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Louis Althusser, Leo Strauss, and Democratic Leadership

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Bron Cohen Tamulis

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Keith Topper, Chair
Associate Professor Kevin Olson
Professor John H. Smith

2014
DEDICATION

To

Political Scientists
of all kinds,

but especially to my Committee,
without whom this work would not be,

and to my family,
who endured it.

But also to the White Dragon Noodle Bar,
who taught me the answer to that pestering question: “why?”

And lastly,
to all those who refused
to forget and who thus
deserve to be remembered.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I entered graduate school in Fall of 2007, I left behind a full time, well-paid vocation as a Jaguar technician. As a teaching assistant I earned a $17,000/yr salary, but during this time I had the privilege of interacting with, and sometimes teaching, hundreds of young students at the University of California, Irvine. Unlike the various engines, compressors, and brake systems that I was used to encountering on a daily basis, my students were dynamic, engaging, and unpredictable. Before it was all over I also met and married my wife, Samantha, and fathered two children, Sydney and Kiriaki. While I was undergoing serious changes, so too was the world. The so-called financial crisis of 2008, the largest prison expansion project in the history of the world (in California), the unrest of the “Arab Spring,” the revelations of Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden, the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, and the current standoff with Syria and Russia represent only a handful of the most memorable events that would shape my graduate career. Politics has not stopped while my nose has been buried in many, many books.

But the reason that I decided to switch vocations, to enter the tumultuous world of academia, was that I felt like there was a serious need to develop a better apparatus with which to understand the often perplexing reality we encounter every day. In taking up the vocation of the political theorist, I embarked upon a journey that brought me in contact with a profoundly inspiring lineage. I searched through countless books for components, bits and pieces, of a machine that would help me understand the complexities of the world. That need is as great as it was in 2007. I have resisted the urge to say that it is needed “now more than ever” because that is something that everyone seems to say, especially after such high-profile crises as we have experienced over the last few years. As I have learned more and more about the history that undergirds our constantly changing present predicament, the need to sharpen analytical tools, to reforge concepts and shape discourse, is one that is never going to be diminished by whatever academic exercise I might undertake. Indeed, this terrain is where the discourse of the future is constructed. It is no surprise, then, that it came to be the topic of my dissertation.

The history of the 20th Century has been one of constantly recurring crisis—providing ample material for an eager graduate student searching for dissertation topics. As an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst I majored in Social Thought and Political Economy (STPEC), a unique interdisciplinary major in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. STPEC taught me something quite rare in today’s educational environment: to think critically about myself, my society, and my world. When I entered graduate school after spending seven years “working for a living,” I was eager to actively engage the world and change it. Naturally, this eager attitude affected my writing. I expected to be working to help make the world a more equitable and just place to live and work, and to use my knowledge in pursuit of these lofty goals. My graduate advisors patiently encouraged me to downplay my polemical attitude
because they wanted to help me to get a job in what has been by all accounts the worst academic job market in anyone’s memory. But, lucky for me, I did not enter the Political Science department solely in order to get job training. I was after a vocation. I centered my sights on understanding the previous century and its profound effect on the world. I became active in the union, helping in the struggle to fight against the draconian measures of austerity that gripped the state of California throughout my time there. I worked to help bring democracy to the day-to-day functioning of the union, even as I kept up my studies. I did, though, come to question what it means to be partisan on the terrain of ideas, what it means to be a committed intellectual in a world that seldom waits for discussion and contemplation. Amidst the bargaining table and the seminar room, I slowly discovered a new version of myself, and thus a new world. Although I did not yet realize it, I had found the perfect place for me.

The “ivory tower” is supposed to be aloof from the everyday concerns of mundane beings, but I quickly found out that it was shot through with privilege, ideology, and contradictions. Ideology, though, is like a finely-tuned clock that tells the wrong time—if you ask it to do what it says it is supposed to do—tell the actual time—then it can really unsettle all those folks who have adjusted themselves to the incorrect reading. I asked the University to do what it said it was supposed to be doing—to teach me to understand the world and thereby help me achieve the best possible version of myself. I asked many questions and settled for few answers. In a graduate cohort awash with uncertainty and self-doubt, such noble aspirations were met with quizzical stares or even downright hostility. Some professors took such aspirations as a personal challenge to the discipline and their careers. One went so far as to inform me that plenty of my kind were to be found driving cabs in New York City. Silently, I wondered what was wrong with driving a cab—at least this was a paying job that performed a discernible good for society. Many of my peers seemed bound for desk jobs with the government or adjunct positions with no security and modest wages. With the power of the market reaching unprecedented encroachment upon all aspects of human life, prospects for gainful employment seemed grim indeed: if tenure seemed unlikely then being a public intellectual was more like impossible.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that within the first month of classes I heard more discussion of what jobs were out there than I did about the course readings. My department required its first-year graduate students to take a course in the Foundations of Political Science with Professor David Easton. I found the course stimulating, exciting, and absolutely essential: surely every political scientist would want to know about where the discipline comes from, how it has changed over time, what mistakes have been made, right? Surely everyone would want to clarify the language and terminology that we use so haphazardly—essential concepts like “the state” or “politics.”

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that within the first month of classes I heard more discussion of what jobs were out there than I did about the course readings. My department required its first-year graduate students to take a course in the Foundations of Political Science with Professor David Easton. I found the course stimulating, exciting, and absolutely essential: surely every political scientist would want to know about where the discipline comes from, how it has changed over time, what mistakes have been made, right? Surely everyone would want to clarify the language and terminology that we use so haphazardly—essential concepts like “the state” or “politics.”

1. What it means to be a political theorist is, naturally, the subject of much concern to those who allege to practice the profession. I would like to show my appreciation to Sheldon Wolin, in particular for his piece “Political Theory as a Vocation,” The American Political Science Review 63 no. 4 (1969): 1062-1082. In my own small way I hope that I have enlisted myself in the ranks of those who “those who believe that because facts are richer than theories it is the task of the theoretical imagination to restate new possibilities” (1082). I also thank John Gunnell, who wrote: “My immediate concern is with the authenticity of an activity that fails to confront the fact that speaking academically about politics is not the same thing as speaking politically” (“Political Theory and Polities: The Case of Leo Strauss,” Political Theory 13, no. 3 (1985): 340).
wondered. Shouldn’t they be learning methods? Where was the data? I was shocked: why on
earth would anyone go looking to academia if they wanted to get a job? Wasn’t this supposed to
be about the process of learning—about bettering ourselves and living a monastic life of the
mind? Weren’t we absolutely privileged to be as insulated as possible from the forces of the
“market?” But, as I quickly found out, my naïve beliefs were out of place. Anxiety, depression,
and pernicious guilt were the norms of academic life—for the grad students. True, the professors
seemed relatively happy—those that had tenure, anyways. Overworked, underappreciated, and
often underutilized in doing mundane bureaucratic tasks, but relatively happy. A few even
encouraged me along my path and actually believed in me. Thanks are due to them.

I did find other wayward souls who took the task of education seriously, and I latched onto
them like a drowning sailor clings to a barrel in the ocean. In the larger discipline of political
science, it seemed, political theorists were the only ones who took questions of history and
method, epistemology and discourse, seriously. I thank the faculty who guided me through this
tenuous period of my career, even as I wonder why the discipline is still unsettled by such
questions. There are many who think that political science must be “unified” along the
methodological stance that they profess to be appropriate, that other forms of inquiry are not
forms of knowledge. I learned about the “Perestroika” revolt in political science, and the strong
undercurrents of change that had been eroding the attempts to unify the discipline. I gradually
found myself comfortable with the label of “political scientist” and I re-learned my awe for the
aspirations of science itself, when combined with political understanding. I undertook to
understand the history of the discipline so as to be able to situate myself within it better. I read
like mad, taking up whatever I could find that might help me from philosophy of science to
histories of the discipline, to Marxist debates about history, to post-structuralism and feminism.

It took me three years to come to grips with the knowledge that I could not read all that I had
to read—that there was always more to do and that no paper that I might write would ever be
definitively “done” like the installation of a new set of brake pads could be “done.” I realized
that this was of fundamental importance toward understanding why it is so foolhardy to attempt
to unify the discipline, and to empathize with those who try so hard to do so: it is surely in the
anxiety that comes from knowing that one cannot read all there is to read under the heading of
“political science” that one can find the reason for the sometimes violent attempt to trim away all
the “clutter” that surrounds the “true” discipline. Slowly, with great attendant suffering and
angst, I realized that I had been thinking about everything in the wrong way. Nobody had
answers to the kinds of questions to which I urgently needed answers. It dawned on me that I
had to make the answers, that I had to engage with history and place myself within its embrace.
I had been thinking like the eager and good-natured, yet slightly annoying, undergraduate who
asks “is this going to be on the test?” I was looking outside of myself for a dissertation topic, for
the answers to the test, rather than accepting my responsibility in discovering and creating them
for myself. This process was an absolutely necessary one, and it is the foundation of an actual
career in academia—one must be self-motivated, persistent, and not looking for the answers to
the test.

It was a great burden to drop at the side of the road, and it took a while to unpack the
suitcase and remove all the deadweights. But I realized that all the pressure I had been feeling
was an imposition made possible by the fear of failure. Such fears drive mundane work and

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boring dissertations. They impel students to write for the market, as they perceive it, rather than to do work that impassions them. Besides, I was after something far more elusive, far more intangible than that mythical unicorn called “tenure.” I was searching for a way to understand the incredibly complex and multifarious world that we collectively call home. I took Karl Marx’s 11th Thesis as my guiding light rather than dwelling on the question of which journal would publish my work. I stopped updating my CV and I went to fewer conferences. I put faith in my ability to problem-solve and read critically and voraciously, following my nose rather than the canon. I didn’t send any of my “work” out to journals—neither top-tier nor fly-by-night. I took very seriously the idea that I had a lot to learn before I could be so bold as to think I had something new to offer the world of academic discourse. I developed a mantra: “If you think you have thought of something new then your bibliography isn’t good enough.” To resort to an ancient analogy: I went back into the cave to practice seeing.

What I saw was not always pleasant: I came to see many of my peers as jealous gnomes, each trying to best the others by polishing up an old rock found in some dusty drawer. As the job market worsened and spirits flagged, many fell by the side of the road. I kept on. I kept true to my working class background, never once taking for granted that I was being offered such an amazing opportunity to think and read, discuss and learn with some of the most keen and erudite minds in California. How many of us get to take a seminar with Angela Davis? Or with Étienne Balibar? As the recent passing of David Easton has brought home, I had been given a truly exceptional, and all too ephemeral, opportunity to see the discipline of political science as he saw it. I realized that to be learned wasn’t to hold an encyclopedia between one’s ears, that judgment was more important than critique, and that knowledge was the product of a vast, intricate machine and not the bright, Romantic spark of genius. The production of knowledge has become the political terrain that defines academia. But the machine has its limits; the market has yet to completely infiltrate the halls of academia, a fact which I exploited for all it was worth. Where else can one withdraw from the world for a period of several years, in contemplation of the world, the self, the institutions and practices of which one has been a part? The market tries very hard to influence this process, and for most students it inevitably does so in “guiding” them in selecting their research topic, their advisor, their summer reading. But graduate school is unique in the contemporary United States in that all of these factors are external pressures and they can be held off for a time. One can create a temporary, well insulated bubble in which one can safely undergo metamorphosis. Or, perhaps a more apt image, one can create a vessel that can withstand the journey and storms ahead.

I would like to offer thanks to several specific people who have contributed to the construction of this vessel. First, to Keith Topper, whose facility with language and sharpness of mind are exemplars of all that is good in the discipline. Thanks also to Kevin Olson, the one constant in a sea of many variables, whose advice and suggestions have consistently challenged me to keep thinking. And to John H. Smith, whose brilliant seminars on German philosophy introduced me to my wife, Samantha, and whose feedback was always blazingly prompt and unerringly precise. I would also like to thank David Easton, too late, for his Socratic example and his dedication to the craft. I am also grateful to Étienne Balibar, for the conversation that encouraged me to pursue the thoughts that have lead me to this final product. And to Warren Montag, whose generosity is unmatched. Many thanks are due to the various colleagues and
friends that encouraged me along the way, a list of whom will always be incomplete: thank you to Daniel Brunstetter, who showed me firsthand that it is possible to get tenure with integrity, and who always came through in the pinch; to Claire Kim, whose support kept me going at a time when I needed it most; to Jane O. Newman for much more than the title of chapter two; to Shawn Rosenberg, for encouraging me to keep the mind in mind; and to John Sommerhauser, for his aid in navigating the vast and often inscrutable labyrinth of the University. Raul Fernandez gently and wisely steered me on this path at critical moments. Lev Marder, Megan McCabe, Ryan Sauchelli, and Diren Valayden all provided valuable feedback during the writing process. Diren even sat up far too late with me, helping me to understand what it was I was trying to say; his friendship and solidarity are vital components of the final product. I would also like to thank Roberto Alejandro and Sara Lennox, who gave me an early start on what has proven to be an incredible journey. David Clooney was also there from the very beginning, pushing the limits and reminding me that fortitude is a special kind of quality. Existential thanks are certainly due to Jeannette Murphy, who bid farewell to the convent and thus gave birth to the world as I know it. Samantha Tamulis unceasingly renews that world even as she has given birth to new ones. I would also be remiss not to thank my parents and my family, my friends and colleagues, all those who I have neglected to mention by name. They are not forgotten. And, lastly, I would like to thank Russell Dalton, who propelled me along in ways he probably never intended.

It has been a constant struggle, as anyone who aspires to think can appreciate—the ideological impositions are deep and they constantly re-intrude on even the most alert and tempered mind. But the truth about the University is that, in today’s grant-seeking, entrepreneurial culture those with capital decide what is an interesting research question—and what methods are respectable—resulting in a situation where what gets funded gets published and those who get funded get jobs. A job is a placement in an economy; it is a task that fits into this larger system of division of labor. This division of labor has a history, and that history is bloody and strewn with the corpses of those who threw themselves in front of the encroaching machine. The discipline of political science has a history that is integrated with the birth of the social sciences, the political institutions of the United States, and the world politics that have defined the previous century. And though we should remember our history, we are encouraged at every turn to forget. We are constantly on the run, breaking with the past to discover a new gadget, a new truth, a new fashion. In order to be ourselves, it seems, one has to forget and to contribute to the forgetting of history, of struggle, of domination and violence. One has to close off the theoretical imagination, one has to forget that writing academically about politics is not writing politically. One has to ignore the fact that politics defines political science rather than vice versa.

I refuse to forget these things.
CURRICULUM VITAE

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FIELD OF STUDY

Political Theory, Critical Theory
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Louis Althusser, Leo Strauss, and Democratic Leadership

By

Bron Cohen Tamulis

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2014

Associate Professor Keith Topper, Chair

In taking up the topic of political leadership, I seek to analyze the legacy of social science in light of the sobering political events of the twentieth century. This dissertation is a composite study of the work of two philosophers, and, specifically, what they endeavored to accomplish by thinking and writing on the subject of politics. I concentrated on the post-War landscape, and the philosophers Louis Althusser and Leo Strauss, in order to analyze the way in which the figure of Machiavelli appears and influences the ideas and practices of political leadership that both saw as viable means of intervening in the world. This project investigates the history of the discipline of political science, the politics of the Cold War, the post-Stalinist developments of the
French Communist Party, and the emergence of the neoconservative movement in the United States. It analyzes a particular form of democratic political leadership that emerged at this point in history, one that represents a turn toward a meta-discursive practice of political leadership that aims to shift discussion by way of strategically chosen scientific and philosophical argument. This “theoretical turn,” grounded in an encounter with Machiavelli, has come to define the way that scholarship situates itself in relation to discourse and politics. It is also a unique and historically-situated activity, one that engages with the problematic of the vanguard as it structured the discourse of political leadership in the early part of the 20th century. Since the 19th century, in particular with the career of Marx and Engels, intellectual action had been oriented toward directly influencing the world itself; the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach is the most classic example of this idea that knowledge or philosophy can successfully guide politics or “change the world.” The experiences of the twentieth century, so present to Althusser and Strauss, were to put a damper on the presumption that knowledge can create an enlightened society free of conflict and misery. This crisis made possible the theoretical turn in political leadership, a turn which we are still trying to navigate today.
INTRODUCTION:

Political Leadership in the Twentieth Century

In the chapters that follow I will be remembering two moments in the recent history of political thought, two thinkers who came to influence our present in profound ways, two sets of interconnected circumstances that came to define politics and political leadership, for us. I will be attempting to write the history of the twentieth century anew.

A host of questions are in the background to this inquiry. What is political leadership, and how does it become effective in the world? What is political philosophy, and what is its relation to politics? What is ideology and how does it influence us? What is political science, and what is its proper relationship to political power? What is the relationship between history and our ideas? What is our relationship to the past? There is one question, though, that seems to distill these important and various questions into one absolutely essential query: what is the responsibility of those who think to the world in which they live?

This immediately becomes a question of action. It is not enough to implore citizens to “act.” It is likewise insufficient to be content with “knowing.” One must be able to motivate the actions, to give an analysis of how, and in what direction, to act. Where thinking and action meet, morality comes into being. In order to be able to think about the question of responsibility on this terrain, a link must be established between authority and knowledge. When we think of leadership, we intuitively think in this way. We think of “collective action problems” and “strong, charismatic leaders” who motivate the herd to go in the “right” or the “wrong” direction. But, in the heat of the moment so to speak, how do we know which way is correct? How can we
tell the difference between a powerful, visionary leader and a self-serving demagogue? How can we trust those who would try to convince us that they know? One must overcome the deeply held ideals of certainty that plague collective action: both the certainty that nags one to wait until one is sure and the certainty that tells one that failure is just over the horizon—or that the motives of the other party are unsavory—or that the motives of leaders don’t matter anyways because “unintended consequences” attend every birth. Collective, progressive politics has suffered the “certainty” of totalitarianism and the “certainty” that violence and fraud are the only tools that matter in political “technique.” At the level of economics and “the market,” the certainty of uncertainty is assured and codified into a science.

The field of political theory is not untouched by all of these certainties, but it is also in a unique position to resist their more pernicious effects. As a subfield forged in the Cold War divisions, political theory bears the scars of that history. It has one foot planted firmly in the past. But as a subfield that still retains a critical grip on the very idea of history, while simultaneously keeping the “model” of the natural sciences at a distance, political theory sits at a critical intersection in the current disciplinary matrix. It has one foot aloft, seeking a place to land. It is, understandably, quite concerned about where exactly to place this foot, since it roams over densely populated areas. The result is that we are a one-footed discipline, always slightly off balance. Under such conditions, temporary rest stops are a necessary part of life. Many of us plant a foot in the humanities or critical theory, while our colleagues seek grants with the NSF or positions in government. Some retreat to the minutiae of the distant past and the endless quest to find the “origins.” As scholars of ancient thought, we take nothing about our current position in the world for granted—we remember Socrates! We know that even if there are “fundamental
alternatives” in political life we nonetheless live in a world of many shades of grey. We take language seriously, with all its vagaries and vicissitudes, while others immerse themselves in numbers and formal logic, and the illusory certainty that such things provide.

But we are not only “theorists.” We are scientists. As political scientists we stand poised to re-brand a discipline whose identity is up for grabs. Political science is, we gently remind our empiricist counterparts, nothing more than what those people we call political scientists do. But what do we do? This question, always open and ready, can only be answered in the doing. This is true for one simple reason: we live in history and history demands our attention. Our world is a historical one, which is to say a political one, constituted by those who have come before and whose projects, largely unfinished, we inherit like a garage full of half-restored classic cars. We choose which to try to finish and which to send to the junk yard.

To be sure, the challenges are great. The lure of career and power is dangled, spinning on the horizon. We doubt ourselves constantly; we measure our merit against the achievements of thinkers like Kant and Hegel, Rousseau and Hobbes. We dare to understand them, to comment upon them, to enter the halls of their thought. Fortunately for us, the security state needs scholars and the authority of science to implement its neoliberal reorganizations. Esoteric formulas, arcane language, alchemical transmutations, logical regressions. We learn them all. The market, that same market that transformed the world into the dizzying array of industry and commerce centuries ago, beckons to us: “Sweet to tongue and sound to eye; come buy, come buy.” The University awaits a few of us, if we can leap from the adjunct pool and crawl breathlessly to the land called tenure.

2. This is the last line of the first stanza of the poem “Goblin Market,” by Christina Rossetti. It can be found online at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174262>
Out of the Tide Pool and Into History

There are few exemplars in recent history to turn to for an idea of how to act in such a situation, of how to navigate the field when chaos and crisis seem to be the only “sure thing.” If there is one thing that history has taught us it is that change is a constant. We must remain doubtful, under such conditions, that we have the appropriate tools to understand the rapid changes of the world around us.

