]](#footnote-38), but is perhaps most well-articulated in the very title to *Discourses* III:49, which reads in part, “A Republic Has Need of New Acts of Foresight Every Day If One Wishes to Maintain It Free”. Machiavelli affirms in this chapter that accidents arise in cities “every day,” and that the maintenance of the polity depends upon not a social closure in which all political roles, functions, and institutions have become fixed, but rather a continual willingness to reorder the form of the regime.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The consideration of Machiavelli’s use of historical sources, and in particular of his use of Livy, like that between the claim of novelty and the appeal to imitation, presents us with another characteristic Machiavellian contradiction: the authority of Livy is affirmed as that most adequate to the extraction of meaning from the examples of Rome, and yet this authority is perpetually undermined through a highly selective and altered presentation of these examples, through the active misapplication of the Livian lessons. The second contradiction is merely a manifestation of the first, and is resolved in the same manner. Livy is of use in the contemporary political conjuncture to the extent that we are critically and reflectively able to represent elements of his histories which, through being combined in specific organizations of thought, reveal to us certain fundamental ethical and political imperatives relevant to the present. In this representation the Livian examples become other than what they originally were; they transcend their status as fixed statements regarding empirical patterns of behavior, calling into question the very practice of historical representation, representation that seeks to organize the past into a complete object fit for contemplation. Machiavelli’s selective approach to Livy is thus intended to overcome the conservatism of the Livian project. In Lefort’s words, “Machiavelli invokes him in order to win over his readers and to lead them, by stages, to place in doubt this historian’s interpretation and, finally, to disengage from the aristocratic principles governing that interpretation.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Thinking in Constellations**

Machiavelli’s active engagement with the past, mediated primarily through the texts of Livy in the case of the *Discourses*, is undertaken for the sake of the activation of Florentine political innovation in the present. In *The Prince*’s dedicatory letter this relation between the past and the future, mediated through the deployed historical examples, is similarly affirmed as the ground from which emerges all practical political knowledge, Machiavelli proclaiming that his specific historical understanding has been achieved relationally through his study of ancient things and his experience with modern ones.[[41]](#footnote-41) If individuals and the world maintained an identical form across time, engagement in only one of the two modes would be necessary. But such is not the case, and hence the necessity of Machiavelli’s method. Given the nature of this method, it would be a mistake to judge the efficacy of the Machiavellian project on the basis of only one of its primary elements considered in its singularity. Most significantly, when evaluating Machiavelli’s use of historical examples as a mode of communicating political ideals we must above all resist the temptation to interpret the legitimacy of the presentation in terms of the establishment of a strict correspondence between the Machiavellian discourse and the literal trajectory of events.[[42]](#footnote-42) Indeed, Machiavelli himself seems to implicitly reject this mode of interpretation through the figure of Fabrizio Colonna in *The Art of War*, a text which, importantly, is also an imaginative construction which is ostensibly presented as a recollection of a conversation between Fabrizio and Cosimo Rucellai in the Orti Oricellari. Early in Book One Fabrizio will make clear to his interlocutors that if in their dialogue he has implored modern actors to imitate certain military modes and orders of the ancients, such an imitation is not meant to be immediate, an impossibility given no other reason that the entirely different social contexts in which the ancient lessons are to be applied. As Fabrizio says, “when I was talking about imitating the ancients in their austere manner of living, I did not mean to carry matters to such extremities as you seem to think, but to propose some other things of a gentler and more practicable nature, such as would be more suitable to the present times, and which I think might very well be established if they were introduced and countenanced by some men of authority in government.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

 It is insufficient to simply suggest, as several readers do, that the existence of a discontinuity between the images that Machiavelli constructs and the established historical record can be taken as evidence that Machiavelli does not intend his examples to be taken at face value.[[44]](#footnote-44) To borrow terms put forward by Edmund Jacobitti, we must be sensitive to the distinction between Machiavelli’s rhetorical history and scientific history. Whereas the latter attempts to systematically recollect events as they actually occurred and order them in a straight-forward representative manner, the former looks to imaginatively construct “external poetic universals” through the heuristic appropriation of past symbols and values, universals which the present historical actor may seize upon and apply in her own context in the effort to stimulate political change: “The task of the historian was to take situations, events, or characters from the past and make them fit current needs. If the actual record did not do so, if it was incomplete or silent, it simply needed to be embellished and recomposed in order to provide the examples.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Such a method was, again, for the sake of the actualization of concrete political ends: “The actual events were secondary to the symbolic interpretation to which the events could be put. In short, the more Machiavelli infused mere empirical reality with poetic interpretation, that is, the farther he moved from chronological description of reality, the more instructive the writing became for use in reality.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Preceding Jacobitti, Federico Chabod identifies Machiavelli’s mode of expression as being structured by an imaginative as opposed to a logical principle, and as being oriented toward the invention of new political norms through the reinterpretation of prior realities: “Machiavelli’s imagination…accepts the legacy of the years, and converts it into a positive achievement – a new instrument, but still an imaginative one. On the other hand, it is nourished and illumined by an intense love of political invention – an obscure mental process by which a given situation is endowed with unsuspected possibilities.”