In order to look beyond the horizon of the present, one must find those critical moments in which definitional structures of thought took shape. Then, one must find those thinkers who stood astride the emergence of these structures, with one foot perched on the other side of the horizon. Grabbing these thinkers by their outstretched hand, one must resist the urge to “pull” them into the spotlight of the present, to make them “intelligible” within those very structures that they, in their act of attempting to understand and influence them, resisted. Against all logic, against all method, one must let them pull. If one has chosen the “exemplar” wisely, the pull will be strong because there are countless other hands, other bodies, linked in a chain of desperate grips, spanning countless new horizons. Their resistance is ours. But one cannot leap backward, renouncing the present in the name of either an imagined past or in an effort to escape an impending future. One cannot let nostalgia pull one completely out of the present. Stretching as far as possible, with one foot—impossibly—planted in the present and with one’s eyes always on the political conjuncture, with one hand in the company of an army of thinkers and one foot perilously lost from one’s own sight, one can then begin to do the work that must be done.
The fact that the worldwide economic crises of the last few years coincide with an undertheorization of political leadership is not surprising. The theoretical justifications for political order developed throughout the twentieth century. From the “commanding heights” of the economy, an increasingly arcane logic of financial capitalism emerged. As Greta R. Krippner writes, “rather than decisions about allocation moving into the strong light of public debate and discussion where a new social consensus could be forged, these decisions drifted ever further into the shadowy realms of the market.” We never saw it coming: “That neither contemporary social and political theorists—nor, for that matter, policymakers themselves—foresaw this outcome is striking, given that it followed directly from the most prevalent diagnosis of the difficulties confronting the state during this period.”

As Krippner goes on to note, there was a real problem with transferring the responsibility of economic outcomes to the state: “even if economic outcomes could be depoliticized, how would individuals disadvantaged by market processes come to accept the outcomes generated by the market as legitimate?”

As many analysts have come to realize, from different angles and with different approaches, the very basis of the democratic state comes into question when market forces are so powerful. Neoclassical economics always involved a set of trade-offs with the implementation of any economic policy. In real terms, trade-offs mean loss of income and jobs for some and accruing benefits for others. What could legitimize these kinds of decisions?


There is a strong ideological wind blowing that seeks to destabilize the very foundation of liberal democratic governance. The political movements of the previous century that attempted to resist the encroachment of international finance capital have all been swept aside or rendered unimaginable. In the tide of anonymous forces like globalization and the market, political leadership becomes virtually impossible. What has come to be known as “neoliberal austerity” is a political “solution” to the crisis of political leadership—it is a de facto governance that subverts and undermines the notion of democratic accountability and the raison d’état of the modern state. The logic of austerity, in the sphere of public debate, trumps democratic procedures. In the main, elected officials pander to the public while they serve the markets. When managing the economy becomes the primary function of government, when the “permanent economic tribunal”\(^6\) is convened and no political decision can be made without the importation of an economic calculus, then a new age of neoliberal politics has begun.

This remarkable shift in public governance, which has occurred over the course of this author’s lifetime, leaves little room for a meaningful notion of political leadership. While resistance has accompanied every phase of the implementation of austerity and financialization of the economy, it has not done much to stem the tide. Our leaders are always suspect. Cynicism regarding “the system” abounds. In this remarkable moment, neoconservatives and post-Marxists alike bemoan the lack of real leadership in such troubling times, precisely because the government and public discourse in general is completely evacuated of public trust.\(^7\)

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A study of this situation, from within the purview of political theory, is of necessity a story of a lack. There is no current theory of political leadership that can both refute the encroachment of the power of the economy and avoid lapsing back into the notion that the only hope resides in charismatic demagogues. In part because our discourse of politics is so infused with ideas of self-interest and individualism, we have difficulty imagining political leadership as anything but charismatic personality. And what is democratic leadership? Winning an election?

The very idea of democratic leadership has been fraught with difficulty since its inception. Democratic theory turns on the democratic paradox, a situation in which a democracy is unable to found itself democratically. The democratic state must enact a means of ensuring its own legitimacy by providing its citizens the material means by way of which they can meaningfully participate in formulating the very laws that structure the state itself. If we take democracy seriously then we must acknowledge that the state plays a role in constituting the citizenry that compose it. Seen from this perspective, the democratic paradox seems to beg for an act of political leadership in order to get the process going, to begin the kind of institutional practices that could result in a democratic polity.

When we hold the state up to its own standards, judging them insufficient, we step outside of the archetypical relation of state and citizen and enter into a third space of critique. We must take up this virtual position “outside” the state in order to help rationalize the existing processes and ensure that they live up to their stated goals. Or, we must do so in order to judge that some goals are not worth holding, that the price is too high, that the stakes are too great. This is the task of neither elected official or citizen, neither representative nor sovereign. It has no

institutional basis. In some cases this is the role of the intellectual or perhaps the “organic intellectual.” Such an act is a certain kind of leadership, one that constitutes itself politically and strategically, referencing a given field of political agents and within a historically-constituted discourse. It utilizes reason and argument in favor of force and coercion, and it legitimates itself on these grounds alone. As a particular kind of action, it is not necessarily tied to a particular class of individuals within a given social formation; there have been citizen leaders, elected leaders, public intellectual leaders. This mode of political leadership is, in principle, open to anyone whose voice is recognized as legitimate in a given social-historical context. For that reason, it can be thought of as a democratic mode of political leadership.

And it is fragile. The discourse of political leadership that we inhabit is constituted by and animated by the result of the debates that have structured the history of democracy. At the level of words and concepts, organizational schemas and institutions, we have come to think of ourselves in relation to authority and reason. In the chapters that follow, I want to take a close look at a few of the contexts that emerge as extremely important in articulating the current landscape of thinking about political leadership. I cannot justify this move, these particular voices I seek out, ahead of time. I am not following a roadmap, and any reasons that I give as to why these figures are so crucial toward understanding the present will, necessarily, be constructed only out of what I have found as a result of the investigation itself. With this caveat in place, I will nonetheless attempt to summarize my findings.

We must turn our gaze to the twentieth-century, and in particular to the middle of that century. Two figures will be our ad hoc guides through the history of the present: Louis Althusser and Leo Strauss. By examining these case studies of two men who lived worlds apart
in some ways and yet were deeply intimate interlocutors nonetheless, we can better appreciate
the situation of political leadership as it relates to the intellectual in today’s world.

Accused of “vanguardism,” “theoreticism,” and more, Althusser represents a tendency in
political thought that has its origins in Marxist social theory and the history of international
communism. Accused of being a “elitist,” “too philosophical,” and “a Sphinx with no secret,”
Leo Strauss embodies a very similar historical trajectory, albeit in a far different set of cultural
and historical conditions. Each took up a theoretical space in which he attempted to take a
comprehensive view of the world. Each taught within the confines of an academic enterprise,
but transcended that space to take up politics on a larger scale. They wrote politically, and they
did so with a powerful dose of theoretical imagination. Perhaps for that indiscretion, that
stepping out of bounds, they have polarized their readership and (unwittingly or not) founded
“schools” that have carried on their work—or not. In taking up the thought of Althusser and
Strauss, we are immediately thrust into the terrain of political history and the push and pull of a
conversation with the past.

Our return to the middle of the twentieth-century already beckons us to pull the curtain back
further, to plunge back into the roiling politics of the turn of the century. In a post-Stalinist age
one is naturally inclined to look back to the time before, to discover the roots of such a profound
and terrifying phenomenon. We might tentatively say that the post-Stalinist era opened up the
problematic of the vanguard party, a sustained and considered discourse about the nature of
political leadership in the age of mass democracy and modern social science. The terrain was
often blurry between communism and fascism, totalitarianism and authoritarianism. The
problematic of the vanguard party cut through this messiness by defining a singular modern
political context in which politics operates through specific mechanisms. The brute fact of fascism, and its arguable democratic origins, caused a serious rethinking of the basis of democracy, of the role of the mass party, and of intellectual responsibility in modern politics. In the United States, this conversation entered into the discipline of political science and shaped the academic writings that resulted in elite theories of democracy. Writers like Mosca and Michels, Pareto and Schumpeter exemplify this trend. In France, the *Parti Communiste Français* found its vanguardism inadequate for the electorally-driven political situation in which it was embroiled, and proved equally inadequate to think of a good solution to this seemingly intractable problem. This problematic occupied thinkers from all backgrounds and oriented discussion about politics and social science for decades.

The problematic of the vanguard party, whose most prominent face is V.I. Lenin, traces its philosophical roots even further back, to the nineteenth century. And while Marx and Nietzsche both took up the problem of social change and the role of the intellectual/philosopher within that process, their work will only be considered indirectly. Due to the scope of this project, I am drawing a firm line in the sand even though I know that the tide is fast approaching: here I will only concentrate on the twentieth century and the historical and political forces that shaped the thought of Leo Strauss and Louis Althusser. While I will have my gaze turned “back” to the early part of the century, as they did, I will not be able to fully engage with what we find there—that project will have to wait for another day. It is true that Nietzsche had a profound effect on

both thinkers, at different junctures in their respective careers.\footnote{10 Strauss said famously that he read everything that Nietzsche wrote while at a very young age. Althusser took up Nietzsche in the last decade of his life, as recorded in his letters in Philosophy of the Encounter.} Heidegger, too, was absolutely central toward constituting the philosophical framework they inhabited. The work of Max Weber could productively be engaged with as well, since he helped to define the modern enterprise of social science. There is profitable work to be done on the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Weber and Marx on the question of political leadership, but my purposes mandate such a project to occupy a secondary status.

The political events of the twentieth century, the history of which is only beginning to be told, are not \textit{caused} by any philosophy nor any philosopher. But these thinkers open up a window into the past, our past, through the written word, that is not possible through any other means. As we will see, it is no surprise that both Althusser and Strauss spent quite some time developing a theory of \textit{reading}. Both Althusser and Strauss were, in different ways, obsessed with the question of intellectual probity; since they were keenly aware of the centrality of reading to the contemporary practice of philosophy, they found it necessary to spend time developing a theoretical approach to this apparently mundane activity. The problematic of the vanguard party, considered in a post-Stalinist light, demanded intellectual engagement “from the ground up.”

Althusser and Strauss were also both concerned with reading specific texts by specific historical thinkers. Niccolò Machiavelli, a man who needs no introduction, was a focal point for both thinkers. This is the common reference point for purposes of this study, between Althusser and Strauss. Machiavelli became a means of orienting them toward the past in a manner that
allowed them to envision the future. His was the hand they reached out to, in an effort to escape from the grip of ideology and modernity, respectively.

Thus, in order to fully appreciate the projects of Althusser and Strauss, we must take a necessary detour into a thicket of philosophical and political issues. In particular, the problematic of the vanguard party is one that was shaped by powerful ideas about democracy and dictatorship, about the role of science and knowledge in constituting emancipatory futures. These ideas can be briefly contextualized by examining a mode of political leadership that has been completely antiquated since approximately 1976.

**Background: The Dictatorship of the Proletariat**

The debate surrounding the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat represents a sustained effort to think through the activity and implications of the major political events of the previous century. It has its roots in the 19th century, a history that is explored in chapter four. In part a description of the prevailing political situation and in part a critique of the locus of power in the twentieth century, the discourse of the dictatorship of the proletariat incorporates violence into politics simultaneous with its grounding of authority in knowledge. It is probably not much of an exaggeration to say that it represents the most sustained conversation about the relationship between social science and political power that humanity has ever known. Social science in its current form was born in the nineteenth-century, and it largely took its cues from the natural
sciences.\footnote{11} Marxism was no exception. It sought to discover the objective laws of history in order to predict the internal developments of capitalism and augur the next phase of human social development. Along the way, the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat came into play and became a powerful idea on the world stage. It was the mechanism by which the ordained proletariat would inherit the capitalist state and use it to suppress its foes. This goal was proclaimed as the goal of the international socialist movement in 1905, in Russia. It would remain in a position of importance until the 1970s, when it faded into obscurity. But even obscurity was not to last: with the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, obscurity became oblivion.

But the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not necessarily doomed to failure and ignominy. No pre-ordained script assured its place in the junk drawer of history. But it is equally certain that no scientific law could assure it of success, either, though this fact was not widely admitted. In fact, as of 1917 its prospects seemed quite good. With its attempt to put into practice the knowledge of social science, the Bolshevik regime undertook the most audacious scheme in modern history. From the very beginning, they broke the rules of history according to the tenets of Marxism, which had predicted that the most advanced nations would be the first on the road to communism. In the wake of the disastrous Kerensky government and its handling of the war, the upstarts in Petrograd and Moscow rushed to solidify their power-base in the face of foreign invasion and catastrophic civil war, only managing to maintain power by the thinnest of margins. But who was in power? Was it the people, themselves, their deputies, or their masters? 

\footnote{11. Much attention has been paid to the history of social science in recent decades, and I cannot hope to cite all the important and challenging work that has been done. One work that tells the history in a particularly compelling fashion is the volume \textit{Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). This commission, chaired by Immanuel Wallerstein, considered the history and future of the social sciences and offered some suggestive criticism and considered advice for future development.}
in new guise? Was this the proletariat, or the proletariat and peasantry, or a new bureaucratic class of managers-to-be?

The ambiguity of this moment, in 1917, is still palpable for any historian of the period. But we know how it all ended. This remarkable achievement, a proud and volatile accomplishment that hailed itself as the next phase of global history, solidified into the totalitarian vision of Joseph Stalin over the next two decades. Stalinism remained such a powerful force in the international communist movement that, after his death, Khrushchev inaugurated a process of “de-Stalinization” in 1956. But, despite the ignoble reputation that would come to shroud his legacy, Stalin was a powerful voice on the world stage for many years. After the second World War, when Stalin had defended his homeland and his position, fueled by the sacrifices of his comrades, communism remained a major factor in global politics. Stalin, breaking with classic Marxist doctrine again, had declared that the U.S.S.R. was the frontier of human development, that socialism exists in one country, and that the dictatorship of the proletariat was officially in effect. This declaration was a challenge to the West, even while it was a plea to be left alone. With Moscow’s official policy no longer in need of fomenting revolution (overtly) in other Western nations, the propaganda war began in earnest. The Cold War was on. Soon, the “West” and the “East” were locked in mortal combat over the future of the planet. With the death of Stalin in 1953 and the reshuffling of the communist party that resulted, the world waited to see what would happen next. In 1956 the world got its answer in the form of Nikita Khrushchev, and his “secret” speech to the XXth Congress of the Communist Party. Despite the nature of this war of images, some truth did emerge.
The show trials of the 1930s, the gruesome depictions of the gulag, and the settled, dour face of bureaucracy came to dominate our view. The universalist edifice of communism, the mask it had worn so well for many decades, the one painted with the colors of equality and justice, crumbled away. With the mask gone, its “real” face was exposed to the world. More than a few intellectuals recanted, more than a few activists switched sides. In the rush to explain these terrible facts, many looked to the figure of Lenin to find Stalin’s “precursor” or his “predecessor.” In so doing, they came to tell a “necessary” story that has all the hallmarks of a classic Marxist view of history. Out of this determinist story about the folly of Bolshevism, a moral lesson emerged and came to dominate the discourse of politics in the latter half of the twentieth century: Utopian vision may be noble, but it inevitably leads to the gulag. Intellectual probity, for a generation of thinkers, demanded a relinquishment of utopian vision and any effort to consciously change the world through collective political action motivated by scientific knowledge. The very idea of social science as a singular discipline, with the ability to discover general laws of human history and society, fragmented into a thousand disciplines during this same period. The vanguard party became equated with dictatorship and censorship, with absolute tyranny. The idea of globalization came to dominate our thinking about global development: a collection of largely anonymous forces that work imperceptibly through the organization of incentives and outcomes to produce patterns of stability and peace. The market, according to this logic, has its own rules and we must follow those rules if we seek to live peacefully. This liberal vision, and its neoliberal incarnation, is still a powerful force at work in the world today. Ironically, this liberal economism shares much with its Stalinist “enemy.” It disables political action ahead of time by shaping the discourse such that the forces of the
economy are of primary importance. It places all of human history on a map of “progress” toward a future that is seemingly pre-determined, because it is out of political control.

Historically, neoliberalism justifies itself on the grounds of the futility and tragedy of collective political action, as evidenced by the Bolshevik regime and its doomed attempt to actively bring the future into being. It comes to rely on Stalin’s master narrative of the Bolshevik failures in order to justify itself, and thus on the economism of Stalinism. Like Stalinism, it sees the economy as the driving force of human progress, an inevitable unfolding that results in greater and greater prosperity for all.

The conversations that were spawned in the wake of the second World War and the revelations of the gulag are instructive. This was a conversation about politics and its relation to knowledge that compelled many thinkers of the latter-half of the twentieth-century to look backward to ancient sources like Plato and Thucydides in order to discover better ways of approaching these topics. The very question of modernity became important as the West seemed that it needed a new face, a new mission, a new understanding of itself.

In this conversation many of the tenets of liberal democracy come under scrutiny. One concept in particular, that of legitimacy, fractures under the weight of this conversation. The concept of legitimacy, derived from the democratic tradition that has its source in the American and French Revolutions of the eighteenth-century, cleaves in two: one one side is the violent necessity of change that accompanies a concept of politics linked to struggle and power; on the other is the equally necessary attempt to form a detached, objective knowledge of the political situation in all its complexity. The concept of popular sovereignty, then, had been a temporary fix in that it melded together knowledge and action into the notion that the people could decide
for themselves what government they would submit to, and that this decision would be the only legitimate grounds for a democratic government. This bringing together of knowledge and power into a singular entity, “the people,” could not withstand the self-scrutiny of the post-Stalinist era. The problematic of the vanguard party took shape, as a means of accounting for the “reality” of politics without relying on myth or nostalgia. On the terrain of this problematic, modern social science emerged as a powerful and decisive voice.

With its attempt to seek objective, detached forms of knowledge, early attempts at formulating social science proved unable to justify democratic values. In putting political knowledge in the hands of a few, it rendered expertise as more important than popular sovereignty. Objective knowledge thus became partners with a powerful strand of realism. Realism dictates that struggle and politics are constitutive of human life and that any attempt to nullify politics, however scientific its pretenses, will be necessarily oppressive. This realist vision seems to encourage the willful melding of science and partisanship, the kind that animates many think-tanks and foundations that take political action as a conscious goal. This viewpoint brings knowledge under power, making it serve human interests in all their messy particularity. In so doing, it invalidates any effort to use knowledge for impartial or meta-discursive steering attempts. Experts, freed of any truly objective criteria that might hold them back, were free to engage in politics molded by this realist vision. The attempt to understand “the whole” were relinquished and laughed at as quaint, well-meaning but foolish views of social science. The vanguard party found a whole class of consultants and coordinators, managers and pundits, ready to fill its ranks. Slowly we stopped speaking of “vanguards” at all, because such a term seems to be attached to a universalist vision of history or teleology. But despite the change in
terminology, the narratives of universal history, of globalism and economism, still haunt and structure our discourse. As a result, we find it remarkably difficult to speak of political leadership in a general, democratic sense that could take as its target the whole of society: subterranean forces pull us in whatever direction they see fit; self-interest guides decision-making; the needs of the moment often trump long-term planning. And because social science is no longer tethered to universal history, it remains split along party lines.

Violence and knowledge, through the political experiences of the twentieth century, become closely linked in discourses of political leadership that owe their historical trajectory to the definitive events of the early part of the century. In particular, two modes of political leadership have emerged over the course of the century in a position to dominate the discourse of political leadership at the dawn of the twenty-first century: neoconservatism and communism. Neoconservatism and communism are similar in that each political ideology seeks to govern the majority (i.e. the masses) from a vantage point of privileged knowledge. Authority, in both the neoconservative and the communist world view, should be established by means of a political party through a welding together of power and knowledge. The party becomes the true political actor, able to muster and motivate citizens and individuals and make them politically efficacious. This is why both neoconservatism and communism as experienced in the previous century deserve to be classified as vanguardist. Against the liberal democratic tradition, which grounds authority in the consent of the governed, neoconservatism and communism radically question the ability of the masses to govern themselves, or to recognize good government when it comes to be, or propel a revolution when it does not. They have little faith that democracy can rely on institutions to propel itself. Thus, there is good reason to think of neoconservatism as closely
akin to vanguardist communism in its description of the masses and the relationship that the political party is meant to establish with the masses. These ideologies see politics as constitutive of the otherwise inchoate mass, as a force acting upon them rather than as one that is rendered legitimate by them.