[[47]](#footnote-47) This investment of the situation with new political potential is achieved through the critical redeployment of historical facts into new arrangements of thought: “Here is the true Machiavelli, assembling all the scattered elements of his experience and adapting them to another and more spacious form of existence with which they, viewed in the light of their individual, limited significance, would not appear commensurate.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The emergence of the new is the productive result of the creative and imaginative self-activity of the political theorist, a self-activity which takes the form of the reintegration of historical fragments, of past reflections and interpretations, into a new and “wholly unforeseen unity.”[[49]](#footnote-49) The end of historical analysis is not the reproduction of a fixed narrative, but the expression and extension of a fundamental imaginative capacity: “The value of what he says does not lie in the exactness of the detail. It lies in his inexhaustible creativeness, which even overlooks known facts, because it strives above all after continual self-development and self-renewal through an ever-widening experience.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

 The significance of these two readings lay in their explicit identification of Machiavelli’s creative deployment of historical examples with his normative concern with the affirmation of the new: the selective representation and juxtaposition of examples is seen as being, not just oriented toward the stimulation of practical action in the world, but also a manifestation of the very principle of human creativity that makes possible political change.[[51]](#footnote-51) Nevertheless, the full significance of this identification is not grasped to the extent that both Jacobitti and Chabod ultimately reduce the general principles which are produced via the juxtaposition of examples to universal rules of behavior. That is to say, the arrangement of examples *x, y,* and *z* is said to articulate the general maxim or rule *a,* a maxim or rule that is seen as being universally applicable across social contexts. Both readers succumb to the totalizing temptation to reduce the constructed figure of thought to a general unity which simply makes itself apparent in the concrete-specific case through the mode of comparison. Hence Chabod claims that Machiavelli “in any single event detects the ever-recurring workings of a universal process that is part and parcel of the human story.”[[52]](#footnote-52) The general idea which is illumined by the critical reconstruction of the arrangement of particulars is seen as being eternally manifest in each of these particulars prior to their arrangement in thought. Here it seems as if the eternal simply resides in the being-itself of the particular, such that “Between *to-day*, i.e. the passing moment with its particular problems, and *the eternal*, i.e. the great and ever-valid laws of politics, there certainly remains a continuing connection, we might even say reciprocity.”[[53]](#footnote-53) This image of the relation between particular and universal, where the former simply bears the latter in various apparent ways, is not able to fully grasp the Machiavellian concept of novelty. Rather than interpret the particular as a derivation of the universal, I believe that we would do better to interpret the universal as the productive consequence of a specific organization of particulars, and hence lacking an independent being prior to this organization. I will argue that Machiavelli, to the extent that he establishes this relationship between universal and particular, anticipates a methodological mode which in the twentieth century would be most famously developed by Walter Benjamin, and which can be labeled thinking in constellations.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Constellative thinking is distinct from traditional forms of comparative analysis that attempt to vertically relate concepts through the identification and isolation of the latter’s common derivation from a higher principle or term that remains static or fixed. It attempts to upset conceptual understandings that have ossified into second natures through the demonstration of the historical being of the phenomena under consideration. The theory of the constellation would be given its classic expression in Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin would initially distinguish between knowledge and truth, between philosophical representation and mathematical representation: “The more clearly mathematics demonstrate that the total elimination of the problem of representation – which is boasted by every didactic system – is the sign of genuine knowledge, the more conclusively does it reveal its renunciation of that area of truth towards which language is directed.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Philosophy must be oriented toward the representation of truth, as opposed to the acquisition of knowledge, which is characterized always by possession. Phenomena are capable of participating in truth only to the extent that they are able to elude assimilation into a system of acquired knowledge, only to the extent that their unity is broken up and their meaning multiplied. This multiplication is made possible through the empirical phenomenon’s representation in a concept placed in a specific historical constellation: “Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas. It is this same mediating role which fits them for the other equally basic task of philosophy, the representation of ideas.”[[56]](#footnote-56) As concepts are to knowledge, ideas are to truth. Truth, however, the representation of the idea, is not the representation of any determinate content, but rather the arrangement of the system of concepts: “For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of those elements.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Whereas concepts delineate the nature of the empirical, ideas relate concepts to one another, truth laying in this contingent interrelatedness of concepts. To the extent that the arrangement of concepts in the idea is the foundation of the representative substance, neither concepts nor ideas present themselves as thematizable. The idea is simply the arrangement of such concepts, an arrangement that does not look toward the identification of static and singular contents: “When the idea absorbs a sequence of historical formulations, it does not do so in order to construct a unity out of them, let alone to abstract something common to them all.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Concepts are not extracted from ideas of which they participate a priori, but rather ideas are constructed historically through the critical arrangement of conceptual elements. In the case of Machiavelli this arrangement of elements, that is to say his prudently redeployed historical examples, results in the production of several unique ideas, the two most important of which are the image of the new prince as the virtuous political actor in *The Prince*, and the image of the republic as an institutional form capable of mediating civic life in common in the *Discourses*.