Seen in this way, the alleged triumph of liberal democracy must be radically questioned. The history of the mass party is one that has been decisively shaped by the experiences of vanguardism, and it is the vanguard party that is the forebear of the modern political party. The ideology of neoconservatism, in the United States, has kept alive the vanguardist tradition and altered the political landscape in fundamental ways. Ironically, this movement, which was historically so critical of Stalinism and sought so desperately to combat its pernicious influence, is one of the greatest living reminders of the Stalinist era. It has kept its Trotskyist roots. For this reason, one should likewise be skeptical of the common narrative that tells of the alleged folly of Bolshevism, and its “inevitable” lapse into totalitarianism. The truth is much more complex.

The role of persuasion and consent in contemporary modes of governing must be seriously recast as well. By turning to two philosophers of the post-World War II era, we can situate ourselves at the decisive juncture in which the forces that have come to shape our thinking on politics and leadership were themselves shaped by both philosophical insight and concomitant political effort. This means taking a specific stance with regard to history, it means “taking history seriously—no longer as a religious abstraction, of which living individuals are merely the humble creatures, but as the real development of conflictual relations.”

In the pages that follow, I will interrogate both the political movements themselves as well as their philosophical articulations. I will seek to define both through the conflictual relations that have come to constitute them and which have defined history itself; these conflicts have had a specific flavor. Through the figures of Leo Strauss and Louis Althusser, I will approach the history of the twentieth century as one that, at the level of politics, has been defined through the variegated experiences of communism. These philosophers offer a window into the history of the twentieth century because of the rigor of their thought and the dedication of their art: as philosophers committed to understanding political phenomenon there are few better guides available. In considering their disparate reading of the notorious figure of Machiavelli, the themes of knowledge and violence, authority and power will be given a more concrete form. They take up Machiavelli at a time when these themes have exploded into significance in most spectacular fashion. Through the history of the multi-faceted neoconservative wing of the Republican party in the United States, in combination and contrast with the Parti Communiste Français in France, it will be simultaneously possible to explore the concrete attempts to put into practice these philosophical insights, as well as see the way in which the political practices of these groups helped to shape these same philosophical insights. Chapter one will place Leo Strauss into the context of late twentieth century discussions about “neoconservatism,” political philosophy, and the discipline of political science in the United States. The following two chapters are dedicated to a reading of Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli* to determine what that particular text is doing, to make sense of these debates about Strauss by reading what he wrote, in a mode he advises. Chapter four considers the history of the Parti Communiste Français and its connection with the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in order to lay out the terrain
on which Louis Althusser was operating. Chapters five and six engage with his work on Machiavelli, entitled *Machiavelli and Us*, in an effort to determine this text’s role in both understanding and shaping the historical circumstances out of which it emerged.

In the end, there is no final theory of democratic leadership that will be possible to be gleaned from this brief engagement with history. But, if we are lucky, perhaps there will nonetheless be some useful reminders about the need for reflection and the power of the word.
CHAPTER ONE:

Reasoned Humility: Strauss, Neoconservatism, and Us

A German émigré to the United States during World War II, Leo Strauss (1899-1973) has had a profound (if not fully charted) influence on American political theory. Dozens of books have been devoted to tracing Strauss’s impact on other academics, and not all of these studies read Strauss charitably. As early as 1975, shortly after Strauss’s death, Pocock wrote of a “closed ideology” that worked to insulate Strauss from all forms of academic criticism. This theme would become a constant feature of scholarly debate, as many tried to wrestle with the dense, tangled body of work that Strauss left to the world upon his death. In 1985, exhausted with the effort of deciphering the corpus, Burnyeat declared Strauss to be a “sphinx with no secret” in the New York Review of Books. And while this analysis has its merits, it seems to have done little to stop scholars from trying to wrest a secret or two from the paws of the Sphinx.

In the years between his death and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, debate about Strauss centered on his role as a political philosopher, and his influence within a narrow bandwidth of scholarship. Even if contentious, Strauss’s work was largely well regarded and respected within this context.

Few could have predicted the explosion of interest in Strauss that was to come. After 9/11 and the subsequent events that led the U.S. back into Iraq, a spate of articles, books, and op-eds

13. Pocock, J.G.A. “Prophet and Inquisitor: Or, a Church Built Upon Bayonets Cannot Stand: a Comment on Mansfield’s ‘Strauss’s Machiavelli.’” Political Theory, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1975: pp. 385-401. Targeted at Mansfield in particular, Pocock shows how certain readings of Strauss elevate insight to revelation, and thus aim more at “conversion” than at “persuasion” (390). Thus the rift in Strauss’s legacy was present right from the start, culminating in what Mark Lilla called the “Closing of the Straussian Mind” in 2004.


brought Leo Strauss’s legacy into the popular press. Indeed, at this moment, what was formerly a low-level conflict between narrowly focused academics became an outright conflagration. The actor and director Tim Robbins even played his part in the unfolding drama when his stage play *Embedded* portrayed Leo Strauss as the ignoble spiritual guru of the “inner circle” surrounding George W. Bush.\(^\text{16}\) And, in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war, as it came to light that there were no secret WMDs, nor were there any covert connections between Hussein and al Qaida, there were many attempts to lay blame for the deception perpetrated on the American people at the feet of the long-dead political philosopher from Germany. Attention focused on the Platonic idea of the “noble lie,” which was alleged to be the reasoning behind the Bush administration claiming to “know” there were WMDs in Iraq at that time. Much has already been written about this moment—an interesting set of circumstances in its own right. On one side were the “Straussians,” self-professed disciples of Strauss and his idiosyncratic political philosophy.\(^\text{17}\) On the other, investigations into the influence of Leo Strauss on various government officials and academics began to map out a forceful, though at times strained, power map of the emergent phenomenon of neoconservatism. These studies sought to show Strauss as an intellectual influence on the rise of American imperialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the ensuing confusion induced by war, and in a rush to explain this “new” ideology

\(^{16}\) This production was also released on DVD as *Embedded Live* (2005).

\(^{17}\) There is great need to be careful with these terms, lest one fall back into the kind of confusion that this essay is hopeful of remedying. To her credit, Anne Norton’s *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) is careful to label only those people who beg to be labeled. Norton’s book benefited by being ahead of the anti-Straussian curve, although it was preceded by Shadia Drury’s inflammatory *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), a book which sets its tone with its cover: the faces of Leo Strauss, Clarence Thomas, and Newt Gingrich. It makes little sense to call someone a “Straussian” just because he or she took a seminar with Strauss or read a book written by Strauss. It makes less sense to collapse the Straussians and the neoconservatives into one group. As Mark Lilla points out, there is an expansive body of work emerging in Europe that treats Strauss much differently than the neoconservatives have done. See Mark Lilla, “Leo Strauss: The European,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 21, 2004. For a recent example of high-caliber European scholarship inspired by Strauss see Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
of neoconservatism, the political necessity of provocation often trumped the patience of philosophy. An idea from an ancient text became attributed to Strauss, and then this idea became a hypothesis about the intentions behind a massive military action—undertaken by the most modern military in the world. The result was that a scholar, who himself claimed to avoid politics, became the site of intense political scrutiny and conflict some thirty years after his death. In the whirlpool created by this apparent resurrection, Strauss’ defenders and accusers have emerged from a varied array of contexts and backgrounds. Some have proudly proclaimed Strauss as their inspiration, and pulled Straussianism under the larger heading of neoconservatism.\(^{18}\)

Other, more impartial attempts, have found little or no influence of Strauss on the movement.\(^{19}\) Some prominent neocons, like Robert Kagan, have claimed ignorance: although Kagan studied with Harvey Mansfield, he says of Strauss that “I have never understood a word the political philosopher wrote. I mean not a single word.”\(^{20}\) Amidst this chaotic field of claims and counter-claims, arguments and accusations, it is very difficult to tell with any degree of certainty what the relationship really is (if any) between Strauss and momentous political events.

\(^{18}\) See, for example, Douglas Murray, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006). Murray acknowledges that Strauss played an important part in the pluralistic intellectual origins of neoconservatism, but that “neoconservatism could have sprung up without Strauss, or indeed any single one of its forebears, because it is the result of specific cultural and social circumstances, created by a vacuum in society and political life” (42). This deeply historicist reading of Strauss threatens, in a manner that would have caused Strauss fits of revulsion, to absorb Strauss into the context of his writing to such an extent that no agency might be found. As we will see below, Murray unwittingly participates in the crisis of the West that Strauss spent so much ink and brain power attempting to think beyond. The tragedy here is that readers like Murray, to put the point bluntly, remove any possibility that Strauss was actually a political philosopher.


\(^{20}\) Cited in Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism*, 272. The full text of Kagan’s profession “I Am Not a Straussian” can be found in *The Weekly Standard* 11, no. 20 (2006). Kagan goes on to argue that Straussians are “ahistorical” and that he learned from his father that history is an important avenue to interpretation of old texts. Kagan is here propagating a certain idea of Strauss and his relationship to history that is highly problematic, although it is certainly very popular.
such as the onset of war in Iraq in 2003—to say nothing of the larger phenomenon of neoconservatism in America.

In an effort to rise to the challenge, some scholars have returned to the texts themselves. But even here the ambiguity persists. Those who defend Strauss against claims about his pernicious influence point to powerful, even impassioned, passages in his writings and speeches in which Strauss claims to be a “friend of liberal democracy.” Opponents point to passages in which Strauss apparently denigrates the masses and seems to call for elite power in order to reverse the imminent crisis of the West. There is even a letter, written early in Strauss’s career, in which he calls for a response to Hitler from the right, from the forces of imperialism and fascism.21 One study attempts to show how this fascistic viewpoint remains central to Strauss throughout his life, becoming subterranean after he “discovers” the esoteric arts of writing.22 Another study finds Strauss to be motivated by a deep regret for these early philosophical leanings, and, pointing to later correspondence by Strauss, sees Strauss as a “Man of Peace.”23 It seems that whether one wants to find Strauss the fascist or Strauss the liberal democrat, there is a quotation to be found to support the claim.

In part this problem is one of historical perspective; from where we stand in the present, it is easy to lose sight of the world Strauss inhabited. How was Strauss received during his academic career? In the period of time that Strauss was at the University of Chicago, he attracted an audience that included both liberal democrats and anti-communist conservatives. He

21. A rich discussion of this letter can be found in Nicholas Xenos, Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy (New York: Routledge, 2008). For references to both the English and German versions, as well as an online resource, see page 145, note 3.

22. Xenos, Cloaked in Virtue.

built a solid reputation and a cadre of loyal students, that is certain. And even if Strauss did not change, the times did; the upheaval of the late 1960s unmoored many ideas and practices and called into question all manner of previously held values. Straussianism seems to have been born here, amid bloody college campuses and images of imperial war. Mark Lilla describes the shift from the academic project:

After 1968, all that changed. The universities imploded, and Straussianism took a new turn. It is difficult for those of us educated on the other side of that cultural chasm to imagine the trauma experienced by some of those teachers wedded to the pre-'68 American university, however sympathetic to their loss we might be. Their sense of betrayal is infinite; they cannot and will not be consoled. Straussians in the universities took the student revolts, and all that followed in American society, particularly hard. From Strauss they had learned to see genuine education as a necessarily elite enterprise, one difficult to maintain in a leveling, democratic society. But thanks to Natural Right and History, they were also prepared to see the threat of “nihilism” lurking in the interstices of modern life, waiting to be released, turning America into Weimar.

The result of these profound changes was that a “catechism” developed. As Lilla goes on to argue about the political Straussians, “the catechism so permeates the way they think about Strauss today, and therefore about themselves, that its philosophical and political tenets need not be articulated. It begins with the assumption that the modern liberal West is in crisis, unable to defend itself intellectually against internal and external enemies, who are abetted by historical relativism.” This crisis leads the Straussians back to classical philosophy, toward an idea of political leadership that embodies a clear division of labor between philosophers and statesmen. And while Minowitz is certainly right that there is a level of “Straussophobia” in circulation today, even if this is the case it is also true that his academic jousting with scholars like Drury is likely to appear to most readers as esoteric and therefore of little import for the broader world of politics. All this quibbling about how to define the term Straussian does seem, at best, a sideshow, and, at worst, a purposeful distraction. As one recent commentator noted, “This


confrontation in which the Straussians have embroiled themselves is largely one of their own choosing….the Straussians are heavily represented in elite universities, including the Ivies; and they write periodically even for that part of the press that they depict as their sworn enemy.”

As Michael Zuckert has noted, “More than most thinkers of the twentieth century, Leo Strauss polarized his audience. One was either for him or against him, influenced by him or repelled by him.”

Because of his controversial position in American political discourse, and the seemingly fanatical nature of his acolytes, the so-called “Straussians” have been subject to accusations of “cultishness” and downright evildoing. According to Zuckert, the term Straussian began as “a label invented by the opponents of Strauss.” In this context, Zuckert sees the begins of Straussianism within the halls of academia, but marvels at the “irresponsible outburst” that occurred when the term “leaped across the fire line separating the academic world and the world of politics.” He argues that with regard to the circle of politicians, bureaucrats, and pundits surrounding the presidency of George W. Bush, “no real connection between their political action and the thought of Struass was ever established.”

Contrasting this reading of Strauss, and his influence, with recent studies in Europe, Lilla points to the distinctly American nature of this phenomenon. As he puts it, “the catechism begins and ends with politics, specifically American politics.”

More specifically, this American political phenomenon, despite its roots in the philosopher Leo Strauss, has morphed into


something completely new. Lilla argues that although neoconservatives have carefully crafted an
insulated world linking certain academic sites with Washington, “it is mistaken to think Strauss’s
ideas govern it.” In the face of this complexity, it is a formidable task to take up the legacy of
Strauss. The object that is the oeuvre seems to split and unify, refract and reflect, distort and
clarify, all at once.

In the last few years, a resurgent effort to read Strauss philosophically, as he wanted to be
read, has begun. The goal of this laborious effort is the piecing together of the shards of his
legacy. Indeed, the scholarly gaze has turned to Strauss and a cottage industry has arisen around
publishing books that take up his corpus in light of the public release of transcripts and audio
files of Strauss’s graduate seminars. The contemporary reader is thus left in an awkward
position—he or she cannot hope to encounter Strauss devoid of preconceptions, and these
preconceptions threaten to disable judgment itself. The political events of the last several
decades cannot help but color our perceptions as we consider Strauss and his legacy—especially
given the current state of affairs in the state formerly known as Iraq. For many academics, the
idea that an obscure philosopher could make such an impression upon the world stage is
undoubtedly appealing. Toiling in obscurity, self-promoting our way into relevancy, we find it
comforting on some level that a “mere” academic could influence foreign policy-making in some
profound way—even if we do not quite understand how.


31. For some time the known existence of these files, when combined with their scarcity, lent weight to conspiracy
theories and the idea that Strauss was a kind of cult leader. Imaginations soared with visions of secret teachings and
dogmatic practices. With the public release of these transcripts and audio files, this question of what Strauss taught
in his classroom can finally be put to rest: there has been no evidence to support the claim that Strauss taught his
classes as though he were a cult leader. We should all be thankful that this effort to make such valuable materials
publicly available has been undertaken by Nathan Tarcov in his position as director of the Leo Strauss Center at the
University of Chicago. A list of available transcripts and audio files can be found at the Center’s website: http://
leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/
Reading Strauss is thus challenging on many levels. There is a strong case to be made that, due to the very nature of the problem that confronts one who is interested in reading Strauss on his own terms, the text of singular importance is *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. This text, dense and labyrinthine, has stymied interpreters and has received less recent scholarly attention than it deserves. Yet as an author study that takes for its subject one of the most oft-cited and controversial political philosophers on our historical landscape, this text provides us with a window into the mind of Strauss, reading someone else as he would have liked to be read by us. And in demonstrating for us his mode of reading, which is in part an exposition of how Machiavelli read Livy, Strauss provides us with training in the kind of philosophy he desires to see in the world. When we view *Thoughts on Machiavelli* as a text in a field, acting consciously upon its readership and with an art of writing few can duplicate, Strauss gives us his greatest lesson: he demonstrates how political philosophy can translate into political leadership, and what the limits of that political leadership might be.

**Putting it in Context: Machiavelli, Strauss, and Us**

*Thoughts on Machiavelli* is a vital component in the larger project that Strauss embarks upon in the post-War intellectual landscape. Published in 1958, it follows on the heels of Khrushchev’s 1956 efforts toward de-Stalinization even as it prefigures the emergent cultural and political disruptions of the 1960s. This is the height of the Cold War. Escalating tensions, combined with the devastating power of the newly invented atomic weapons, colored the landscape in an apocalyptic hue. The American imperial intervention in Vietnam was only just beginning, in the aftermath of the disastrous French withdrawal from the region. This remote
conflict came to define American culture, exposing fault lines that had been dormant for some
time. In only a few short years, campuses all across the nation would be the seat of social unrest
that challenged the integrity of the American project at its core.

This is the context of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, a book that might easily be mistaken as a purely esoteric text devoted to a canonical figure. The book is built upon lectures Strauss originally delivered in 1953, and its second chapter was previously published in the *American Political Science Review (APSR)* in 1957. It is a public work, a work of political philosophy, which takes Machiavelli as its starting point. Its audience is English-speaking political philosophers and political scientists, particularly in the United States; it is deeply enmeshed in the field of political science, with its pretenses and foibles, and takes a stand within that discipline. We cannot ignore the form that this book takes, cultivated into a book from academic lectures and a published paper.\(^{32}\) Their audience is clear. As an attempt to steer the discussion and the discipline, Strauss writes *Thoughts on Machiavelli* in a mode of political leadership. The choice of Machiavelli is not random, either—Strauss finds in Machiavelli a vantage point from which to assay the emergence of modern forms of thought. As is well known, Machiavelli is seen by many to be the “origin” of modern political science, of *raison d’état*, of political realism that vigorously sheds any romantic notion of finding a moral basis for politics. To take up the texts of Machiavelli at such a time is to immediately enter upon the terrain of very pertinent questions about the relationship between power and authority, knowledge and violence, and morality and politics. These are, indeed, the questions that would occupy many protesters and academics in the decades to come, both by those who sought to bring and end to an imperial war

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32 Strauss would have been keen to point out these aspects of his own writing. For a particularly detailed discussion of the relationship between form and audience see his “On Plato’s Republic,” in *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
and the growth of the military-industrial-complex, and by those who sought to reinvigorate American will and the consolidation of global peace. In many ways, they are still our questions as we consider the role of American political and military power in the world.\(^{33}\)

Reading Machiavelli with Strauss, then, one should expect the experience to produce a certain sense of familiarity—but this sense of familiarity soon becomes more of an ominous warning than a collegial smile. Strauss’s ultimate purpose, his “message,” proves elusive. When we take a long view at the claims that have been made about Strauss’s influence upon neoconservatism and we look for the mark of such influence in the pages of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* we cannot help but feel, if we read carefully and holistically, a disturbing sense of ambiguity. We can find passages that seem to call for a renewed sense of American purpose, a call for what has been termed a “bellicose imperialism.” But we can equally well point to passages that seem to light the way to a more tempered, perhaps even a non-interventionist, foreign policy. If we lose trust in Strauss, submitting to the schizophrenic hallucinations that swirl in the public sphere, then we soon come to suspect the intentions of the author. It is all too easy, in the context that we have come to know Strauss, to put the book aside and walk slowly away, convinced that we have escaped the grip of a master con-artist. We know that all the best swindlers sway their marks with smiles and familiar glances—a good starting point for a work that seeks to guide its reader away from certainty and the familiar toward something more slippery, more dark, more disturbing. This sense of strange familiarity is familiar to readers of Strauss. It seems to be a necessary predisposition on the part of his readership, and it is difficult

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33. Interestingly, the 1991 Gulf War was thought to be the proof that America had finally shed its “Vietnam Syndrome.” Recent events might give one reason to rethink the present in light of the events of the past—and the Vietnam War would be high on the list of events to reconsider.
to imagine how a cult could be founded on such confounded ambiguity. This is the strange part of the strangely familiar way Strauss demands to be read.

But this strange familiarity has a familiar side to it as well. This element is encountered during the reading process as one dimension of the historical effects of the text. There is a certain affinity to be noticed immediately in the remarkable capability shared by Machiavelli and Strauss to *inspire*; both thinkers seem to compel strong emotions on the part of their readers. We cannot help but sense that Strauss writes *for us* in the manner of someone who *knows us*. This uncanny feeling, as unsettling as it may be, is deeply congruent with Strauss’s conception of political philosophy and its relation to opinion. It causes us to dare to dream—perhaps we too are philosophers. Perhaps we have finally *got it* and understand that which has resisted so many previous attempts. It is this dimension of Strauss that is often ignored by those who seek to vilify him. If one goes looking for confirmation of opinions held without reflection then one must be careful not to read Strauss too carefully. This problem is one that seems all too common in many “readings” of Strauss.