**Perspectival Analysis and Constellative Thinking**

“Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.”[[59]](#footnote-59) The meaning of its perception, the way in which a star is appropriated by a viewing subject, is dependent upon the vantage-point from which the subject perceives, upon the constellation within which the star is seen to exist at the moment of perception. Similarly, the way in which the object is to be represented depends upon the critical arrangement of concepts in a particular constellation: “The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The form of subjective cognition thus structures the objectivity of that which the subject appropriates, opening the seemingly closed world of the object to a multiplicity of meanings or realities. In light of the above discussion, it is of the utmost significance that in *The Prince* Machiavelli begins his investigation into the nature of the virtuous political actor with an affirmation of the necessity of recognizing the perspectival character of knowledge. In his dedicatory letter he will highlight the degree to which the acquisition of particular knowledges is structured by the observer’s objective position in a circumscribed field that delimits understanding: “For just as those who stretch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places place themselves high atop mountains, similarly, to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be a prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Throughout Machiavelli’s political work we are continually confronted with this theme of perspectivism, the virtuous political actor being identified as one who is capable of representing to him or herself a multiplicity of different perspectives, recognizing the extent to which the shift in perspective fundamentally alters the concept, one’s perception of the nature of the object that is being observed. This is noted by Charles Tarlton, who observes that “there is no single position, no one opportunity of vision, no one outlook. Vantage point is everything, and everywhere is some vantage point or other. Every situation is, like the landscape, appreciated from some distinct point of view.”[[62]](#footnote-62) This is most notably expressed, for example, in Machiavelli’s exhortation to military leaders to privilege the study of the variance of sites and terrains, and how the occupation of different strategic locations strongly influences understanding.[[63]](#footnote-63) Hence the subject matter of *Discourses* III.39, in which Machiavelli writes that “Among the other things that are necessary to a captain of armies is the knowledge of sites and of countries, for without this general and particular knowledge a captain of armies cannot work anything well. Because all the sciences demand practice if one wishes to possess them perfectly, this is one that requires very great practice.”[[64]](#footnote-64) The key form of such practice, that aiming at the refinement of the capacity for critical perspectival analysis, is hunting: “One also cannot learn the knowledge of countries in any other advantageous mode than by way of hunting; for hunting, to one who uses it, makes one know the particular lay of that country in which he trains. Once one individual has made himself very familiar with a region, he then understands with ease all new countries; for every country and every member of the latter have some conformity together, so that one passes easily from the knowledge of one to the knowledge of the other.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

We must not be misled here by Machiavelli’s characterization of perspectival analysis seemingly suggesting that it generates in the prudent actor fixed standards of behavior which are capable of being applied in necessarily identical contexts. What is crucial to recognize here is that such forms of perspectival study are not valued to the degree that they result in the acquisition of a homogenous positive knowledge that can be referred to when one encounters equivalent situations. On the contrary, Machiavelli’s emphasis is not on a content, but a capacity, one being better equipped to critically confront the radically new situation when being familiar with various forms of perspectival representation. This becomes clear in Machiavelli’s discussion of the subject in Chapter 14 of *The Prince*. Once again the significance of hunting is affirmed, it being maintained that the actor “should learn the nature of sites, and recognize how mountains rise, how valleys open up, how plains lie, and understand the nature of rivers and marshes – and in this invest the greatest care.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Machiavelli will go on to suggest, however, that better learning the layout of your land is not for the sake of the construction of a fixed schema which is universally applicable across multiple times and spaces, but on the contrary, for the sake of the development of a critical skill or capacity that can be deployed in necessarily unique circumstances. Thus he writes, “through the knowledge of and experience with those sites, one can comprehend with ease every other site that it may be necessary to explore as new.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

The potential to refine this skill or capacity, furthermore, is potentially perpetual, as can revealed through the case of the Greek prince Philopoemen. Machiavelli will note that whenever Philopoemen was out with others he would always interrogate the landscape, asking, “‘If the enemy were on top of that hill and we were here with our army, which of us would have the advantage? How could one advance to meet them while maintaining order? If we wanted to retreat from here, how would we have to do it? If they retreated, how would we have to follow them?’”[[68]](#footnote-68) The practical questioning of Philopoemen illustrates to Machiavelli the non-possibility of ever achieving a critical mastery that would terminate the need for perspectival study. But once again, the fact that it is not possible to abstract such practical activity from historical study is revealed in the manner in which Machiavelli concludes Chapter 14, stressing again the relation between theory and practice, between the ancient and the present, through the reaffirmation of the need to supplement the study of terrains with the exercise of the mind via the reading of histories and critical reflection on the action of past actors: “Above all he should do as some excellent man has done in the past who found someone to imitate who had been praised and glorified before him, whose exploits and actions he always kept beside himself, as they say Alexander the Great imitated Achilles; Caesar, Alexander; Scipio, Cyrus.”[[69]](#footnote-69) This common theme in Machiavelli, that great “men almost always walk on paths beaten by others and proceed in their actions by imitation,”[[70]](#footnote-70) that the prudent political actor will attempt to imitate the modes of clearly virtuous individuals in the past, refers us to a very precise form of imitation. It would be a mistake, for example, to think of imitation in terms of the static reproduction of prior particulars, such as is done by Francis Bacon, for whom “The form of writing which of all others is fittest for this variable argument of negotiation and occasions is that which Machiavel chose wisely and aptly for government; namely, discourse upon histories or examples. For knowledge drawn freshly and in our view out of particulars, knoweth the way best to particulars again.”[[71]](#footnote-71) On the contrary, Machiavelli is advocating not the imitation of static particulars whose beings are stable prior to their arrangement in thought, not fixed and immobile patterns of behavior, but rather a creative and critical mode of being, a reflective orientation toward the world that allows us one to respond to the emergence of contingency in always unique ways. If the actor learns from these modes a form of flexibility and reflexivity, “when fortune changes, it will find him ready to resist them.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

This notion of imitation as innovation is particularly well articulated in *Discourses* II.16, where Machiavelli recalls the first battle of the Latin War, which he identifies as “The most important battle ever waged by the Roman people in any war with any nation.”[[73]](#footnote-73) The armies of the Romans and the Latins, Machiavelli tells us, were identical in all respects, possessing an equivalent skill, size, and obstinacy. This likeness was achieved as a consequence of the similar education of each: “having served in the military together a long time they were alike in language, order, and arms.”[[74]](#footnote-74) The fundamental difference between the two armies, according to Livy, was the greater virtue among the Roman captains. And how did this virtue manifest itself? Crucially, for Machiavelli it was expressed through the Roman captains’ abilities to utilize a mode of creative imitation in order to respond to the emergence of unexpected contingencies. Specifically, “two accidents arose in the managing of this battle that had not arisen before and of which there have been rare examples since: to keep the spirits of the soldiers firm, obedient to their commands, and decided on combat, one of the two consuls killed himself and the other his son.”[[75]](#footnote-75) The actions of the Roman consuls Decius, who killed himself, and Torquatus, who killed his son, adequately hardened the spirits of the Romans, separating them from their enemies and providing them with the energy needed to prevail. In light of the objective identity of the opposing forces, the Romans could be elevated only through “something extraordinary,”[[76]](#footnote-76) but something which was absolutely singular and without prior existence. Virtue was not located in the repetition of a past good or timeless example, but rather lay in a creative bringing forth of a completely new mode. And Machiavelli will maintain that this openness to innovation is in fact the source of all Roman virtue: “In showing the likeness of forces, Titus Livy shows the whole order that the Romans kept in armies and in fighting.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Virtue lay not in literal imitation, but in the imitation of a creative capacity that is deployed in always unique situations and which results in always unique modes. This account, furthermore, appears immediately before Machiavelli seemingly advocates a more traditional form of imitation, appealing to modern leaders to repeat specific ancient orders and patterns, in this case through the arrangement of the *astati, principi,* and *triari* in battle. There is no contradiction in the chapter, however, for once again, what Machiavelli admires in this latter example is the arrangement’s openness to change, the fact that this mode of fighting gives itself three opportunities before it is defeated. Modern armies are incapable of structuring themselves such that they are open to this multiplicity of chance, preferring instead to interpret their initial fate as the ultimate one, closing off any future possibility for a change of trajectory: “whoever does not stand except against the first push, as do all the Christian armies today, can lose early, for any disorder, any middling virtue, can take victory away from them.”[[78]](#footnote-78) To the extent that they eschew a willingness to organize themselves so as to allow for creative adaptation in response to changing fortune, the Christian armies affirm a one-sided and literal imitation of things, as opposed to a critical and reflective imitation of capacities. What should be affirmed, in other words, is that critical orientation that is able to prudently recognize the need for behavioral adaptation should innovative activity be perpetuated and new realities generated.

**Conclusion: Machiavelli and the Lessons of the Event**

Machiavelli’s valorization of the creative virtue of the political actor refers us back to our original distinction between active and contemplative history, to Machiavelli’s preference for the former as being located in his practical concern with the stimulation of future-oriented action in the present, with the potential to press historical analysis into the service of political creation. What Machiavelli hopes to reveal to his reader is the possibility for historical action, the fact that time is not sequential, but rather open to the shock of the event, to the emergence of the new. It is within the context of Machiavelli’s theorization of the event, of the human potential for historical creation, that we must understand the well-known concept of the *verità effettuale della cosa*. Distinguishing between his own historical approach, which takes off from the political potential germinating within the concrete here and now, and those abstractly utopian political projects ungrounded in consideration of the constraints of life in an empirical world, Machiavelli writes: “since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.”[[79]](#footnote-79) The *verità effettuale* does not refer us to any sort of absolute truth or reality that would pre-structure the direction of our action, but rather to the truth of the possibility for the virtuous actor to generate new political realities – events – through the critical analysis of worldly potential. In the words of Barbara Godorecci, the *verità effettuale* expresses a “conception of truth whose identity is tied to the event (‘lo evento della cosa’), to the process of living that is a constant becoming. In practical terms, Machiavellian *verità effettuale* rejects programming, if by ‘program’ one intends a pre-established goal to be achieved by pre-established methods (a rejection, therefore, of any specific form of methodology).”[[80]](#footnote-80) To recognize the *verità effettuale* is to recognize the contextual situation of your action within a non-teleological historical stream which you act into and which acts upon you, such interaction producing a multiplicity of unforeseeable and undetermined events.