It is scarcely necessary to point out that Machiavelli has met with a similar fate. Machiavelli, then, provides a vantage point that is perfect for Strauss’s intent. If we perform the procedure Strauss recommends for reading the classics—if we avoid looking back at the past but instead try to look forward *from the past* we might begin to strip away some of the confused and contentious polemic that has accompanied Strauss’s legacy. From this vantage point, Strauss carves a space in which to stand: there does not seem to be much room in that space for anything like

34. This remarkable quality of Machiavelli’s writing is the starting point of Claude Lefort’s Strauss-inspired study *Machiavelli in the Making* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012).
“Straussianism.” Any -ism would, by definition, be subject to philosophical scrutiny and the critical work of interrogation.

Machiavelli is, for Strauss, the founder of modern political philosophy, an enterprise that defined itself in breaking with the classical tradition of the ancients. This assertion seems sensible enough. But in its wake Strauss advances a more shocking thesis: contemporary readers do not realize the radical nature of Machiavelli’s work because they are within the grip of that work. With this intentional provocation we are unsettled, skeptical, alert. No one wants to be told that they are incapable of understanding something—least of all a political scientist. In an ideological age, one riven by the epic clash between capitalist democracy and communist autocracy, such a claim has the added benefit of bringing ideology home. In the context of a political science that seeks to define itself in the attempt to remain “value neutral” on questions of normative judgment such a claim is nothing less than utterly catastrophic. But even as catastrophic as the infiltration of values into the sacred domain of facts may be, it is nonetheless the logical conclusion of the dominant power of historicism, which situates all human thought as conditioned and/or determined by its historical context and thereby definitionally “out of step” with the thinking of those who have come before us. The problem, in part, is that we do not recognize the distortion that historicism grafts onto our scholarship—our science. And thus, with an attitude of reasoned humility, Strauss argues that our unrecognized ideology requires philosophic intervention—or perhaps a therapeutic one—in order to loosen this grip and free the mind. This thesis establishes a critical vantage point from which to judge Machiavelli. From this place, he is simultaneously able to judge the contemporary field of political science as well
as the unfolding political events that come to be known as the Cold War.\textsuperscript{35} Here the crisis of the West is seen as a result of the crisis of political philosophy, which began with Machiavelli. But while Strauss is after big game in his reading of Machiavelli, with the terrain being nothing short of the imminent crisis of the West, his ultimate purpose in writing is much more local. Strauss’s intent is to attempt, pedagogically, to remove the prejudices that might otherwise guide our thought, the dogmatic assumptions that we might take to be obvious and beyond reproach.\textsuperscript{36}

Reading Strauss afresh begins, unsurprisingly, with reading Strauss.

Reading Strauss is an experience in and of itself. In taking up a careful reading of Strauss, a reader will inevitably find him- or herself cornered at some point. Somehow, Strauss will have subtly and suggestively lead one’s reasoning to a conclusion that one is unsettled by. This uncanny experience of reading Strauss has been legitimately likened to engaging in a conversation: a metaphor that readers of Machiavelli will find familiar. Endeavoring to write about that reading, to offer a kind of vantage point from which to judge the work, is the kind of objectifying enterprise that Strauss anticipates. Strauss has an uncanny way of appearing on the horizon, just when one thinks one has escaped the orbit of his thinking. Perhaps for this reason, Harvey Mansfield has famously asserted that Strauss seems to pre-inhabit every corner of the continent opened up by Machiavelli.\textsuperscript{37} It is not advised, then, to seek to think “beyond” Strauss

\textsuperscript{35} For a brief and illuminating discussion of Strauss’s understanding of the tradition of political philosophy in relation to the contemporary phenomena of liberalism and communism, see John Gunnell, “The Myth of the Tradition,” \textit{The American Political Science Review} 72, no. 1 (1978): 122-134.

\textsuperscript{36} Gunnell argues that Strauss works in an entirely instrumental way in his attempt to retrieve political philosophy. In this reading, Strauss is focused solely on the present by way of looking at the past; it is the present that is the target of action. The tension between Strauss’s pedagogical purposes and his instrumentalism toward the past will be the topic of a later section of this chapter (Gunnell, “The Myth,” 130).

or to view oneself as looking at him from the superior vantage point of history. Strauss is not an object of contemplation. We can only hope to take up a dialogue with Strauss, to reinvigorate some of his criticism of the field of political science in an effort to help to transform the discipline. But such ambitious goals are, themselves, a topic of the conversation.

For this reason, amongst others, perhaps it is best to read Strauss with a certain sense of humility. This is, indeed, how Strauss recommended that one approach the wisdom of ancient thinkers: with humility, respect, and a blend of caution and boldness. The other key ingredient is a keen sense of the duty of judgment. Wherever we find contradiction, Strauss encourages us, we should audaciously presume to resolve it. If we take this tack, we can assess his work as a living and breathing philosophy, dynamic and resisting easy categorization. This work of rethinking Strauss begins with an assumption of which Strauss himself constantly reminded his students—we must read the great books of the past while assuming them to be the product of superior intellects trained in a manner of thought that we have great difficulty in appreciating. But Strauss’s understanding of history precludes taking his text as providing axiomatic truths that could help us in any given political or social context. He cautions us not to read ancient texts with the idea of finding solutions to modern problems. At best, we are enlarging our own horizons through an encounter with radical alterity. We should, I think, avoid lapsing into a reverence or awe for Strauss that might turn into something like an orthodoxy. Strauss seems to want to be read this way, with a flexible judgment tuned to comprehensive reflection rather than

38. This methodological precept will, I fear, become more and more necessary as education becomes more and more driven by market forces and expediency and less and less by the somewhat slower pace of the mind. To the extent that the job search dominates the search for a dissertation topic, the purpose of education is certainly altered.

39. In this sense, Strauss can be said to have taken on board the most radical historicism—which makes for an interesting conversation with thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, with whom Strauss engaged in a lengthy correspondence.
a dogmatic tenacity tuned to non-reflective repetition. Such a careful reading demands a certain submissiveness, a shedding of one's ambition in more practical matters in favor of a stance of reasoned humility.

But the other side of this submissive attitude is that, when the reading is done, we must emerge again in the world, ready to make judgments about particular situations and duty-bound to exercise our reason as political philosophers. While Strauss, the man, seems to have made every effort to avoid engaging in outright political action of the more mundane variety, his work is nonetheless situated in a space that engages the reader with the intent of shaping him for political action. 40 His legacy is nonetheless highly politicized. For this reason, in somewhat paradoxical fashion, Strauss’s political philosophy is ultimately embodied within the pedagogical text; it is an act of political leadership. This form of political leadership is one that Strauss finds coeval with modernity, and which he sees enacted by Machiavelli. 41 Strauss reads Machiavelli as embarking on a journey in order to seek out nothing less than the creation of a “new ruling class” by way of textual arsenal—a recruiting of a future cadre that can master chance by way of political philosophy. Modern political philosophy, beginning with Machiavelli, thus sets the stage for the internal crisis of the West that would occupy so many mid-twentieth century writers—thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Oswald Spengler, and many others saw the imminent fall of the West in the political events of the century. In writing about philosophy, amidst the backdrop of these portentous events, and in so doing taking up the legacy of political


41. It is certainly premature to make the claim that Strauss was attempting to emulate Machiavelli, that Thoughts on Machiavelli attempts to recruit an army by way of a text in order to muster a force capable of overturning the present state of affairs, thereby ushering in “new modes and orders.” I think it is best to leave this question open rather than assume that it has a definite answer.
philosophy in its neglected state, it is possible that Strauss emulates Machiavelli and attempts to perform a kind of steering—but what is being steered? Modernity itself? Political science? The regime of the United States? Something more abstract like “political thought?” For the moment it is better to leave the object of this intervention completely open. We need only accept that Strauss is attempting to steer his readers toward some larger effect, and that this kind of activity is itself a form of political leadership.

Despite its apparent simplicity, it is likely hard for many political scientists to take this thesis seriously. This fact in and of itself is one aspect of the larger terrain of modernity that Strauss seeks to elucidate. On a landscape that has been shaped by the events of the twenty-first century, with Strauss’s legacy composed of equal parts hostility and reverence, and with politics seemingly outpacing scholarly activity, many political scientists automatically genuflect to The Event or The Economy, Globalization or Post-Modernity. Recently, on the left, the idea of “neoliberalism” has become one such container—a placeholder of an idea that becomes causal of all manner of particular phenomena. Few would admit that the idea of democracy may have attained this status as well; democracy is presumed, by many, to be the best regime, and the demise of the U.S.S.R. is seen to be indisputable proof of this fact. Importing mathematical models and methods from other disciplines, political scientists distinguish themselves from politicians by way of the character of their presumed knowledge of the world. We reflexively look to history to justify the present state of politics, thus looking to history for political guidance in the present. To the extent that political science sees the question of the best regime as a

42 The fact that it seems so incredible is in fact part of the very crisis that Strauss and others comment upon: the group that should have the best knowledge of politics should theoretically be in the best position to intervene politically—yet most of us political scientists feel unable to change history by way of individual actions and thus submit to historical necessity.
historically settled matter we remain vulnerable to Strauss’s critique. According to Strauss, political science has evacuated the perspective of the citizen—as concerned as that perspective is with the question of value—by taking up the mantle of the strict isolation of facts and values. This leaves our science adrift and unable to define itself or defend itself on its own terms, to give itself meaning.

In order to remain alive at all in the belly of the modern University, political science as a discipline might be better off focusing its attention elsewhere. But, for better or for worse, there is no other political scientist who has been alleged (properly or not) to have had the profound and lasting impact on politics. Leo Strauss stands alone as an example of a political scientist who achieved the task of writing politically, and doing so effectively. Whether he achieved his purpose is another matter entirely. What this situation proves, though, is that, to the extent that we take seriously our own place in the world as scientists and as actors in the life of the mind, we must take seriously the questions imposed on us by Strauss. To the extent that we remain concerned with politics, real, living politics that eludes easy quantification and which resists the best attempts to measure it, the relationship between Strauss and neoconservatism remains an open site of research. And there is one stubborn fact that enforces this judgment: Leo Strauss, a reticent philosopher who espoused the heterodox view that political philosophy is the “rightful queen of the social sciences,” has apparently outpaced the impact of countless empirical scientists. Not since Woodrow Wilson has a political scientist enjoyed such an elevated status in public discourse. If there is a connection between Strauss and neoconservatism, in any form whatsoever, then this fact threatens the self-conception of many political scientists. When

43. Strauss makes this claim on the first page of *The City and Man.*
Strauss claims that the discipline of political science has fallen into a state of decay by virtue of its attempt to become a science, by giving up its claim to “the all-embracing study of human affairs,” we should take this claim seriously. For this reason alone, writing about Strauss is dangerous. To assign Strauss the status of guru seems to equate him with a cult-leader; to consign him to a historical footnote threatens to bury any potential influence he might have had amidst an avalanche of publications and musings, transforming Strauss into a historical artifact of a different time.

As valid as these questions may be, however, it is not just in the prevailing rhetoric of a select group of scholars that one can see the influence of Leo Strauss. Strauss’s mark has been made in terms of the discourse of leadership that has taken hold in the larger sphere of American politics. Here I must acknowledge my debt to Nicholas Xenos, whose *Cloaked in Virtue* (2008) remains the most erudite investigation into Strauss’s influence on the George W. Bush administration. Xenos argues persuasively that “the Straussian element is most readily seen in the rhetoric in which those policies [of the Bush administration] have been couched” and that “The Straussians have scored major victories in the struggle of ideas in the public realm while various intellectual fashions of the left have effectively abandoned the field.” This is a charge that has some potential weight to it. In the pages that follow, I will consider the implications of Strauss’s work (and of various readings of his work) upon the field of political leadership writ large, and its impact not only on neoconservative thought, but on the wider discursive landscape we inhabit. I will do so with a careful eye. Of particular importance in this discussion is the text

44. See “What is Political Philosophy?” 17.

Thoughts on Machiavelli because it has thus far escaped a close analysis on these terms. But before launching into an analysis of this vital text, we must spend some time sorting through who Strauss was, how we should read him, and what this means for us.

**Which Strauss?**

Whether it is Strauss’s philosophy or his politics that present the greater danger, the fact remains that there are good reasons to undertake the effort of reading him, but with the understanding that one must read him both cautiously and boldly, as he demanded. The gambit that begins this journey can be stated in deceptively simple terms: in Strauss we find a perspective that forces us to confront our most deeply held preconceptions and prejudices. Being charitable, we can say that Strauss’s esoteric method is meant to serve a pedagogical purpose. Where some see an elitist enterprise that attempts to communicate the tenets of a secret doctrine through encoded language, we might instead see a pedagogical challenge that attempts to do a certain kind of work on the reader—on the right reader. One must read Strauss, then, as he wanted to be read. One must also decide to be the right reader, to step into that place that Strauss has cleared, almost expectantly, just for us.

This initial (dare we say) “leap of faith” is the necessary starting point of any reasoned analysis. By way of this charitable stance we can hope to avoid the twin dangers of deifying Strauss or demonizing him. But we cannot hide from our responsibility—the necessary act of judgment that must follow any engagement with profound thinking. If we engage Strauss already convinced of his eminence and his freedom from responsibility for neoconservatism we do not do him justice. On what basis might we presume to make that judgment, without having
read the work itself? In like fashion, if we read him with the conviction that he is an elitist demagogue responsible for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, we preemptively untether ourselves from the real Strauss. But there is another challenge that may be harder to overcome. If we give up the task of seeking for “the hidden message” we must take up an entirely different mode of reading. We must try, as much as we are able, to philosophize like Strauss. We must “bring about” a conversation with the “greatest minds” of the past.

We will not find, in Strauss, a road map of truth, the x-number of precepts that we can follow to good health, good politics, and good life. I believe that too many good minds have spent too many sleepless nights trying to wrest secrets from the paws of the sphinx, an enterprise that is undoubtedly doomed to failure. Strauss resists at every turn the attempt to pin upon him guru status—even while realizing that this is the initial disposition from which he expects his reader to begin reading. But if Strauss is not best read as a godfather of an intellectual movement, if he is more concerned with educating his reader than with converting him or conscripting him in a battle against modernity or one of its pernicious faces, then much of the polarized debate about Strauss and his legacy needs to be reconsidered. The texts themselves demand attention. Despite this fact, though, there is nonetheless good reason to see connections between Strauss

46. This gauntlet has massive weight: critics may always say that the necessary skill or erudition has not been met, and that Strauss eludes all criticism because he has attained a level of understanding that is not even possible under prevailing historical conditions. But these arguments are not themselves for anything—they merely rest content with criticizing others for failing to live up to some ideal standard. Taking Socrates as our model we can only note that the difficulty always lies with building knowledge out of our opinions but though this task be difficult it is always nonetheless necessary. Where is one to find a real philosopher today? Strauss wrote in “What is Liberal Education?” that “We must not be deceived by the fact that we meet many people who say that they are philosophers. For those people employ a loose expression which is perhaps necessitated by administrative convenience. Often they mean merely that they are members of philosophy departments. And it is as absurd to expect members of philosophy departments to be philosophers as it is to expect members of art departments to be artists. We cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize” (in Liberalism: Ancient and Modern, 7).

and the neoconservative revolution in American political thought. At a time when political action is nearly universally decried as either futile or inherently manipulative, as bereft of the ability to deal with the world’s largest problems, Strauss uncannily appears on the horizon of our present moment just when we thought we could turn our backs on him with a good conscience. Those who reflexively dismiss the “anti-Straussian” claims as to his influence upon real-world politics ultimately do a disservice to Strauss and his intent. Making clear this influence, however, is no easy task. It involves reconsidering many of our assumptions about ideas and their relationship to politics, the role of leadership in guiding human action, and how we conceive of history and our place within it.

Previous studies that attempt to locate Strauss’s “influence” upon neoconservatism have approached the question from a particular vantage point. Looking for the “substantive” teaching that is disseminated in seminar rooms and coded into texts, these theories of intellectual action conceive of ideas as material objects that can be handed from teacher to pupil in a line of unbroken lineage through the decades of the twentieth century. Many who write about Strauss, from different political vantage points, describe Strauss’s “teaching” in a manner that is not inconsistent with this viewpoint on the nature of ideas. Such claims inevitably take the form “Strauss’s teaching was….” Indeed, those who willingly take up the mantle of “Straussian” seem to tacitly embrace this notion by the very use of the proper name of someone else to describe their own intellectual position. They presume to lift the banner of an ideology, to join the ranks of a school in the image of its founder. In a pluralistic field like political science, such categories are perhaps inevitable. Other figures have certainly attracted various adherents—one thinks of the colloquial “Haber-mafia” that is sometimes jokingly (sometimes not) used to
describe the followers of Jürgen Habermas. But these categories can quickly become ossified and unhelpful, no longer serving their heuristic purpose and instead distorting the positions of those who take them up.

It is necessary, for any investigation of this kind, and in a preliminary and ad-hoc manner, to draw a line of demarcation between those who willingly take up the label of Straussian and those who merely took a course with Leo Strauss or some person who did. Anne Norton, a student of a student of Strauss, makes a clear distinction between students of Strauss, and his disciples— the self-proclaimed Straussians who “have made a conscious and deliberate effort to shape politics and learning in the United States and abroad.”48 This is a useful distinction at the level of academics—its benefit is that it reserves the label “Straussian” for those who embrace it themselves—lest we hastily judge a person based solely on the teachers he/she has encountered. As scholars like Shadia Drury have pointed out, Strauss attracted such a following (and of such a character) that it “tended to have the attributes of a cult—its secrecy and faith in the authority of Strauss and of the ancient philosophers he supposedly followed.”49 Peter Minowitz goes to great lengths to defend Strauss and his followers, and in so doing attempts to develop a sufficiently broad definition of “Straussian” so as to avoid unfair categorizations. However, his definition includes the necessity that someone has read, with care, all of Strauss’ major works, that they are “dazzled” by his writings, that they are themselves of a similar disposition in their interpretation of texts, that they read “between the lines” to look for hidden meanings. While such a definition has merit in that it does not limit itself to the direct disciples of Strauss, so defined, it limits itself to academics— or at least those who have spent a considerable amount of time (and have


available such time) “they have spent hundreds of hours trying to extract buried teachings” reading Strauss and the source texts he himself pored over. This manner of defense, akin to the accusers it is poised to battle against, can only appear as a skirmish in a larger war—and perhaps just as pointless. Minowitz does not even try to keep his level of polemic in check as he works tirelessly to refute any and all claims that have any air of critique toward Strauss or Straussian.

It is intellectually irresponsible to label a person a “Straussian” for reasons of their past exposure to a certain form or substance of thought. This is like treating Straussianism as a chronic disease, a contagion. It is like calling anyone who took a class with Heidegger a “Nazi.” But it is equally irresponsible to assume that no connection exists—that all students are completely self-contained and autonomous individuals with free will who take courses without learning anything from their teachers. This would be like arguing that no one who took a course with Heidegger was influenced to become a Nazi. Or, it would be like arguing that Strauss was not a teacher at all, that he exerted no influence upon his pupils. The task, naturally, has to be to show exactly how this influence has been transmitted, what form(s) it takes, and what the consequences of this influence actually amount to in the thinking that is


51. The scope of the catalog of all wrongs against Strauss and Straussians is truly overwhelming. To be fair, Minowitz is largely responding to a bevy of ridiculous claims that have been made about Strauss; Minowitz uncovers and rebuts everything from who Strauss thought was Plato’s “real” voice in *The Republic* to what the topic of Bill Kristol’s doctoral thesis was.

52. I use this example because of its notoriety in academic circles. The questions of the relationship of philosophy to politics was posed in stark terms in the aftermath of World War II. Coincidentally, Strauss was a student of Heidegger in Germany before leaving for England, and then the U.S. Should we thus argue that Strauss was a Nazi?