In order to articulate such singularities, to further highlight the political significance of historical events, Machiavelli theoretically pushes them to their most extreme points. For Benjamin “Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed; so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes.”[[81]](#footnote-81) It is thus that “The concept has its roots in the extreme.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Machiavelli’s much noted method of exaggeration[[83]](#footnote-83) can here be thought in terms of a form of thinking at the extreme, utilized in order to affirm the capacity to initiate the new: “a rule of method, to think at the extremes, at the limits, and the application of this rule to the problem of how to begin in politics, or, if one prefers, to the problem of the new in history: the truly new is that which has no precedent and no legacy, that which is made from nothing, ex nihilo – therefore that which, in the strict sense of the word, is creation – as a consequence, the founder as creator.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Machiavelli pushes to the extreme his ancient sources in order to affirm the innovative capacity to create new political realities. I have argued in this article that not only, as is commonly pointed out, does Machiavelli’s appeal to the wisdom of the ancients not contradict his claim regarding his theoretical novelty, but also that this appeal is a deliberate methodological strategy affirming a broad affirmation of novelty most generally. The lessons Machiavelli would have us draw from the past are not to be found in our one-sided imitation of prior modes of doing and being, but rather in our critical recognition of the singularity of these past events, events that reveal to us the specifically human capacity for political creation. Machiavelli’s mode of historical appropriation aims at, through the creative reinvestment of the meaning of events through their selective juxtaposition in specific figures or constellations of thought, the articulation of this innovative potential. The recognition of this potential is then seen to provide a ground from which the interested political actor is able to launch an historical endeavor aimed at the transformation of the world. For Machiavelli such is the only legitimate mode of historical practice.

I would suggest that the implications of Machiavelli’s project for political theory, and in particular the history of political thought, are potentially far-reaching. What would it mean to read Machiavelli, for example, in the same way that Machiavelli reads Livy? To begin to answer this question would be to begin to explain the staggering diversity of interpretations that characterize the field of Machiavelli studies, which might be initially divided into two broad categories. As is noted, for example, by Eric Weil and Miguel Abensour, we may distinguish between an academic Machiavelli who exists only as an object of scholarship, and a political Machiavelli who emerges in the present historical context in order to assist us in articulating the being of the contemporary political conjuncture. In Abensour’s words, “The question is no longer to address the topic called Machiavelli, but to think Machiavelli through, or better to think *with* Machiavelli the political issues of the present.”[[85]](#footnote-85) This distinction between a scholarly and a political Machiavelli can be mapped onto Machiavelli’s distinction between a contemplative and an active history. Just as Machiavelli’s historical examples become, through their critical juxtaposition with one another, other than what they originally were, so might Machiavelli become other than himself depending upon how we choose to read him in the moment. Once we began to read Machiavelli in our time, in our own here and now, we find that, in the words of Weil, “other moments emerge and give a new life to he who, until then, was but one author among others.”[[86]](#footnote-86) The fact that Machiavelli was responding to his specific historical-political situation in no way limits his potential to intervene in our own. As Carlos Frade correctly notes, Machiavelli’s historical conjuncture cannot be reduced to the problem of Italian unification, there being no end to Machiavelli’s project: “It is in accordance with this eminently endless character of the struggle that Machiavelli theorized a praxis and its transmission – a praxis whose continuous character must be strongly emphasized, as it involves both the everyday and the extraordinary. Machiavelli’s intervention exceeds therefore the historically specific conjuncture and becomes an intervention in the human predicament.”[[87]](#footnote-87) In opposition to the wide-variety of contextualist and esoteric readings of Machiavelli, I would suggest that our goal should be not exclusively examining what it is that Machiavelli thought and why, but in addition, what it is that Machiavelli can do for us today, if we adopt the same approach to reading him as he did to his ancient sources.