53. This position is untenable. By all accounts, Strauss was a generous and gifted teacher who took his duty to his students very seriously. The University of Chicago hosted a conference entitled “Leo Strauss as Teacher: Reflections on Leo Strauss as Teacher” on April 22-23, 2011. At this conference, many of Strauss’s former pupils spoke of his enduring impact on their intellectual lives. Participants included Nathan Tarcov, Ralph Lerner, Victor Gourevitch, Hilail Gildin, and Robert Faulkner. Video of the conference can be found on The University of Chicago youtube page.
being analyzed.54 This is a complex set of questions. They cut right to the bottom of our perceptions about the world and our place within that world, about our relationship to ideas and our ability to influence history. As when we are faced with any complex issue, it is tempting to reduce this complexity through the application of some common-sense heuristic. One temptation is what I will refer to as the “contagion-model.” The contagion-model of thought, whereby an idea begins in a brain somewhere and then “spreads” throughout the population unless quarantined and expunged, is an archaic and dangerous way of thinking about the relationship between ideas and practices, and the role of philosophy in human political life. It smuggles in ideas of purity and health, holding these ideals as sacred and postulating that they must be expunged of viral threats or pernicious influence. It elevates a romantic notion of genius to the hallowed seat of creation—making ideas the product of these singular moments of creation. It turns ideas into crystallized, static objects that endure through time. When thinking in this way, it is all too easy to put ideas into the position of causal agency, making them the motive force of all human action. This view is seductive: thinking of ideas like contagious diseases has a long and bloody history.

The task ahead of us is further complicated by the legacy of Strauss’s apparent re-discovery of a forgotten form of writing known now as “esoteric” writing. Strauss himself certainly advanced this claim. In his essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Strauss sets out the tenets of his way of “reading between the lines.” One of the central claims of this essay is that if one

54. Even less attention has been focused on who it was that influenced Strauss. By Strauss’s own admission, Nietzsche was a profound influence upon his formative years. Less known is that of R.H. Tawney, the scholar responsible for Leo Strauss’s stay in England prior to his emigration to the United States—and ultimately for his position at the University of Chicago. But, intellectually speaking, it would appear that Strauss was the one doing the influencing rather than vice versa. For a discussion of this connection see S.J.D. Green, “The Tawney-Strauss Connection: On Historicism and Values in the History of Political Ideas,” The Journal of Modern History 67, no. 2 (1995): 255-277.
discovers, in reading a particular text, an off-hand or surreptitious contradiction of a central tenet of a given orthodoxy that can be held to be known by the writer, then one must read anew the entire work with the presumption that the writer means to be opposed to the orthodoxy in its entirety—even if this writer, in all other places, otherwise upholds the given orthodoxy. This methodological precept of reading has given fits to many of Strauss’s attempted interpreters, causing the entire legacy of Strauss and his thinking to be more or less completely up for grabs. Strauss’s own self-understanding of philosophy and its relation to the city—as dominated by tension and ambiguity, by persecution and ridicule, seems to dictate that we read Strauss according to his own guidelines—“between the lines.” The standards of evidence become rapidly unstable when we accept this methodological precept. And thus, although he lays out the way of reading him so clearly, it is this apparent clarity that has spawned so many muddled readings of Strauss—and just as many careers. If we read Strauss as he tells us to read him we are quickly swallowed in an unfamiliar territory loaded with contradictions and bread crumb trails that fade in the act of following them. I can’t help but think of Machiavelli’s wry smile, that smile known to every undergraduate who has had the dubious fortune of being assigned to read The Prince. What exactly is Strauss up to? Was Strauss a friend of liberal democracy? It is no longer good enough to discover a place in Strauss’s text wherein this claim is made overtly. Even finding a claim made “between the lines” becomes sketchy work—for the entirety of Strauss’s written corpus could yet reveal a contradictory statement that might cause one to go back to the beginning and read the whole corpus anew. Nothing less than complete familiarity with every word Strauss wrote—and every word he didn’t write—is demanded.

Surely, no reader has ever met this challenge. Any seemingly overt claim is subject to this heightened scrutiny—such claims can be mere window dressing, laid over the “true” teaching for purposes of throwing off the censors. As Pocock noted shortly after Strauss’s death, Strauss’s method has uncomfortable results for a certain kind of mind: “If there are no anomalies in Machiavelli, then everything Strauss can impute to him as an intention is an intention. The method must become non-falsifiable.”

This interpretation of Strauss imports a scientific cast of mind upon the text, demanding it hold itself up to particular standards of evidence that are taken as “self-evident.” But, as we shall see, it was precisely this scientific mode of analysis that Strauss sought to destabilize through *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Its non-falsifiability, then, is not an external criteria by which one can judge the merits of Strauss’s analysis but instead a precept that the text subjects to a different kind of analysis. But what kind? How should we read Strauss? As one early commentator noted in his assessment of Strauss’s writing:

*The argument is as elusive as its object. It is consistently elliptical, consciously ambiguous, broken by aporien moments, moved forward by spurious allusions, characterized by a strategic or mock-strategic style, laced with irony and sarcasm, and held together by arcane thematic connections. It is a fascinating object of exegesis, but there is no clear basis on which it can be substantively engaged either politically or philosophically.*

These facts, encountered by any astute reader of Strauss, pose a serious problem of interpretation. When Strauss demands that we read an author “as he intended to be read” he means that we give up on the attempt to import a criteria of judgment, taken from our present historical conditions, into the terrain of the past. But, because historicism is a prevalent force in

56. Pocock, “Prophet and Inquisitor,” 393.


58. It is worth noting, and not merely in passing, that it is always a “he” in Strauss’s encounter with the profound thinkers of the past—Strauss, to my knowledge, never wrote anything about a woman. Masculinity, as an organizing principle of Machiavelli’s thought, seems to share a certain continuity with Strauss, who frequently lamented the “effeminate” nature of modern life. For a reading of Machiavelli that subjects gender to a detailed analysis, and also takes up Strauss, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender & Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
the West, he expects us to read him in a mode that is dominated by historicism. His intention, then, becomes paradoxical: he demands that we do not read him as he expects us to read him.

With these insights in place—more suggestively unsettling intuitions than anything else—we might begin a reading that could take us someplace unanticipated. Strauss will not be found in any test tubes, nor will his legacy be readily packaged for easy consumption and digestion. Those that wave an iconic banner, emblazoned with the name “Leo Strauss,” over any battlefield have surely departed from reading Strauss as he demanded to be read. Anticipating these kinds of readers, knowing how his contemporaries will read him, Strauss deploys a strategy of writing that stymies the forms of thought that are brought to bear on his texts. What is remarkable is that, despite his anticipation of the problem and all his work to prevent such things from happening, Strauss has nonetheless become an icon of the political right. The obscurantist nature of his style has seemingly come back to haunt him. Thus, critics like Mansfield can easily buttress their claims that Strauss has not been understood even while those more in line with Pocock can nonetheless attempt to discern what Strauss was really up to in writing about Machiavelli. As Pocock notes, Strauss’s doctrine results in the imputation of meaning wherever a contradiction might be found:

It is not that there are hidden meanings in the *Prince* and *Discourses*, but that these works form a sustained esoteric exercise in conveying, by consistent occult methods, a consistent occult meaning, and that Strauss is the greatest of interpreters of Machiavelli because he alone has discovered the methods and deciphered the meaning.\(^59\)

The result of this stated methodological precept is that the reader is left in a constant state of dependence—searching for the hidden meaning that is somewhere *out there*. Strauss is read as a voice of authority—in such a reading Strauss is held to be systematic, coherent, intentional in

\(^{59}\) Pocock, “Prophet and Inquisitor,” 392.
every word, punctuation, and numerical notation. If one approaches Strauss on bended knee, it
would seem, Strauss can not help but accept this sign of devotion and enlist another follower into
the ranks of his army of believers. But this may not be all he is doing. Indeed, he may in fact be
trying desperately to do something quite different.

This interpretation of Strauss as the mastermind behind the text, as the omniscient mind
who takes account of all variables and who leaves no thread dangling from the fabric of the
tightly-woven text, encounters a problem. This problem is *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. While
Strauss does claim that one should read Machiavelli as if every word and every silence
corresponds to a singular intention, he is nonetheless quite clear that this is a methodological
precept rather than a statement of absolute truth.60 The fact that, in our experience, the various
authorities we encounter do not agree on everything compels us to rely on our own capacity to
reason in order to sort through various truth claims. Here, method and philosophy merge into a
mode of reading that requires practice and patience, time and labor. As he put it in the essay
“What is Liberal Education?”: “Since the greatest minds contradict one another regarding the
most important matters, they compel us to judge of their monologues; we cannot take on trust
what any one of them says.” This situation is compounded by the fact that “we cannot but notice
that we are not competent judges.”61 The problem is one that confronts a reader of a single text
or a single oeuvre, just as much as it is for one who reads across the many authors and many

60. See also “Political Philosophy and History,” in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 62-3. On these pages, Strauss draws an important distinction between
“refutation” and “contradiction.” Refutation would presumably be a final judgment based on some universal criteria
—history, progress, logic. Contradiction is merely that—statements that do not agree with one another. By drawing
this distinction Strauss encourages us to question the nature of our relation to the thinkers of the past.

texts with which political philosophy has concerned itself. He states that to teach this mode of reading is the goal of liberal education:

…liberal education consists in listening to the conversation among the greatest minds. But here we are confronted with the overwhelming difficulty that this conversation does not take place without our help—that in fact we must bring about that conversation. The greatest minds utter monologues. We must transform their monologues into a dialogue, their “side by side” into a “together.”

These guidelines are consistent with Strauss’s comments on method in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Strauss maintains that one must keep a keen eye out for contradictions: “When an author deliberately contradicts himself in a subtle manner, he may be said to repeat an earlier statement of his while varying it in a way which for some reason is not easily noticed.” This theme of the pervasive character of contradiction, and the responsibility of judgment, occupies much of Strauss’s work. It alerts the reader to the way Strauss encourages one to think and to read, to philosophize and to learn.

This is a training exercise—a way of reading a text that assumes more than is necessary in order to give the best possible weight to the argument. The hypothetical status of these precepts is made more clear by consulting Strauss on the question of humility and the responsibility of education. One can see the same status, the same “as if” in Strauss’s famous pedagogical dictum that a teacher should always “assume that there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart.” It is a training exercise that demands a state of humility of its practitioners—whilst simultaneously demanding responsibility. This methodological precept is foreign to a culture of expertise and authority—a science of politics built on positivist

63. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 42.
foundations seems bound to inculcate the kind of posture only authoritative knowledge can grant. Such teachers assume, by virtue of degree and prestige, that they are the foremost experts and that they are therefore “superior” in at least one regard to their students. For many teachers at work today, especially at the University level, the goal of teaching is to, by way of one’s expertise, provide substantive material to the students. This is the “banking concept of education” which Paulo Freire railed against, and which assumes information and knowledge to be material, easily parsed and packaged, that can be transmitted to students. Teaching in this mode is thought by some to be more accountable because standardized testing can measure whether the material has been successfully transmitted to the students, or not. History, in this view, becomes an assemblage of facts and figures, trends and tabulations. In approaching the works of the past with this posture, positivist social science can only see precursors or early, muddled forms of the present. Two assumptions follow: the present is always, dogmatically, assumed to be superior to the past, and action, in the present, is always assumed to be the motive for investigation into the past.

This is the state of the discipline as Strauss found it. It is still, largely speaking, our discipline today. In writing Thoughts on Machiavelli, then, Strauss enters upon the terrain as it is, with the subtle but undeniable intent to shake things up as much as possible. He defends contemplation and demands that we read the works of the past on their own terms. It is unsurprising that this text, in particular, would have provoked such a heated exchange in Political Theory. The dual legacies of Strauss and Machiavelli, with their equally polarized

65. Paulo Freire, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum Press, 2005), 72. Interestingly, there is something of Hegel in this idea, for whom the process of Bildung, by way of which culture is taken up by individuals, happens such that: “The (individual and universal) Spirit that has passed through this process of formative education resembles a repository of dead matter which it has mastered and can make accessible to itself by the powers of well-trained recollection” (John H. Smith, The Spirit & Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel’s Philosophy of Bildung (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 17.
readership, cannot help but ignite the passions and stir the tongue and pen to argument. Machiavelli is the perfect focal point because he has been seen as the progenitor of positivist political science—as the penultimate realist who embraced facts and demanded that values subordinate themselves to the reality of a given situation. The figure of Machiavelli occupies a unique position in the tradition of scholarship—a more contested or reviled figure could not be found. There are many interpretations of Machiavelli that challenge this positivist viewpoint. Indeed, Machiavelli’s “thought” has lead to all manner of assertions and interpretations—from the democratic Machiavelli to the corporate executive Machiavelli, from theorist of republican virtue to the amoral purveyor of tips for ruthless princes. And perhaps this is why we still find his enigmatic smile so appealing; interest in Machiavelli in contemporary scholarship has accelerated this trend of pluralizing Machiavelli. Ironically, perhaps in spite of ourselves, we find ourselves in a position anticipated by Strauss: many eminent and learned men and women disagree as to what Machiavelli was up to in his writings, what he intended and what he was trying to teach us. How are we to make a judgment, especially when we are all to aware of our own deficiencies? To whose authority must we submit? In order to begin to consider these important questions, we must discuss Machiavelli on Strauss’s terms—and specifically his relation to tyranny.

Machiavelli’s Philosophy and Its Relation to Tyranny

Strauss claims, albeit in qualified manner, that Machiavelli is a “teacher of evil.”66 This claim receives a sustained treatment in Thoughts on Machiavelli, so we should be unsurprised that this

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66. This claim is sometimes not read in the context and with the qualifications Strauss offered. See, for example, Timothy J. Lukes, “Lionizing Machiavelli,” The American Political Science Review 95, no. 3 (2001): 561-575.
initial claim becomes transformed through the work of the text. Strauss appears to take up his own doctrine of reading between the lines, saying that “There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface.” Strauss goes on to flatly declare that “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.” As always, one must tread carefully. Here an apparent contradiction in the text must give way to a more nuanced understanding—authorized by Strauss himself in his methodological stance. This is perhaps what makes Strauss unique amongst political philosophers—in arguing for the existence of a body of esoteric writing that has existed amidst political repression and “on the surface” whilst simultaneously buried in the depths—Strauss lays out all the necessary interpretive maxims by which one should approach his own writings. He seeks to be as comprehensive as possible, to encompass his own viewpoint in writing. Machiavelli, to be sure, never lays out a theory of reading that points the way to his understanding of Livy. He just does this reading, leaving it to the trained and careful eye to thread the pieces together and stitch a pattern out of the text. But Strauss, perhaps because he is empowered by the liberal democratic regime of the United States, and because of the intellectual climate of the time, is enabled to write the very rules by which one should read his works. Thus, while someone like Pocock can bemoan the lack of reference points by which to “falsify” some of Strauss’s claims about Machiavelli, it is not as clear that reading Strauss is subject to the same potential pitfall. If it is true that Strauss offers, in clear and logically consistent manner, a set of rules for reading his text (by way of the reading of Machiavelli) then one might have at hand the interpretive matrix necessary in order to make claims about what Strauss wrote whilst

simultaneously avoiding the abyss of the author’s *intention*. It is possible that, through an act of seasoned intellect, Strauss may lay out his intention in clear and cogent terms.

When we read Strauss in this way, which is how he wanted to be read, this book, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, becomes less a book that attempts to excavate “what Machiavelli meant” as a sustained argument aimed at the present generation. Machiavelli is important to this book—no doubt—but since Strauss does not approach Machiavelli as if he were an object in the world of nature, in need of observations and generalizations, it is an act of extreme prejudice to bring to bear a scientifically-tuned apparatus on Strauss’s reading of Machiavelli. Certainly some familiarity with Livy and Aristotle, Xenophon and the Medici clan, will help one to understand Machiavelli. Strauss exacts high demands of his readership, but his methods demand that the text assemble all these references “under one roof” so to speak. Strauss wants us to read him as if his intention conflates with the text, permeating it and embodying it in a manner as to make the two indissociable. Several specific themes and concepts emerge at once as vital toward this enterprise.

The “problem” is a specific thing in Strauss—it is discussed in the closing paragraph of the Introduction. Strauss argues that political philosophy is concerned with the “permanent problems” of man—those problems that are coeval with human society and with human beings as such. He notes that many have argued that Machiavelli is “new” in that “Machiavelli’s problem is a novel problem; it is fundamentally different from the problem with which earlier political philosophy was concerned.” Thus, he hopes to disabuse us of this notion, to somehow retrieve the permanent problems by way of a reading of Machiavelli. It is because Machiavelli

had the classical tradition of political philosophy in his sights that we can use Machiavelli for this purpose, peering into the world as he saw it.

We might supplement this reading with a few insights gleaned from the essay “What is Political Philosophy?” Political philosophy, as a branch of philosophy, is “the conscious, coherent, and relentless effort to replace opinions about the political fundamentals by knowledge regarding them.”69 One can only begin such an enterprise by delving into the surface of things—the heart of things can only be approached by way of the surface. Because the nature of political phenomena is “subject to approval or disapproval” or to “praise and blame,”70 one is faced with a specific problem when attempting to study political “things”: “One does not understand them as what they are, as political things, if one does not take seriously their explicit or implicit claim to be judged in terms of goodness or badness, of justice or injustice, i.e. if one does not measure them by some standard of goodness or justice. To judge soundly one must know the true standards.”71 What we are warned against is despising the surface or taking it for granted—we must approach with a certain humility. Despising the surface, or otherwise taking it for granted, stymies understanding because one sees the surface as deceptive or illusory rather than as significant in some way toward understanding that which is not immediately evident. Here, the apparent contradiction on the surface of Strauss’s text gives way by way of interrogation to a subtle distinction. This distinction, in its subtlety, and as a result of the “work” of deciphering it, can perform a kind of pedagogical mission for Strauss. Strauss hopes to attune his reader to make him receptive to a different way of looking at the world. This is consistent with other

69. Strauss, Political Philosophy, 12.
70. Strauss, Political Philosophy, 12.
71. Strauss, Political Philosophy, 12.
statements Strauss made in other works. In *On Tyranny*, Strauss elaborated the connection between Xenophon and Machiavelli, arguing that by way of contrast between Xenophon’s Socratic political science and Machiavelli’s political science one can see the contours of the modern edifice of political science as it was laid down by Machiavelli. This apparently obscure topic is contextualized by Strauss as helping to explain why modern day political science “has failed to grasp tyranny as what it really is.” This profound failure of political science is the starting point of Strauss’ rumination on Machiavelli—it animates his entire reading of the text. For this reason alone, political scientists of today should reckon with its arguments and attempt to discern the thrust of the critique. With an appropriate degree of humility, we can find ourselves in a position to evaluate ourselves and the world in a different register of thought. Strauss sees himself as facing up to a massive yet indescribable danger, a kind of tyranny that “surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past.” But before we immediately assign this bold tyranny a name like Hitler or Stalin, let us note that Strauss explicitly links up this new form of tyranny with the ongoing conquest of nature, a theme that is likewise apparent in his reading of Machiavelli. For Strauss, it is the birth of science itself, coeval with modernity and its objectifying relationship to nature that results in this nightmarish form of tyranny. He is not merely condemning the ideology of communism or fascism, nor will he point the finger at despotic (yet charismatic) leaders who seduce whole populations with acts of demagogic prestidigitation. The tyranny Strauss has discovered is new, never before seen


74. Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 23

75. For a further defense of this claim, see Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 95-7.
or anticipated by ancient thinkers. It is our tyranny, a tyranny we must meet and deal with and this can seemingly only be done with a retrieval of ancient political insight. Because a certain kind of tyranny demands a certain kind of response, this modern product of the birth of natural sciences and the erosion of the tradition of natural right requires a particular kind of intervention, one that looks to the pre-modern heritage of the modern condition for some clue as to how to interpret the otherwise unintelligible events of the present day tyranny. In this exercise we cannot expect to find ready-made theorems or formulas that might only be applied to new cases. What is needed is true philosophy. But what is that, exactly? Perhaps it is, as one reader of Strauss has concluded, that “true philosophers are guided by a different standard from non-philosophers as to what it means to be a just man. They are beyond the conventional understandings of good and evil.”

This mode of philosophy requires a particular kind of engagement with history, one that is philosophically rooted in the tradition of German philosophy. What’s more, Strauss is claiming that the ability to understand modern political science too hinges on this return to the past:

To understand the basic premise of present-day political science, one would have to understand the meaning of the epoch-making change effected by Machiavelli; for that change consisted in the discovery of the continent on which all specifically modern political thought, and hence especially present-day political science, is at home.

76. As an example of why political philosophy matters think about the question of the “best regime.” If we ask “what is the best regime?” we open the door to all kinds of political analysis. If, on the other hand, we take for granted the modern liberal democratic state as the regime du jour, as the only possible way of organizing a political entity, we foreclose all manner of vital discussion in favor of a deeply historicist argument about the necessity of certain forms of political order during particular historical junctures. This foreclosure is itself the kind of tyranny that Strauss is attuned to in his thinking on political philosophy. It shows a deep continuity between the modern state of Stalin and Hitler and that of Roosevelt and Churchill—the political regime is not merely reducible to its ideological face. The other, related question, is “do we have a modern democratic state because it is the best regime possible or because it is the one that we got handed to us?” This question is equally necessary, and equally at odds with the established power structures of any given society, thus the contention between philosophy and the state according to Strauss.