1. John Plamenatz, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau*, ed. Mark Philp and Z.A. Pelczynski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yves Winter is one of several recent exceptions to this tendency, recognizing that “The question of Machiavelli’s ‘true intentions’ has no determinate answer, for the polysemy of his text makes securing a single meaning unfeasible.” Yves Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 738. Winter goes on to argue that this polysemy allows for the emergence of a democratic opening which Machiavelli himself perhaps never fully grasped. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Harvey C. Mansfield, “Strauss’s Machiavelli,” *Political Theory* 3, no. 4 (1975): 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Claude Lefort, “Machiavelli and the Verità Effetuale",” in *Writing: The Political Test*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), bk. 1.Preface.1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., bk. 1.Preface.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Martin Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*, trans. Lazer Lederhendler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Felix Gilbert, “Machiavelli’s ’Istorie Florentine": An Essay in Interpretation,” in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron P. Gilmore (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1972), 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 1.Preface.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On the use that Machiavelli makes of bodily and sensory metaphors and the degree to which they can be seen as elements of a comprehensive political theory of sensation see Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 74–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As Dick Howard writes in reference to Machiavelli’s appeals (*ricorsi*) to antiquity: “a ricorso is not a simple return to the past; it is a renewal of the institutional spirit that animates republican freedom.” Dick Howard, *The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought From the Greeks to the French & American Revolutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Here I differ in an important way from a reader such as Michael Sherberg. Sherberg correctly notes that Machiavelli’s reading of Rome is intended to function as a corrective to those fetishistic readings that care only about the aesthetic beauty of the object. Michael Sherberg, “The Problematics of Reading in Machiavelli’s Discourses,” *Modern Philology* 82, no. 2 (1991): 179. There is always a political dimension to reading. In the *Discourses*, for example, “Machiavelli establishes a basic pedagogical relationship with an implied reader regarding both politics and reading; he deploys overt and covert strategies meant to encourage a particular type of reading.” Ibid., 176. This mode, however, does not look toward the activation of the reader’s critical interpretative capacity, but rather the communication of Machiavelli’s own history, the appropriation of which closes off the reader’s potential to engage the text in a creative fashion: “the new arbiter of history is a Machiavelli whose seemingly objective stance in fact masks his displacement of Livy’s authority and the authority of the reader to judge history autonomously.” Ibid., 195. Overall, Machiavelli constructs a complex literary architecture composed of signposts intended to lead the reader to her own conclusions, the reader being taught to simply think Machiavelli’s way. In my own reading, by contrast, Machiavelli teaches the reader to think in her own way, to redeploy history for the sake of her own political project. I would thus agree with John Parkin that Machiavelli’s engagement with history is not only an imaginative and rhetorical one that attempts to productively transform the object for the sake of particular ends, but also that this method demands “an imaginative cooperation by the reader.” John Parkin, “Dialogue in The Prince,” in *Niccolò Machiavelli’s The Prince: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. G.W.F. Hegel, “The German Constitution,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Lawrence Dickey and H.B. Nisbet, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81. Along these lines, for a short attempt to situate the last chapter of *The Prince* within the context of the emergence of a unified Italian national consciousness in the face of a renewed period of foreign invasion, see Felix Gilbert, “The Concept of Nationalism in Machiavelli’s Prince,” *Studies in Renaissance* 1 (1954): 38–48. For Gilbert “The chapter reflects elements in the climate of the opinion of the time. The distinguishing fact is that Machiavelli fuses these elements together into a program of political action.” Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. François Matheron, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 46–47. Needless to say, Althusser is hardly the only commentator to note the practical commitments that motivate the Machiavellian theoretical project, and in particular the extent which Machiavelli’s use of history is critically deployed in order to advance this project. Here we may mention just some of these secondary contributions. Martin Fleisher, for example, observes that Machiavelli “was consciously motivated by the most direct and urgent political purposes in contrast to many nineteenth-century philosophers of history and historians of philosophy. Interest in the past was inspired by the desire to uncover a course of political action which would effectively solve pressing present problems.” Martin Fleisher, “The Ways of Machiavelli and the Ways of Politics,” *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 3 (1995): 331. He hence “turned to the past for the practical political purposes of working out the guidelines to action and inspiring his contemporaries to undertake the necessary political acts.” Martin Fleisher, “A Passion for Politics: The Vital Core of the World of Machiavelli,” in *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought*, ed. Martin Fleisher (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 118. Victoria Kahn, meanwhile, notes that Machiavelli pragmatically arranges his collection of specific historical examples so as to suggest “that the examples he has chosen are already informed by an act of interpretation, a judgement of their relevance to contemporary affairs.” Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 47. For Bruce James Smith, this relevance to contemporary affairs is framed in terms of Machiavelli’s commitment to the cultivation of the deed: “In teaching what men had done, Machiavellian history sought to teach men what they might do. This history was less a science of correct action than the origin of action itself. Machiavelli dared to make ‘the deed’ the first principle of history because he believed he had discovered the primordial principles which tied men to the past.” Bruce James Smith, *Politics & Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 38. And Jack D’Amico contrasts Machiavelli’s historical memory with those forms of remembrance which are incapable of restimulating the active spirit of the past: “It is not that men forget examples of past excellence but rather that they do not know how to remember in a way that will bring the past alive.” Jack D’Amico, “Machiavelli and Memory,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1989): 106. If such stimulation is to be achieved, the appropriation of the past must be critically oriented. Hence “one must question the ancients, drawing out significance and reliving a past that was their present. One must retain the critical self-awareness that permits mastery (rather than blind veneration) of the past and its use in the solution of present and future problems of state.” Ibid., 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. J.H. Whitfield, “Machiavelli’s Use of Livy,” in *Livy*, ed. T.A. Dorey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Markus Fischer, “Machiavelli’s Rapacious Republicanism,” in *Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul A. Rahe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xxxvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of The History of Rome from Its Foundations*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Londong: Penguin Books, 2002), bk. 1.7, 1.13–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 1.9.1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Livy, *Rome and Italy: Books VI-X of The History of Rome from Its Foundation*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1982), bk. 9.4–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 3.42. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For one recent explication of such a case of divergent interpretation see Michelle T. Clarke, “The Virtues of Republican Citizenship in Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 322–323. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Smith, *Politics & Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 141. Strauss also maintains that, to the extent that Machiavelli is not strictly concerned with the presentation of historical truth, he can be considered just as much an artist as an historian. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Whitfield, “Machiavelli’s Use of Livy,” 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For two recent works that detail the breadth of Machiavelli’s use of ancient sources see Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), and Rafael Major, “A New Argument for Morality: Machiavelli and the Ancients,” *Political Research Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2007): 171–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cicero, *On Duties*, ed. M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), bk. 1.107. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., bk. 1.110. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., bk. 1.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. James A. Arieti perceives that the fact that Machiavelli’s discussion of the lion and the fox refer us to essentially human as opposed to animal nature is revealed through his utilization of the figure of the centaur Chiron, who is a most unbeastly actor: “Throughout ancient literature, Chiron is the kindly, poetic, artistic, peace-loving centaur, the very antithesis of beast-like qualities.” James A. Arieti, “The Machiavellian Chiron: Appearance and Reality in The Prince,” *CLIO* 24, no. 4 (1995): 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chap. 18, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius, Volume I*, ed. and trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), bk. 6.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., bk. 6.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 224. Needless to say, however, Lefort is not the only commentator to question the literalness of Machiavelli’s engagement with Polybius. To mention just one example, Salvatore di Maria argues that Machiavelli’s view of history cannot be reduced to a cycle governed by natural laws, as in Polybius, precisely because Machiavelli so consistently portrays the course of history as being determined by human action, even if that action is constrained by fortune and human nature: “In sum, Machiavelli is not an historian of general conditions and cultural trends, but of ‘personaggi in azione sulla scena della vita’ (‘personages in action on the stage of life’).” Salvatore di Maria, “Machiavelli’s Ironic View of History: The Istorie Fiorentine,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1992): 251–252. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 1.18.2; ibid., bk. 1.34.3; ibid., bk. 1.49.2–3; ibid., bk. 1.60.1; ibid., bk. 3.1.2; ibid., bk. 3.9.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 3.49.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 3.49.1.

 Lefort, “Machiavelli and the Verità Effetuale",” 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. DL, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Alkis Kontos notes that historical analysis is irreducible to the objective transcription of literal events, but rather always informed by the active and critical intervention of the historian. This was understood by Machiavelli, who explicitly thought of his own use of history in these terms: “Each of his historical examinations ultimately is resolved into a principle, aphorism, or rule which reflects Machiavelli’s concluding interpretation of the event or issue and not necessarily a restatement of what is already accepted.” Alkis Kontos, “Success and Knowledge in Machiavelli,” in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 94. Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, meanwhile, writes that “Machiavelli does not use examples as a means to illustrate or introduce an argument. Rather, it is by the exposition of a given example that Machiavelli himself argues, judges, measures, weighs the pros and cons, contradicts, interrogates, and elaborates.” Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, “An Introduction to The Prince,” in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, ed. Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman, trans. Gerald Seaman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 25. These examples are crucially appropriated in a highly selective way: “He finds inspiration in his source and then adapts it, by omission and exaggeration, to his own argument.” Ibid., 26. The historical is thus being perpetually critically refashioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, trans. Neal Wood (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001), 12. My reading here differs from that of someone like Janet Coleman. Coleman emphasizes the extent to which Machiavelli’s use of history is an interested as opposed to disinterested one. For her, however, such historical representation is still just a form of straightforward imitation, depending upon a static and transhistorical understanding of human categories. Machiavelli’s historical method is not seen as a new one in itself, but rather a specifically political application of those historical methods applied practiced by many others, including jurists and physicians: “His aim is to show princes and republicans what other specialists already know how to do.” Janet Coleman, “Machiavelli’s Via Moderna: Medieval and Renaissance Attitudes in History,” in *Niccolò Machiavelli’s The Prince: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 41. What is revealed and that which stimulates action is simply a pre-existing pattern or form. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See, for example, Francesco Guicciardini, “Considerations on the Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli,” in *The Sweetness of Power: Machiavelli’s Discourses and Guicciardini’s Considerations*, trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 413; Catherine Zuckert, “The Life of Castruccio Castracani: Machiavelli as Literary Artist,” *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 4 (2010): 577–603; John M. Najemy, “Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia: A Reconsideration of Chapter 7 of The Prince,” *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 539–56; Ryan Balot and Stephen Trochimchuk, “The Many and the Few: On Machiavelli’s ‘Democratic Moment,’” *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 4 (2012): 559–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Edmund E. Jacobitti, “The Classical Heritage in Machiavelli’s Histories: Symbol and Poetry as Historic Literature,” in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 180, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Federico Chabod, “An Introduction to The Prince,” in *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. David Moore (Londons: Bowes & Bowes, 1960), 2–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 19–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Also relevant in this respect are J.R. Hale, who, although initially labeling Machiavelli’s selective appropriation of historical fragments “arbitrary,” goes on to note that these examples are in fact chosen and used in order to illuminate the specific general principles that Machiavelli wants to highlight. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, 155, and Felix Gilbert, for whom history in the Machiavellian tradition is less about the reproductive presentation of a sequence of facts in a linear time-continuum, and more about the selective appropriation of significant events which are then re-presented in a dramatic literary form. Gilbert, “Machiavelli’s ’Istorie Florentine": An Essay in Interpretation,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Federico Chabod, “Machiavelli’s Method and Style,” in *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. David Moore (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1960), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Reading Machiavelli in light of Benjamin, even if only methodologically, may initially seem strange. There is some precedent, though, for thinking certain commonalities between Machiavelli and members of the Frankfurt School. Most notably, Victoria Kahn argues that Machiavelli can be seen as a sort of kindred spirit to Adorno and Horkheimer, with the latter in fact being able to help us appreciate the rhetorical dimensions of the former’s thought: “Adorno and Horkheimer’s exemplary resistance to the traditional distinction between literary and philosophical or political texts can help us not only to see how literary and political notions of representation and imitation are inextricable in Machiavelli’s work but also to recover the rhetoric in his political theory.” Victoria Kahn, “Reduction and the Praise of Disunion in Machiavelli’s Discourses,” *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18, no. 1 (1988): 2. What Machiavelli resists, most notably expressed in the *Discourses’* praise of disusion, is the “lure of harmony and totality.” Ibid. Despite his generally critical view of Machiavelli (see, for example, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 257), this at least was recognized by Horkheimer, for whom Machiavelli was one of the “somber writers of the bourgeois dawn … who decried the egotism of the self, acknowledged in so doing that society was the destructive principle, and denounced harmony before it was elevated as the official doctrine by the serene and classical authors. The latter boosted the totality of the bourgeois order as the misery that finally fused both general and particular, society and self, into one.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2000), 90. In addition to Kahn’s article also relevant in this respect is the following paper by Brian Harding, which suggests that “We can note the similarity between Machiavelli’s approach and that of critical theory: both look to history, rather than metaphysics, for an understanding of political possibilities.” Brian Harding, “Machiavelli’s Politics and Critical Theory of Technology,” *Argumentos de Razón Técnica*, no. 12 (2009): 37–57. The specific possibility that critical theory is concerned with is the sublation of late capitalism, and that which Machiavelli is concerned with is the liberation of the Italian peninsula. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid., 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. DL, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Charles D. Tarlton, “Fortuna and the Landscape of Action in Machiavelli’s Prince,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 4 (1999): 737. For Tarlton this is especially well articulated in *The Prince*, in which Machiavelli is concerned above all with “the prince-on-view, the prince-as-viewed, as something viewed, the product of such viewing on stage before the people.” Ibid., 745. The text cannot be interpreted as being written for any one person or interest, for it “opens upon as many perspectives as there are differently interested actors in differently interpreted circumstances. Each such active reading constitutes a separate project, revealing its own distinctive quality as landscape demanding its own forms of action.” Ibid., 750. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. E.g. Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 3.39.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 14, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., chap. 14, 59–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., chap. 14, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., chap. 6, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Francis Bacon, “The Advancement of Learning,” in *Bacon’s Advancement of Learning and the New Atlantis* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2008), 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 14, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, bk. 2.16.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., bk. 2.16.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., bk. 2.16.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid., 2.16.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., bk. 2.16.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., 2.16.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 15, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Barbara J. Godorecci, *After Machiavelli: “Re-Writing” and the “Hermeneutic Attitude”* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. pp 34-35 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid. p 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Strauss, for example, notes that many of Machiavelli’s most shocking statements are not meant to be taken seriously, but rather “serve a merely pedagogical function”. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 82. The goal is to utilize deliberately provocative language in order to seduce potential political actors, specifically the young. Victoria Kahn, meanwhile, argues that Machiavellian exaggeration is necessary for the communication of Machiavelli’s vision of politics, which speaks to “the gap or lack of a mimetic relation between intention and result.” Victoria Kahn, “Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s Prince,” in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 200. It is this irony which necessitates the utilization of extreme means that seem scandalous from the standpoint of traditional morality. Hyperbole thus “has a rhetorical and pedagogical function”: “In short, the world of Machiavellian politics is intrinsically ironic, and the most effective mode of behavior in such a world is theatrical and hyperbolic.” Ibid., 200–201. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Emmanuel Terray, “An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli,” in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, ed. and trans. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. Max Blechman and Martin Breaugh (London: Polity Press, 2011), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. “…d’autres moments surgissent et donnent une nouvelle vie à celui qui, jusqu’alors, ne fut qu’un auteur parmi d’autres.” Eric Weil, “Machiavel Aujourd’hui,” in *Essais et Conférences, Tome 2: Politique* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1991), 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Carlos Frade, “An Altogether New Prince Five Centuries On: Bringing Machiavelli to Bear on Our Present,” *Situations* 5, no. 1 (2013): 60. Gopal Balakrishnan also emphasizes the extent to which Machiavelli can still help us think through the radically unique political predicaments that have emerged in our new century, and this because “The problem Machiavelli raises is that discovering the effectual truth of our historical situation requires a radical engagement.” Gopal Balakrishnan, “Future Unknown: Machiavelli for the Twenty-First Century,” *New Left Review* 32 (April 2005): 20. Historical understanding is thus inseparable from political action, Machiavelli providing us 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.” Ibid., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)