77. Xenos, Cloaked in Virtue, 106.

78. Strauss, On Tyranny, 24. This theme of the “discovery of continents” by intrepid thinkers resonates with the thought of Louis Althusser, who is taken up in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.
Strauss thus puts his reading of Xenophon next to his text on Machiavelli, and situates both of his own texts in relation to problems of pressing urgency in the modern world. The threat is real and looming: “We are now brought face to face with a tyranny which holds out the threat of becoming, thanks to ‘the conquest of nature’ and in particular of human nature, what no earlier tyranny ever became: perpetual and universal.”

This universal threat is characterized by Strauss as a particular manifestation of collectivism: “Confronted by the appalling alternative that man, or human thought, must be collectivized either by one stroke and without mercy or else by slow and gentle processes, we are forced to wonder how we could escape this dilemma. We reconsider therefore the elementary and unobtrusive conditions of human freedom.”

What concerns Strauss is the collectivization of thought, what we might also call the homogenization of thought or the lack of individual distinction in thought. This is a threat that knows no state boundaries. In failing to ask the right questions in our engagement with history, we foreclose the ability to have a discussion about the truly important matters of political philosophy.

Strauss elides “man” and “thought,” thus arguing that what defines human beings as such is the ability to think. He takes seriously the threat of a universal collectivization of thought—this domination would by definition be perpetual because it would obliterate any manner of critical

81. It is significant that one of the looming silences of Thoughts on Machiavelli is on the question of the state. Considered by many to be the progenitor of the theory of raison d’état, Machiavelli nonetheless had a very personalized notion of political power, as evidenced by his use of the concept stato—a personal, relational form of domination. The topic of state power was very much on the agenda for German political thought of the early twentieth century. As an example of work that Strauss was undoubtedly familiar with see Friedrich Meinecke, Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d’État and Its Place in Modern History (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998).
82. See, also, Strauss’s discussion in “Political Philosophy and History,” in What is Political Philosophy? (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).
stance one might take on it by virtue of its universal status. Strauss sees a certain preparation for this universal mode as one of collectivized thought, which is “being prepared in a hidden and frequently quite unconscious way by the spread of the teaching that all human thought is collective independently of any human effort directed to this end, because all human thought is historical.”83 This thesis is central to the book, and I will return to it below. But before we can embark on a discussion of the work of Thoughts on Machiavelli, or how it goes about doing what it does, we must discuss the topic of history. This is no academic matter: the question of history is of vital importance.

History and Us

It is by taking up history in a specific kind of way that we might, as political scientists, attempt to overcome the history of our own discipline, to come to grips with the forms of thought that structure our science “behind our backs” as it were. This is the first path that is opened up by Strauss—a self-critical path that may lead in a direction that results in the complete transformation of the discipline of political science—and perhaps civilization as well. On this path we might take up history anew, reframing our engagement with it in a potentially non-historicist manner and in so doing begin the open-ended process of asking the right questions. But there is another path, a more seductive path and, certainly, an easier one. There is something of the Cold War fog hanging over this text, a rich and variegated context that threatens to engulf Strauss’s unique voice and historicize his thought. This fog subtly encourages us to think of Strauss as past, as a figure whose work and life are removed from our own across historical

83. Strauss, On Tyranny, 27.
thresholds like the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 or the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. When we think in this foggy way about ourselves and our past, about irreversible moments in time that propel us forward into an uncertain future, we create a distance between ourselves and these arguments, these texts. Such constant effort is the very substance of modern life. Without the antiquated notion of inevitable progress of the human species to fall back upon, we are left aimlessly adrift. We constitute the present by forgetting the past, not in detail or in fact, but in its presence. We could easily meld the comments on collectivization into a critique of the Soviet Union or of communism more generally, and thus safely place this object in the past—thereby neutralizing its threat upon our “advanced” discipline. On this second path, we would then be free to go about doing political science, safely assured that the threat Strauss identified has been bested. Even if we have not made progress according to universal standards by which we might mark such progress, we have nonetheless, in each passing moment, entered onto new and uncharted territory that may demand new things of us. We might then proceed to debate how and why the Cold War was won, and nostalgically look at the threat of tyranny as if it were a slightly oxidized object under glass, in a museum. This Strauss, the scholastic and all-too academic Strauss, becomes an item of curiosity or a souvenir of a struggle waged long ago. In some ways, the battle over Strauss’s legacy has thus far been waged on this terrain: did Strauss contribute to the victory of the U.S. over the U.S.S.R.? Was he “merely” a philosopher who helped to reinvigorate political philosophy during the victory of behavioral social science? Did he mastermind the political movement currently known as neoconservatism from beyond the grave? These are all questions that can only be asked by assuming very specific things about

84. Certainly, this idea of progress is not completely gone from the scene. But Strauss would argue that it is not a dominant intellectual force any longer. See his discussion of progress in “Political Philosophy and History.”
history and our engagement with it—assumptions that Strauss himself spent much effort trying to convince us to stop taking for granted.

If this were a text merely about the Cold War, or merely about the threat of communism, it would not need to take Machiavelli as its interlocutor. As if to illustrate the alien nature of his project to our own ways of thought, Strauss argues a thesis about Machiavelli that is hard to take seriously: Machiavelli, himself, effected epochal change through the writing of his text. According to Strauss, it is because Machiavelli is so ultimately present for us that we have trouble interpreting him—he is a seemingly permanent fixture in our mental apparatus, a kind of dark matter that influences our thought but remains out of our vision. Ironically, one of the ways in which we are Machiavelli’s students is precisely in thinking of ourselves as situated in history in a specific kind of way—that we see Machiavelli as a figure of the past, in a particular nexus of circumstances, is itself an effect of Machiavelli and his thought. The very idea of a historically-situated point of view is a product of modernity, and therefore to be traced to Machiavelli.

This puts a different spin on the situation we find ourselves in with regard to modernity and our encounter with ancient forms of thought. Much as Machiavelli looked to the ancients to help motivate a change in the present condition of his city of Florence, Strauss too takes a specific stance with regard to the past. Consider the opening words of The City and Man, published in 1964:

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.

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85. This argument is repeated in “What is Political Philosophy?” as well.

The radical nature of this thesis is provocative and perhaps even a bit unbelievable. This celebration of human agency against *Fortuna* and history, in praise of individual effort of the most monumental variety, can find little purchase in a mind utterly devoted to historicism. It is a thesis that grounds all action in the present moment, in a set of motivations that shape and direct our passions. It vigorously demands of us that we justify ourselves, our actions, that we give reasons for them and hold ourselves responsible for holding those opinions. It links us with Machiavelli because presumably he was doing something of the same sort with his own turn to the past. A new political science, one that walks the road of political philosophy, must justify itself on this terrain.

On the contrary, the study of history is, for many scholars, an enterprise of self-evident value. Taking the tacit model of the natural sciences, historians of a certain kind seek to find causal mechanisms and patterns in the study of dead historical matter. Political scientists take as equally self-evident the need to gather more and more data, to assemble enough data points to construct the missing general theory of politics that might put an end to debate and solidify its authority. To such minds, the world is full of people who merely “express” their times, who offer a viewpoint that is so deeply rooted in a specific time and place that it threatens to vanish into its own singularity before being able to be brought into conversation with other, radically different cultures or times. “To each his own,” such a culture says, idle, as it wonders why political life becomes inert. This is the deeply paradoxical nature of our modern scientific enterprise, modeled as it is on the natural sciences—we want desperately to craft a general theory whilst we simultaneously insist on the radical particularity of each data point. The modern mind believes thought to be nearly or completely historically conditioned. We intuit ourselves as a product of
our environment. Relativism thus obliterates our need—or even our ability—to establish a connection with the remote past. According to the relativistic view, at best the past is seen as a pre-cursor to the present, at worst a failed experiment that is better forgotten because it has no real continuity with the present.

But Strauss situates this turn to the past in a position that is opposed to self-forgetting: dare we call it a self-remembering? This is in line with Strauss’s discussion of the problem of natural right, which he called “a matter of recollection rather than of actual knowledge.” How could reading Xenophon be considered an exercise in self-remembering? Why is this distinct from “actual” knowledge? It is our incredulity toward this question that might pique our interest—perhaps it will even provoke hostility and skepticism that might turn into suspicion of conspiracy and deceptive use of language. To further complicate matters, what Strauss qualifies as the crisis of the West has not, in the least, subsided; this specter of relativism, the cultural byproduct of historicism, has been a political lightning rod in recent decades. Undoubtedly, it was this phantasmic critique of relativism that made Strauss so appealing to many conservative thinkers and helped ingratiate him to the neoconservative movement. But Strauss nonetheless resists such enlistment. He attempted to leave behind the “hot and blind zeal of partisanship” and to avoid the “two hostile camps, heavily fortified and strictly guarded” that dominated the discussion of

87. I am aware that this claim may be contentious. I am basing it on semi-anecdotal evidence: I have taken the opportunity, at the start of every session of Introduction to Political Theory, to poll my students as to their thoughts on human nature. I have done this for several years. The overwhelming majority of them presume that nurture and environment are the deciding factors in whether a person is “generally good or generally bad.” Few profess to believe in something as hard and fast as human nature. On the other hand, though, biology is rapidly becoming a causal explanation for all kinds of behaviors with the expanding study of DNA and genetic legacy. Ironically, though, the explanatory power of genetics in the end serves to buttress the claim that there is no such thing as essential human nature: all humans are genetically unique, after all, and the species has undergone evolutionary changes that constitute irreversible ruptures with the past.

88. Strauss, Natural Right, 7. In support of the claim that Strauss is not arguing for a purely pragmatic approach to history, Strauss says here that “The gravity of the issue imposes upon us the duty of a detached, theoretical, impartial discussion” (Natural Right, 6-7).
natural right. His manner of overcoming these oppositions consists in bringing them into relation—to see these partisans as “modern men” one and all who are thus perplexed by the same problems and confronted by the same crisis. This relation, a comprehensive reflection, is the work of philosophy. For this reason, any attempt to “retrieve” classical philosophy must by definition be something other than classical political philosophy itself—it must be a particular and unique attempt to come to grip with the “timeless” or the “eternal” questions of classical political philosophy.

The question of the “timeless” questions of classical political philosophy is a theme that animates nearly all of Strauss’s many writings. It would be impossible, in the confined space of this introductory essay, to engage with this theme in a nuanced and appropriate manner. In the next chapter, the topic of political philosophy will necessarily be handled in a more robust manner befitting the topic. But whereas we are tempted to see scientific objectivism and historical-cultural relativism as opposing forces, Strauss asks us to see them as deeply intertwined:

As regards the “scientific” approach to society which many of its adherents trace to Machiavelli, it emerges through the abstraction from the moral distinctions by which we take our bearings as citizens and as men. The indispensable condition of “scientific” analysis is then moral obtuseness. That obtuseness is not identical with depravity, but it is bound to strengthen the forces of depravity.

Strauss builds upon this argument about the relation between science and historicism in other writings. In the essay “Political Philosophy and History” Strauss argues that political philosophy and history must be kept analytically distinct. He calls historicism here the “assertion that the fundamental distinction between philosophic and historical questions cannot in the last analysis

89. These camps are the liberals and the Catholics. See Natural Right, 7.

90. Strauss, Thoughts, 11.
be maintained.”

Historicism, then, reduces philosophy to history and the classical tradition of political philosophy to something like the history of political philosophy. It compartmentalizes and disaggregates the elements of a collective conversation, ignoring the dialogue that constitutes that conversation. Much criticism has been made of Strauss and his treatment of the “tradition” of political philosophy. One notable critic put it this way:

He persistently conflates politics and political ideas, and sometimes treats political philosophers as if they were legislators for an age or the tradition and sometimes as if they were representatives of the stages in the tradition. Strauss never specifies how individuals such as Machiavelli have effected the great impact on society that he attributes to them, and does not even suggest the evidence substantiating the causal connections between ideas and action to which he continuously alludes.

This line of criticism has a certain truth to it—Strauss does indeed tend to take political philosophers as “representatives” or perhaps exemplars of a given tradition. But the idea that Strauss never specifies how Machiavelli went about “legislating” modernity is harder to support.

Strauss is thus trying to keep a strict separation between philosophy and history. Because of his approach to history, Strauss has been labeled a “textualist” who faced off against the “contextualist” school of Skinner and Pocock (and others). In its most distilled form, the charge of textualism can result in the absurd idea that one has only to read and re-read the classics in order to find “the truth” that they reveal. Indeed, some have read Strauss as arguing that one need only read the same book over and over again in order to discern its hidden teaching.


93. In the next chapter we will take up this thorny question with specific regard to Thoughts on Machiavelli.

94. See Peter Minowitz, Straussophobia, 23. For a rebuttal of this claim, indeed of the very confounding of Strauss with textualism at all, see Tarcov, “Politics and History: Tradition and Interpretation in Leo Strauss,” Polity 16, no. 1 (1983): 5-29.
definition of itself as “contextualist,” in part, contributed to the rise of the Cambridge School and its practitioners (e.g. Skinner and Pocock). Context matters, as we all know. But to argue that context does not matter to Strauss is to depart from reality completely.

Rather than accept the terms of this “debate” between contextualists and textualists, some have elected to use the term “Straussian” to describe those who have been influenced by Strauss in some way. Michael Zuckert recommends that this term be used to describe “one who works to a degree that cannot be entirely specified within a framework of Strauss’s question and chief concepts and, if the scholar in question is concerned with textual studies, deploys Strauss’s methods of close reading.” The terms of the debate between textualism and contextualism are pre-figured by historical consciousness: we intuit that context matters quite a lot, and thus we find it absurd to consider that one could read Plato without knowing something about ancient Greece, that one could read Machiavelli knowing nothing of the state of Florence, the brief rule of Savonarola. When we look for the context of Strauss himself, then, we should be unfazed by his deep connection to his time and place. In fact, one can discern between the lines in his essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing” a critique of the dominant mode of literary criticism of his time. This “embeddedness” brings him closer to scholars like Pocock and Skinner than those who read Strauss’ words too literally would like to admit. Harvey Mansfield, for example, engages Pocock and Skinner on details of their arguments about Machiavelli, but misses entirely

95. For a recent reappraisal of this distinction between textualist and contextualist methods, and a defense of Strauss against his opponents, see Rafael Major, “The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 477-485.

96. We have already alluded to the difficulties inherent in such an enterprise. I repeat here that I think it is prudent to use the term “Straussian” only for those who elect to describe themselves in this fashion.

their closeness in orientation and method to Strauss. Critical of the “textualist” approach, both Pocock and Skinner attempted to excavate the vocabularies of ancient political thinkers, a method which was professed to help toward “gaining a greater insight into its author’s meaning than we can ever hope to achieve simply from reading the text itself ‘over and over again.’” Critical of this approach, Nathan Tarcov has questioned the efficacy of Skinner’s method: “Skinner seems to have no method for identifying the unequivocal when confronted with the paradoxes, contradictions, and equivocations of the text.”

Tarcov hits on the central benefit of Strauss’s method: the assumption of intention allows one to “hold onto” paradoxes and contradictions, to keep them alive rather than dismiss them or attempt to resolve them completely. The terms of this debate have grown stale in recent years in part because the difference that was propounded to be at the root of the struggle is not distinct. While some followers have taken Strauss in the direction of “read the same book over and over again and you will find the truth” the fact is that Strauss himself, in both his method and his writings, was consistently of the opinion that context matters quite a lot.

To illustrate this point, we should pause to consider what Skinner typifies as the benefits of his approach, and ask whether or not Strauss is claiming precisely the same thing by his “alternative” method. Skinner claims that his contextualist method is better able to “characterize what their authors were doing in writing them” by looking toward “what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning


and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and
conditions of political debate.” And in this, it would seem, Skinner and Strauss can come to
terms: the goal of reading Machiavelli is to discern what he was up to—what he hoped to
accomplish, what he meant for us to understand. By reading texts as “answers to specific
questions” Skinner is advocating a position similar to that which Strauss put forth in his
Thoughts on Machiavelli. Here, Strauss is very much concerned with what Machiavelli was
doing and he is likewise aimed at finding out what questions Machiavelli thought that he was
answering. He is likewise concerned with the polemical silences as well as what questions
Machiavelli was trying to answer.

There is one very curious fact here that we must not gloss over, though. This discussion,
in its attempt to situate the present as contiguous with the present of Machiavelli, posits
Machiavelli as our contemporary. In a very real way, the problem of historical interpretation is
abolished by Strauss’s analysis, even while it is presumed by Skinner. According to Strauss, we
share the decline of the West with Machiavelli—as the events of World War I, World War II, and
the concentration camp prove. We still live within the horizon of Machiavelli’s thought.
According to Skinner, Machiavelli is by definition a foreign thinker who must be interpreted and
contextualized if he is to be understood. This creates a definite and deserved space for expertise
and knowledge to work to create understanding. Historicism requires the use of expert
knowledge to uncover the truth about the past, but it simultaneously undercuts the idea that the
past has influenced the present in a meaningful fashion. The “value” of reading Machiavelli
becomes merely academic—a matter for experts to debate.

When Strauss argues that we are the “followers” of Machiavelli he is merely making this same claim as to Machiavelli’s “presence” in a more provocative manner. He seeks to jar the reader into a sense of the need for closer scrutiny. If we look for the site of authority in the mode of writing, we find that Strauss has shifted it onto the shoulders of his reader. He does not take up the hallowed tradition of standing above the reader, as an expert constituted by the authoritative grip he holds on knowledge. Indeed, he does his best to descend even when his reader intuitively elevates Strauss to that status. He plays with this idea constantly throughout the text, in ironic fashion, consistently encouraging the reader to take on the responsibility of reading for him or herself. There is something deeply, profoundly, democratic about this mode of writing.  

This thesis as to Machiavelli’s presence has interesting implications for the world of politics in the 1950s, as well. Take for example the doctrine of humanism. Machiavelli’s axiom of unintended consequences, originally conceived in response to humanism, must be applied to Stalinism and to fascism, which thereby come to share an essential similarity with humanism. Fascists and communists, according to this argument, really did think that they were doing good in the world. What allows them to think this? How can such forms of tyranny be confronted and successfully defeated? These are the kinds of questions that linger on the outskirts of Thoughts on Machiavelli. Strauss is deeply concerned that these important questions will be left to expertise and authority, rather than to reason.

102. The topic of Strauss’s stance on democracy will occupy much of the next chapter.

103. This thesis was argued at the time by certain French intellectuals—see the various writings by Louis Althusser for example.
But, from another perspective, Machiavelli’s thought is also a kind of uber-humanism, one that defines humanity not in terms of its nearness to an ideal status but rather in terms of its flawed nature. The inherently flawed status of human nature is a constant that allows one to compare and contrast different political organizations, different historical situations. It is a “natural fact.” In defining humanity as flawed and thereby incapable of perfect or ideal political organization, Machiavelli is actually working against the onrush of modernity. He stands opposed to Rousseau’s powerful thesis of the infinite malleability of man. His is only the first “wave” that is destined to be superseded by two more—those exemplified by Rousseau and Nietzsche, the second and third waves respectively. Strauss sees one of the defining characteristics of modern political philosophy to be its insistence that human nature is completely malleable—that there is no flaw that could not be eliminated through the proper institutional and educational set up.

But if Machiavelli is our contemporary then we are not modern, either. The edifice of the distinction between modernity and the ancients is itself called into question—modernity becomes something of a collective myth that we tell ourselves in order to elevate ourselves above the ancients. Modernity’s status is only truly secured by historicism. Here, somewhat paradoxically, the idea that Machiavelli is our contemporary is buttressed by Strauss’s claim that we are Machiavelli’s followers. It is because we share a historical horizon with Machiavelli that we find it so difficult to reckon with the world as Machiavelli saw it. It was extremely difficult for Machiavelli to achieve even a modest understanding of the incredible complexity of the world—and it is a modern prejudice that seeks to identify the easy categories and concepts by way of

104. This thesis is elaborated in *Natural Right and History*. 

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which we can approach the world as an object. This difficulty may be occluded or obfuscated, but it cannot be erased. It is our difficulty: its stubborn permanence reminds us of the various preconceptions that inform our judgment.

Strauss does not provide a bullet-point list of the various preconceptions that we owe to Machiavelli, nor does he patiently explicate the precise way that they have percolated through the years, from their original impetus in Machiavelli to modernity and its discontents. Strauss was no garden-variety genealogist. There are no causal mechanisms at work in his account of history. His method remains cryptic even while his text seeks to create a distinctly personal relationship with his reader. There can be no question of trying to offer a substitute for this reading of Strauss in person, one in which the reader encounters Strauss as Strauss meant to be encountered. This essay is not meant to alleviate the reader from any responsibility to read Strauss in the flesh. The original impetus of Strauss’s writings, as they relate to the discipline of political science, remains as forceful and as targeted as ever. It is because Strauss’s work is as of yet unfinished that this task beckons, not because we are “all Straussian now.”

If Strauss did see himself as taking up the monumental task of shifting human thought, he never said so. Taking a hard look at what Machiavelli was doing is not the same thing as doing what Machiavelli was doing. Consistently, Strauss adopted a stance of humility, a humility that he saw as necessary by virtue of an assumption that the figures of the past knew something that we don’t. He thus advises a preliminary submission to authority, by way of a disinvestment in self-interest. In taking up the works of these great thinkers, we must not presume to be in a position of superiority by simple fact of being “after” them in history. The site of this submission calls into question the presumption of authority that our age has granted itself. The
stubborn fact that faces any careful reader of the great books is that, fortunately for us, the great thinkers of the past do not all agree. We cannot read them in search of the truth, even if we remain open to the possibility that the truth is there to be revealed. And if this lack of agreement cannot be chalked up to historical influence, cannot be unexplained by way of historicism, the position that opens up is one that demands a kind of reasoned humility. In the present moment, as, perhaps, always, it is this reasoned humility that is needed most of all.105

Taking up Strauss in the contemporary moment, then, we can safely put to rest the largely off-base debates about “textualism” versus “contextualism.” We must also bracket the confused and chaotic debates about Strauss and his influence on neoconservatism—not because we seek to ignore this important and timely debate but because we seek to gain insight as to its basis in reality—if there is indeed any such basis. We can thus read Thoughts on Machiavelli in a mode Strauss himself would have demanded: with an open, yet critical, mind. We cannot help but wonder whether Strauss has some important lesson for us, whether there is a teaching here that can be brought to bear on the present political situation in which we find ourselves. But we cannot allow this deferential mode of reading to override our good judgment. Our mode of reading demands this of us: we cannot blindly or dogmatically accept any truth as put forth by such a text. Reason, then, can be our only banister.106

105. Humility, for Strauss, is not an unqualified benefit. Sometimes it can be the mark of self-deception; see the discussion in Thoughts, 146-7.
106. I am alluding to Tracy B. Strong’s powerful Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Banister in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Strauss could easily have been the subject of one of Strong’s chapters, even if Strauss might have resisted the notion of thinking without a banister; can one imagine thinking without reason?
CHAPTER TWO:

Pre-Modern Lessons For a Post-Stalinist Age: Leo Strauss on Machiavelli

We cannot know ourselves without first understanding our situation. And we cannot achieve either without first recognizing ourselves as "moderns."

—Pierre Manent

Leo Strauss begins his *Thoughts on Machiavelli* by situating it with regard to common opinions:

We shall not shock anyone, we shall merely expose ourselves to good-natures or at any rate harmless ridicule, if we profess ourselves inclined to the old-fashioned and simple opinion according to which Machiavelli was a teacher of evil.

That Machiavelli was a teacher of evil is carefully qualified in this sentence. We are left wondering how much weight to put on the "if" that precedes the profession. By the end of the first page this sense of wonder has not been lessened: "If it is true that only an evil man will stoop to teach maxims of public and private gangsterism, we are forced to say that Machiavelli was an evil man."

Are we comfortable being forced to say that Machiavelli was evil? Was Machiavelli a mere gangster? As common as opinions like these are, perhaps it is in taking them up in such a careful way that Strauss can encourage us to question them. As I will illustrate below, this "evil" that Machiavelli teaches has a particular content—it is self-interest and the positing of such self-interest at the center of all human activity. What Machiavelli did, then, was to displace the common good from the realm of politics, relegating such concerns to a realm of appearances and myth rather than one of tangible results. Self-interest came to supplant such notions, imbuing modernity with its peculiar character and coming to dominate the way we think and read. The authority of our self-interest is, according to Strauss, Machiavelli’s legacy.


Thoughts on Machiavelli thus works to expose this legacy by way of doing work on its readers. It is, for that reason, a work that owes its impetus to Machiavelli, who attempted to do something very similar with his own written words. But Strauss is likewise critical of Machiavelli and the entire project of modernity, which results in an interesting conclusion to this discussion. In displacing self-interest, Strauss seeks to implant a sense of self-critical awareness in his readership, one that is founded on contemplation and pride. In defending contemplation, he seeks to work against the pragmatism of modern culture. This involves being aware that Strauss intends to trouble four assumptions which he presumes the reader will approach his text. First, there is historicism: Strauss presumes that we see ourselves as embedded in a particular historical context. Second, Strauss problematizes the culture/nature dichotomy; he presumes that we consider human society to be “apart” from nature. Third, he confounds attempts to ground authority in his own expertise; he presumes that we approach him in a manner that tends to defer to the authority of the author, that we are in some sense looking for “the truth” to be revealed in the written word. Lastly, he calls into question our understanding as self-interested beings, which of necessity involves questioning our identity as “moderns.” In combination, these probing interrogations of the premises with which we approach the text work to clear a space for the reemergence of political philosophy.

Reading Strauss as he means to be read means putting Strauss into conversation with Cold War politics and the discipline of political science. This defense of contemplation enables a renewed discussion of Machiavelli in terms of the themes of foundation and beginning, return and end. These will, naturally, be the concluding thoughts of this chapter.
Machiavelli has long been recognized as representing a completely novel approach to politics and thinking about politics. Readers have never hesitated to disagree as to exactly *in what* this novelty consists, however. We might begin to appreciate Strauss’s perspective on Machiavelli by way of a brief comparison. In a highly influential work, J.G.A. Pocock took up Machiavelli in 1975, and he too situated Machiavelli in an emergent form of historical consciousness. Pocock defined Machiavelli in terms of two moments: the first sense is the moment at which Machiavelli’s thought emerged:

The “moment” in question is selectively and thematically defined. It is asserted that certain enduring patterns in the temporal consciousness of medieval and early modern Europeans led to the presentation of the republic, and the citizen’s participation in it, as constituting a problem in historical self-understanding, with which Machiavelli and his contemporaries can be seen both explicitly and implicitly contending. It became crucial in their times and remained so, largely as a result of what they did with it, for two or three centuries afterwards.\(^{110}\)

Like Strauss, Pocock acknowledges that there is a specific form of human agency here—that the actions of Machiavelli and his contemporaries have carried through the centuries in some way. Like Strauss, he is concerned with the topic of self-understanding in history. Pocock also invokes a second sense of the moment, saying that it:

…denotes the problem itself. It is a name for the moment in conceptualized time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability. In the language which had been developed for the purpose, this was spoken of as the confrontation of “virtue” with “fortune” and “corruption”; and the study of Florentine thought is the study of how Machiavelli and his contemporaries pursued the intimations of these words, in the context of those ways of thinking about time explored in the earlier chapters.\(^{111}\)

Pocock glosses this problem by saying that “It is further affirmed that ‘the Machiavellian moment’ had a continuing history, in the sense that secular political self-consciousness continued

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to pose problems in historical self-awareness, which form part of the journey of Western thought from the medieval Christian to the modern historical modes.”\textsuperscript{112} Machiavelli’s “paradigmatic legacy,” which he shares with his “contemporaries,” is to have contributed concepts that have endured because they tied in with emergent forms of secular historical self-awareness.\textsuperscript{113}

Pocock’s effort, then, is to deeply contextualize Machiavelli and to show how Machiavelli and his contemporaries, through language as they found it, confronted and engaged with emergent forms of thought—precursors to historicism like republican theory—and contributed to the “conceptual framework within which the doctrine of vivere civile—the ideal of active citizenship in a republic—must struggle to maintain itself.”\textsuperscript{114} Here, we can see a contrast that reveals something of Strauss’s radical stance. The attempt by Pocock to see what Machiavelli was doing from ahead, to see Machiavelli’s “republicanism” as an early form of historicism, involves situating oneself in a certain posture to history. What appears to be an attempt to take Machiavelli’s agency seriously is thus revealed as bringing to bear a form of historical thinking that was, in some ways, alien to Machiavelli. It makes of Machiavelli a manifestation of necessity rather than of contingency embodied in human action. It reads Machiavelli as reactive to the forces of history. In Strauss’s more succinct formulation, Pocock attempts to read Machiavelli from the vantage point of looking backward, rather than attempting to read Machiavelli as Machiavelli intended to be read. Was Machiavelli’s intent to be read as a precursor to historicism? Did Machiavelli perceive any deep necessity in the unfolding of

\textsuperscript{112} Pocock, \textit{Moment}, viii.

\textsuperscript{113} Pocock, \textit{Moment}, viii-ix.

history? Pocock’s reading of Machiavelli performs what Strauss has warned us is the greatest tyranny facing human beings: it collectivizes thought by way of historical contextualization. It incorporates Machiavelli into a body of thought which emerged “behind his back,” forcing him into its ranks and enlisting his capable hands in the project of conscripting the past. It makes his ideas into historical products, external objects rather than the work of human creative agency. It strips *Fortuna* of her majesty, and thus removes excellence from the range of human possibility.

Strauss advocates a different approach to history. He famously defended the thesis that one should strive to read an author as he himself meant to be read, that one must always attempt to see through the eyes of that person rather than objectify him:

One cannot see the true character of Machiavelli’s thought unless one frees himself from Machiavelli’s influence. For all practical purposes this means that one cannot see the true character of Machiavelli’s thought unless one recovers for himself and in himself the pre-modern heritage of the western world, both Biblical and classical. To do justice to Machiavelli requires one to look forward from a pre-modern point of view toward an altogether unexpected and surprising Machiavelli who is new and strange rather than to look backward from today toward a Machiavelli who has become old and our own, and therewith almost good. This procedure is required even for a purely historical understanding. Machiavelli did know pre-modern thought: it was before him. He could not have known the thought of the present time, which emerged as it were behind his back.²

Machiavelli is such a valuable interlocutor because he had pre-modern thought “before” him, i.e. as an object of contemplation. This implies that pre-modern thought had reached the point where it could be comprehended in a reflective and encompassing manner: its time was nearly at an end. Machiavelli has become “almost good” in the way that we have taken on board his way of thinking about the world.

The trouble here is that if we read Machiavelli seriously we must take account of the fact that he influenced the very way in which we come to read him. Strauss considers this his primary task in helping us to read Machiavelli: to strip away some of the unreflective preconceptions by way of which we approach Machiavelli. Reading Machiavelli then becomes

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² Strauss, *Thoughts*, 12.
an exercise in the appropriate approach to history because, as his contemporaries, we recognize something of ourselves in Machiavelli’s thought.

This is essentially a problem of historiography, and Strauss unceasingly took up this issue. In one of his most succinct formulations of the problem of historicism, in the introduction to On Tyranny, Strauss argues that:

Many present-day scholars start from the historicist assumption, namely, that all human thought is “historical” or that the foundations of human thought are laid by specific experiences which are not, as a matter of principle, coeval with human thought as such. Yet there is a fatal disproportion between historicism and true historical understanding. The goal of the historian of thought is to understand the thought of the past “as it really has been,” i.e., to understand it as exactly as possible as it was actually understood by its authors. But the historicist approaches the thought of the past on the basis of the historicist assumption which was wholly alien to the thought of the past. He is therefore compelled to attempt to understand the thought of the past better than it understood itself before he has understood it exactly as it understood itself. In one way or the other, his presentation will be a questionable mixture of interpretation and critique. It is the beginning of historical understanding, its necessary and, one is tempted to add, its sufficient condition that one realizes the problematic character of historicism. For one cannot realize it without becoming seriously interested in an impartial confrontation of the historicist approach that prevails today with the nonhistoricist approach of the past. And such a confrontation in its turn requires that the nonhistoricist thought of the past be understood in its own terms, and not in the way in which it presents itself within the horizon of historicism.  

But, as others have likewise noted, Strauss takes on board the radical historicist notion that we ourselves are always historical beings. Contemporaries realized the profound implications of this take on history. As one commentator notes, “these remarks, subsequently revered and reviled, have become the basis of one of the most controversial reputations in the historiography of political ideas.” One criticism will illustrate some of the more salient points.

Gunnell criticized Strauss’s reliance on the trope of the tradition, whilst simultaneously admitting that instead of arguing that Strauss was caught in the historical moment it may be “more reasonable to suggest that he consciously employs a ‘historical’ argument because he


117. I think it is fair to say that Strauss begins with this opinion, precisely because he finds it to be so prevalent in those to whom he is writing.

believes he must do so in an age in which only historical arguments carry meaning and
authority.” At a time when the canonical status of the “great” works was more an accepted
dogma than a proven fact, such work had an important corrective effect on the discipline. But
what Gunnell advocates is a distinction between two types of work, those that actually conduct a
“conversation with the past” and those that “stage a conversation with the past.” It is not clear,
though, that this distinction could be rigorously maintained in an analytical sense, since any
conversation that is presented in a written work will, of necessity, be staged in some sense. What
Gunnell clearly means is that we should be careful not to import drama or characters into the
past, that we should attempt to engage with the figures of the past on their own terms rather than
on terms established by the genre of drama or “tradition.” This is, naturally, to assume that the
figures of the past are in fact “of a different time.” In assuming the radical nature of this gulf
between the present and the past, we thus presume historicism. This closing line, with all the
power of rhetoric, drives home the point that we should be humble in our approach to history and
circumspect in our attempts to define the canon. His criticism of Strauss, then, seems to be that
Strauss does not accomplish his declared mission of reading the figures of the past as they meant
to be read, that he artificially establishes the boundaries of a “tradition,” or that he “stages” a
conversation. Thus, when Gunnell notes that he is not interested in “conjecture about Strauss’s
true teaching” because he is more interested in taking note of the “rhetorical function of the myth
of the tradition and the instrumental tasks served by this kind of argument” this seems to line up
with the critique that “the figures he selects to construct the tradition are simply already

meaningful within the vision of the tradition he wishes to impart before he sets about interpreting their work.”

Ironically, this is the very terrain on which Strauss waged his struggle against the hegemony of positivism and historicism in the social sciences. He was well known in the discipline for his critique of the alleged “value-neutral” study of politics. If Gunnell is correct in his critique then Strauss would seem to be unwittingly interpreting the “fact” of the canon with a pre-established and unrecognized set of values. Gunnell notes:

It is indeed strange that Strauss’s account of the tradition, with such features as his “wave” metaphor describing the development of modern thought, seems to reflect the very historicism which he so vehemently repudiates. Once pieced together, it is apparent that his story of the decline of the West embodies an extravagant symbolism which plays, in part, upon various eschatological and prophetic motifs.

But Gunnell has already realized the problem with this argument, namely that Strauss is self-consciously engaging with the contemporary discipline in a manner that is familiar to that discipline. To be fair, Strauss has not clearly laid out his own position in a manner that would be easily “provable.” Yet, by eschewing the question of Strauss’s “true teaching” Gunnell forecloses an appreciation of Strauss that looks beyond this historicist starting point. It fails to take Strauss and his declared intent seriously. Remarking on the status of political theory not even a decade after Strauss’s death, Richard Ashcraft wrote:

Taking the texts ‘seriously’ involves some self-critical reflections upon these changes in status, importance, and meaning of works of political theory. A view which pretends that such changes have nothing whatsoever to do with the relationship of political theory, past and present, to a specific historical context is not one which, in my view, takes either the text or the theorist seriously.


Ashcraft goes on to criticize Strauss on the grounds that his account of modernity—with its relativism of values, historicism, and decline of political philosophy—is unsupported by historical evidence. Ashcraft is critical of Strauss’s “global assertions” because they lack an explicitly formulated theory of social change backed up with historical evidence. But if Strauss is right then the idea of pushing all of history into an explicitly formulated theory that is backed up with carefully selected historical evidence is, itself, already to presume too much. From Strauss’s perspective, such a view of history does not take the theorist seriously enough at all because it makes every thinker into a mere mouthpiece or spokesperson for a given age. Strauss encourages us not to dissolve the complex issues that surround the study of history and the location of human agency in a network of apparently causal relationships—but instead to leave this question open so that we can approach the past on its own terms. Strauss was committed to a view of human freedom that pushed against the claims of historicism—to read him in a manner that assumes this viewpoint is illegitimate a priori is thus to foreclose the possibility of understanding Strauss at all. Even if Gunnell is correct, as I think he is, that political theorists have a historically proven track record of defining the boundaries of a certain tradition in rigid, or even sacrosanct terms, it is less clear that Strauss is actually doing this. Perhaps we could put the issue like this: although Strauss does tell a story in epic fashion about the decline of the West, it is not immediately self-evident what that story is doing in the context of the overall argument that Strauss seeks to advance, or of the intent of the work to transform its readership.

124. Ashcraft, “Rethinking the Nature of Political Theory,” 582.
We can return to the beginning. As if anticipating these critiques, Strauss opens the work by taking the position, apparently forced upon him, that Machiavelli is a “teacher of evil.” He simultaneously asserts that Machiavelli was a philosopher, and that as a philosopher he “alone has dared to utter the evil doctrine in a book and in his own name.”

Machiavelli does not disguise his opinions in the mouths of characters in a dialogue or otherwise obscure his personal stance in the larger field in which he stands. This solitary position, personalized and taken against the grain of convention, constructs a representation of Machiavelli, the figure of Machiavelli, that comes to take on historical existence. This historical existence, as is well known, is fraught with controversy and vehement opposition; the history of Machiavelli’s reception is littered with treatises written against Machiavelli and his evil influence.

But Strauss takes up a different, more provocative claim. He does not see Machiavelli’s “evil” as a substantive teaching that has been successfully implanted in our brains—perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Strauss takes aim at the self-understanding that we have of what we are as political beings. He does not simply decry Machiavelli’s distasteful exposition—he undertakes to show the reader how he or she is implicated in Machiavelli’s thought—how we are all students of Machiavelli. Strauss wants to show us that we necessarily misinterpret Machiavelli precisely because we are students of Machiavelli. This claim opens the door to another: we are evil, we have been taught to be evil, by Machiavelli. Strauss later modifies his


126. Strauss, Thoughts, 12. Can the same be said of the neocons, that they necessarily misinterpret Strauss because they are students of Strauss?
claim about philosophy, though, saying only that it is the meaning of philosophy that is “undergoing a change” through Machiavelli’s thought.127

When he states that Machiavelli is “almost good” he means that the domination of Machiavelli’s thought over our own is almost complete—there is but a small window from which we might peer into a different landscape. When we combine this claim with the notion that Machiavelli is a teacher of evil there is another layer of criticism that opens up, one that is hopefully unsettling to the reader. The text becomes very personal. While Gunnell is right that these kinds of claims are more evocative than substantively “proven” in the text, he does not seem to take them seriously enough in terms of their pedagogical or transformative power.

This transformative power is one that operates through the text, in meeting the reader where Strauss presumes the reader to be, and in guiding that reader to a different place. Strauss proceeds to carefully, methodically, take up a series of preconceptions that he assumes his readers will possess, only to undermine those preconceptions. Machiavelli is a natural interlocutor for Strauss to engage with in this process, since Machiavelli is well known for his persuasive powers. According to one commentator, Machiavelli “knew how to force a reader, even unwillingly, into being massaged by the message.”128 If the message is modernity, then it would appear that we have all been massaged thoroughly.

But how? How did Machiavelli invent a thing like modernity, and how did he spread his invention so widely that it became our lived experience? It will be necessary to walk through Strauss’s Thoughts on Machiavelli in order to see how the argument is built. From the very

127. Strauss, Thoughts, 295.

outset, we are informed, contrary to the idea that Machiavelli is first and foremost a patriot, that the core of Machiavelli’s thought is a “comprehensive reflection.” Strauss deploys in a manner to show how Machiavelli distances himself from both fatherland and himself. This comprehensive reflection encompasses both his fatherland and his soul—it is the whole that Machiavelli crafts, by standing outside of them, which holds both of these elements in tension. Read in this way, Machiavelli’s infamous claim that he loves his “fatherland” more than his “soul” becomes ironic: in order to be able to make a claim like this, one would have to inhabit a third position, one that can take account of both the love of fatherland and the love of the soul and compare them according to some standard. Machiavelli takes up this position, thus putting himself into a space “beyond” politics and in the realm of philosophy. This comprehensive reflection, in fact, is what “made him the teacher of many men in all countries.”

But it also calls into question the nature of authority and reason in both politics and philosophy. We cannot simply assume that Machiavelli transcended his time and discovered a science, for when considered against the backdrop of the social order in which he wrote Machiavelli’s discovery would take on the character of revealed truth rather than scientifically provable discovery. Strauss even goes so far as to declare Machiavelli as a

129. Strauss, Thoughts, 10.

130. There is a Hegelian element to Strauss’s thought that has not yet been fully explored. I would like to devote more study to this topic in the near future. I will say this, though. It appears at first blush that Strauss is advocating a Romantic notion of history, a leap back in time to see that which is eternally present. But I don’t think this cursory judgment holds up to scrutiny. Given Strauss’s critique of historicism and his familiarity with Hegel and Heidegger, I think that he has developed what I think could only be called a postmodern approach to history. Strauss’ historical methodology certainly involves a leap back in time, but it has a different purpose: to see Machiavelli projected forward from a pre-modern starting point rather than to look backward from the present, a task that would involve the search for the already familiar. (Strauss, Thoughts, 12). Strauss acknowledges that any investigation is always motivated by the present, that it derives any value it might have by its ability to be brought to bear on present circumstances in some way. But rather than devolve into a pragmatism of interests, Strauss attempts to insulate political philosophy as such, giving it its own set of interests that seem to be isolated from those of its users.

131. Strauss, Thoughts, 11.
“prophet” with “a new revelation.” Clearly, then, Strauss reads Machiavelli carefully because his goal goes beyond Machiavelli. But what, then, are Strauss’s goals in writing and how are we to read Strauss?

In order to understand exactly how this reflection, or revelation, however comprehensive it may be, came to teach so many “men in all countries” we will need to piece together the nature of Machiavelli’s innovation in more detail. One key to this puzzle involves the notion of contradiction:

Machiavelli cannot train his readers in discovering for themselves the lowly but true principles which he can only intimate, except by appealing on different occasions to different principles all of which are respectable or publicly defensible but which contradict one another: the contradiction between them may lead some readers to the true principles in their nakedness.

This seems tenuous at best: the contradictions “may lead some readers” to these “true” principles—but it is unclear whether it is the principles or the readers are going to be naked during this encounter (or, perhaps the contradiction itself will be unclothed).

In order to make sense of what Strauss is doing in his reading of what Machiavelli was doing, it will be necessary to offer some larger context. Strauss writes in a mode of criticism that takes the “decline” of the West seriously as a fact of the previous century. This is a consistent theme in German philosophy and it became translated into the larger European and American discourse in the early twentieth century with the publication of such texts as Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. This book, published in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, hypothesizes that the West is “going under,” that it has reached the peak of its development and that it (like any organism) has entered into the stage of decay that ultimately leads to death. This

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132. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 83

background helps to make sense of some of Strauss’s more eschatological statements. Take for a minor example this statement about the state of modern philosophy:

In studying the *Discourses* we become the witnesses, and we cannot help becoming the moved witnesses, of the birth of that greatest of all youth movements: modern philosophy, a phenomenon which we know through seeing, as distinguished from reading, only in its decay, its state of depravation and its dotage.\(^{134}\)

As a staging to a more complete discussion of Machiavelli we must take a detour through Spengler.

**The Decline of the West**

It is not really possible to overstate the problem as posed by Spengler:

> The decline of the West, which at first sight may appear, like the corresponding decline of the Classical Culture, a phenomenon linked in time and space, we now perceive to be a philosophical problem that, when comprehended in all its gravity, includes within itself every great question of Being.\(^{135}\)

In line with Hegel, Spengler argues that the West is past its peak and that this is evident in and through philosophy. As we saw in the close of the previous section, Strauss supports something like this view in his estimation of the “dotage” of modern philosophy. But lest we consign these problems to the “merely philosophical” we must realize that it is assumed that every sphere of human activity is affected by such a state of affairs. Spengler, like Hegel, assumes that a given “culture” has a kind of essential spirit that animates it and that infuses all aspects of its existence. Unlike Hegel, though, Spengler has construed this insight into a completely relativistic worldview. This relativism is Strauss’s concern.\(^{136}\)

\(^{134}\) Strauss, *Thoughts*, 127.


\(^{136}\) I will take up this topic in the conclusion to this chapter.
Strauss sees the problem of relativism through history, but refuses to situate himself in the position of an observer to that history. Instead, he endeavors to take a stand despite the problematic nature of values. In an essay entitled “‘Relativism,’” Strauss explores the problem in all of its shades of complexity. Strauss sees Nietzsche as a kind of vanguard:

Nietzsche is the philosopher of relativism: the first thinker who faced the problem of relativism in its full extent and pointed to the way in which relativism can be overcome. Relativism came to Nietzsche’s attention in the form of historicism—more precisely, in the form of a decayed Hegelianism. Hegel had reconciled “the discovery of History”—the alleged insight into the individual’s being, in the most radical sense, the son or stepson of his time or into the dependence of a man’s highest and purest thoughts on his time—with philosophy in the original meaning of the term by asserting that Hegel’s time was the absolute moment, the end of meaningful time: the absolute religion, Christianity, had become completely reconciled with the world; it had become completely secularized, or the saeculum had become completely Christian in and through the postrevolutionary State; history as meaningful change had come to its end; all theoretical and practical problems had in principle been solved; hence, the historical process was demonstrably rational.

This leads to a “deadly truth” that history has taught us: “culture is possible only if men are fully dedicated to principles of thought and action which they do not and cannot question, which limit their horizon and thus enable them to have a character and a style. It shows us at the same time that any principles of this kind can be questioned and even rejected.” Thus, Hegel seems to have been right in arguing that philosophy is a signal of decline. In questioning the very principles by way of which we orient our lives, we demonstrate that these principles are not held sacrosanct—we demonstrate our own uncertainty regarding our most deeply held principles. This is the crux of the crisis of liberalism according to Strauss. But Nietzsche is the signal of a possible rebirth, one founded on human creativity:

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137. While Strauss does advocate transcending history, he situates the attempt within history. He chastises historicists because they consciously take the position of mere observer, pretending not to bring value judgments to bear on their engagement with history.


139. Strauss, “‘Relativism,’” 152.
What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously. This radically new project—the revaluation of all values—entails the rejection of all earlier values, for they have become baseless by the realization of the baseless character of their claim, by which they stand or fall, to objective validity. But precisely the realization of the origin of all such principles makes possible a new creation that presupposes this realization and is in agreement with it, yet is not deducible from it; for otherwise it would not be due to a creative act performed with intellectual probity.140

This understanding of intellectual probity imbues all of Strauss’s writings. This understanding of the origin of values enables a project that seeks to consciously create values—through a creative act done in accordance with intellectual probity. In order to elaborate on this project and what it entails, and what role Strauss takes within the attempt to revalue all values, we must consider Strauss’s criticism of Spengler.

In his discussion of Spengler, which opens his *The City and Man*, Strauss notes that although Spengler appears to have been wrong as to the actual “end” of history that he was right in another sense:

Today, so far from ruling the globe, the West’s very survival is endangered by the East as it has not been since its beginning. From the Communist Manifesto it would appear that the victory of Communism would be the complete victory of the West—of the synthesis, transcending the national boundaries, of British industry, the French Revolution and German philosophy—over the East. We see that the victory of Communism would mean indeed the victory of originally Western natural science but surely at the same time the victory of the most extreme form of Eastern despotism.141

This confrontation then, takes as its backdrop the events of World War I, including the Russian Revolution of 1917. These events, which Spengler took as confirmation of his central intuition about the decline of the West, a thesis which Strauss tacitly supports, lend a credibility to Strauss’s claim that the “crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose.”142 Trench warfare, with its interminable senselessness, put the question of “progress”

140. Strauss, “‘Relativism,’” 153.
142. Strauss, *The City and Man* page 3. It may be important to note that Spengler began writing *The Decline of the West* well before the onset of the war, which delayed its publication until 1918. This fact itself was taken as a kind of “proof” that Spengler was right in his intuition, and that the new “threat” of the East, initiated with the October Revolution of 1917, was truly the harbinger of a new age.
to the test. The Russian Revolution, with its internationalist spirit and its unlikely victory, presented itself as the dawn of a new, advanced age in which equality would triumph and justice would be achieved. At time of publication, then, Spengler’s book seemed dramatically validated by events. Events in the middle of the century only compounded these observations as to the problems of the present. The advent of thermo-nuclear warfare problematizes the presumption that technology and science are inherently linked with global human progress.\textsuperscript{143} The freezing grip of the menacing conflict between the West and its powerful challenger to the East thus took on a new and formidable credibility: the idea of global cataclysm comes into view.

But, in the realm of German philosophy, the decline of the West was already in full swing. Hegel had made the audacious claim that his philosophy, emergent as it was after the peak of the glory of the West, represented the pinnacle achievement of mankind. Take for example this famous passage from the preface of Hegel’s \textit{Philosophy of Right}:

\begin{quote}
Only one more word concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be. For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready. History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

Philosophy, arriving after the fact, cannot teach the world what it “ought to be.” Once the ideals of a society have been realized as ideals, which is to say they are not vigorously and unreflectively assumed to be the only goals worth striving for, they are “known” as ideals and thus represent a grey picture of what had formerly been a living, vibrant view of the world. The owl of Minerva, the symbol of wisdom and philosophy, thus comes to its own only once the sun has set and the shades of night threaten to make everything grey.

\textsuperscript{143} Strauss makes this point in “‘Relativism,’” 149.

\textsuperscript{144} Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of Right} (Saskatoon, SK: Batoche Books, 2001), 20.
By this loss of purpose Strauss indicates that the West, which had once been accustomed to feeling a sense of certainty and pride in its power over nature and history, experiences this loss as a loss. In a society in which such universal purpose did not exist, no existential dilemma could arise by its absence. The events of the twentieth century, then, preceded by Hegel’s declaration that the absolute moment of history had come and gone, serve as confirmation of this thesis. The loss of purpose thus gives rise to wars and chaos, cultural decline and fragmentation. In the West, committed as it was to such universal goals as liberty and democracy, freedom and justice, a loss of purpose can only be catastrophic: “a society which was accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose, cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming completely bewildered.”

This results in a culture that cannot give itself meaning, a culture that declares the individual and self-interest to be the sole source of value. Like Nietzsche, Strauss sees modernity as a new threat to philosophy itself. And, like Nietzsche, Strauss takes no solace in communism.

A contrast with Communism thus reveals that “there is not only a difference of degree but also of kind between the Western movement and Communism, and this difference was seen to concern morality, the choice of means.” Strauss further elaborates on this idea, stating that the experience of Communism has proven that “no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy and hatred, and hence there cannot be a society which does not have to employ coercive restraint.”

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146. Lampert puts it this way: “Both Strauss and Nietzsche take the religion of ‘modern ideas’ with its global tyranny to be philosophy’s greatest threat,” Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 185.


paints Communism in a harsh light, as “the iron rule of a tyrant” who can only be restrained by “the tyrant’s fear of the West’s immense military power.”¹⁴⁹ The Cold War lesson is that communism is a failed experiment, the experience of which should establish the fact of human nature and the perennial need for law and politics. Strauss echoes the arguments of Karl Popper, who had argued, in his immensely influential *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, that modern totalitarianism owed its philosophical lineage to Plato and the attempt to establish the coincidence of philosophy and political power through purposive action.¹⁵⁰

This evacuation of purpose leaves a vacuum, a void in which politics and philosophy may, by joining forces, craft a future. These conditions seem to call for a kind of effort that Strauss finds in Machiavelli—a conspiracy that enacts itself over multiple generations and with the intent of transplanting a new order onto the dying body of the old.¹⁵¹ This stance relative to history was echoed in Spengler:

> He who does not understand that this outcome is obligatory and insusceptible of modification, that our choice is between willing *this* and willing nothing at all, between cleaving to *this* destiny or despairing of the future and of life itself; he who cannot feel that there is grandeur also in the realizations of powerful intelligences, in the energy and discipline of metal-hard natures, in battles fought with the coldest and most abstract means; he who is obsessed with the idealism of a provincial and would pursue the ways of life of past ages—must forgo all desire to comprehend history, to live through history or to make history.¹⁵²

In taking up philosophy in the manner in which he does, Strauss thus attempts to rejuvenate a form of life that he saw as on the verge of extinction. But rather than look to live life in a manner suited to the past, Strauss sees the need for a kind of philosophy of the future in the

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¹⁵⁰. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962). It is worth noting here that Popper sees a connection between “personal responsibility” and historicism; he sees the latter as a reaction to the strain of the former (5).

¹⁵¹. Even if these conditions call for this manner of action, it is unclear that Strauss actually saw himself as performing this kind of activity. The welding together of politics and philosophy into an intra-generational conspiracy seems to be an act of hubris—the kind of hubris that Strauss eschewed. But it could be that Strauss impels in *us* the imperative of action, that he puts to us the question of our own involvement in such a conspiracy.

¹⁵². Spengler, *Decline* Volume One, 38.
tradition of Nietzsche. Strauss calls for a certain kind of history, a work that requires putting oneself in the shoes of another:

To the extent to which the social scientist succeeds in this kind of study which is imposed on him by the requirements of social science, he not only enlarges the horizon of present-day social science, he even transcends the limitations of social science, for he learns to look at things in a manner which is as it were forbidden to the social scientist. He will have learned from his logic that his science rests on certain hypotheses, certainties or assumptions. He learns now to suspend these assumptions. He is thus compelled to make these assumptions his theme. Far from being merely one of the innumerable themes of social science, history of political philosophy, and not logic, proves to be the pursuit concerned with the presuppositions of social science.  

This “tentative” or “experimental” method, taking its goal the return to classical political philosophy, threatens to unseat many dogmatic assumptions about history and our ability to know it. By way of this reasoning, social science is always “on the run,” in that in order to live up to its own ideals it must constantly question the assumptions that are necessary to begin social inquiry. This threatens to turn social science into a purely pragmatic exercise, one that could potentially forsake its philosophical roots. The political task is far from esoteric:

Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the principles as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these principles to our tasks.

In the context of understanding ourselves, it is only in looking to the ancients that we can see the origins of our condition. In fact, Strauss argues that the moment in which he is writing constitutes a special kind of opportunity:

The genuine understanding of the political philosophies which is then necessary may be said to have been rendered possible by the shaking of all traditions; the crisis of our time may have the accidental advantage of enabling us to understand in an untraditional or fresh manner what was hitherto understood only in a traditional or derivative manner. This may apply especially to classical political philosophy which has been seen for a considerable time only through the lenses of modern political philosophy and its various successors.

As we shall see, this framing of the problem is reminiscent of how Strauss describes Machiavelli’s approach to Rome. In order to confront this issue of Strauss’s relation to Machiavelli, and determine to what extent Strauss is engaged in a project that is fundamentally similar to Machiavelli’s, we will need to consider the nature of the task that he sets before us. This political task requires an engagement with the legacy of Christianity, since this was central to Machiavelli’s definition of modernity.

The topic of Christianity is vital to this enterprise because Strauss sees the West as the product of the triumph (and decline) of Christian morality. In comparing the teaching of Christianity with a more “natural” teaching concerning evil, Strauss’s Machiavelli advocates a teaching that is in accord with the nature of things. Machiavelli takes up the topic of Christianity with the purpose of trying to understand how it did what it did, how it achieved its influence in the world. In this analysis, teaching then becomes defined as a rule of action—an “ought.”

But, instead of relying on force of law or fear of punishment to enforce this ought, it instead depends for its implementation on the actions of the individuals who have been transformed by the text. They take up this “ought” as their own because they have internalized its message; they have taken it as a true maxim of action. The initial submission to authority is what activates a language of “right,” giving its proponents the legitimacy with which to defend their normativity. Here we see the blurry territory where reason and authority merge, fixed within the experience of reading itself. In a telling sentence, Strauss conflates traditional political philosophy with the cultivation of reason itself. The origins of Christianity thus point us

156. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 156.


toward its relationship with reason, and the way in which it has been successful at imbuing reason with a particular character. Machiavelli insists that it is the “corruption” of Rome that gives Christianity its opening—it is only by losing its grip on power that Rome allowed a challenger to emerge. He thus embarks upon a journey of discovery, to elucidate the virtues and vices of the Roman republic—those modes and orders that Rome had stumbled upon by accident—and open up “the new continent…the goal of rational desire and action.”

The verdict against Rome is fierce and involves its open borders: “Rome was then enabled to destroy freedom in the Western world because she was excessively cosmopolitan or constitutionally exposed to corruption.” By allowing foreigners free access to citizenship, Machiavelli claims through Strauss’s words, Rome suppressed freedom and became corrupt, allowing Christianity to take root. This extinguishing of freedom amounts to the “suppression of the supremacy of political or public life.”

With the political or public life smothered, the supremacy of the private sphere and its attendant priest, self-interest, comes to dominate the West.

But no human creation lasts forever. Strauss indicates that Machiavelli foresaw the end of the Christian era, and that he hoped to influence what ethos would take its place. Machiavelli argues that “Christianity has led the world into weakness, and the failure to imitate the ancients properly is due to some extent to Christianity.” But, in a surprising turn, Strauss points to Machiavelli’s claim that this weakness is actually predicated on a false interpretation of Christianity, “…since Christianity permits the exaltation and defense of the fatherland, it

159. Strauss, Thoughts, 116.
160. Strauss, Thoughts, 118.
161. Strauss, Thoughts, 118.
162. Strauss, Thoughts, 177.
demands that Christians be strong. He [Machiavelli] concludes the statement by saying that the decline of love of freedom is due, as he believes, less to Christianity than to the destruction by the Roman empire of all republics.”

Strauss thus interprets the generalized statements by Machiavelli to be exaggerated forms of the condemnation of the Church and its weakening of Italy. This translates into a broader condemnation of the rule of priests, whose authority is based on revealed truth and thus the most tyrannical form of government possible. The alternative to rule by priests is rule by warriors, and it is strength of arms that is claimed to be that which keeps potential tyranny at bay. In the end, Machiavelli judges Christian republics by the measure of political happiness they evince, which Strauss interprets as “strength and freedom combined.”

This sense of crisis or immanent demise seems constitutive of modernity itself; as Spengler noted in his The Decline of the West, “it would appear, then, that the Western consciousness feels itself urged to predicate a sort of finality inherent in its own appearance.” Writing itself seems linked with the Western obsession with temporality and finitude. By way of writing, Machiavelli can overcome the finality of his own specific body and enter into a more enduring state. Machiavelli thus needs a specific kind of reader, one who can take him up in the correct spirit and put him to use. He must recruit his army by means of his books, by way of appealing to the elite of coming generations. As with any conspiracy, such an enterprise is best concealed until the moment that intent transforms into deed. But unlike other, more mundane forms of

163. Strauss, Thoughts, 179.
164. Strauss, Thoughts, 181.
165. Strauss, Thoughts, 185.
166. Strauss, Thoughts, 186.
167. Oswald Spengler, Decline Volume One, 20.
conspiracy, this one requires a particular artifice: this long-term conspiracy requires multiple lifetimes in order to pull off.\textsuperscript{168} With the last year mentioned in the \textit{Discourses} as 1517, Machiavelli was eerily prescient as to the imminent power of the Reformation.\textsuperscript{169} In another text, Strauss puts Machiavelli’s break with classical tradition in these terms:

\begin{quote}
When antitheological passion induced a thinker to take the extreme step of questioning the supremacy of contemplation, political philosophy broke with the classical tradition, and especially with Aristotle, and took on an entirely new character. the thinker in question was Machiavelli.\textsuperscript{170}
\end{quote}

But, as Strauss is consistent in noting, Machiavelli seems not to have entered upon the terrain of the infinite in his considerations of human society and its cyclic nature. Indeed, Strauss \textit{centers} the \textit{Discourses} on Machiavelli’s consideration of the cycles of human history, the erasure of the past, and the rise and decline of civilizations. One of the more puzzling aspects of Strauss’s reading, for those who have read Machiavelli carefully, concerns his discussion of Machiavelli’s view of the cycle of civilizations. According to Strauss, Machiavelli predicted the end of the Christian era within 1,666 to 3,000 years of its inception.\textsuperscript{171} These numbers, as has been noted by commentators, have a kind of mystical significance but they are not actually present in Machiavelli’s text.\textsuperscript{172} Machiavelli writes, casually, that civilizations change two or three times every five or six thousand years, a calculation that Strauss performs and substitutes in hard digits for Machiavelli’s otherwise imprecise language. But these “hard” figures serve a real purpose in Strauss’s text, one that shows simultaneously the distance between Machiavelli himself and the

\textsuperscript{168} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 169.

\textsuperscript{169} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 170.


\textsuperscript{171} This is a claim that spans several of Strauss’s major works. See “What is Political Philosophy?” 45, as well as \textit{Thoughts}, 142, 170, and 202.

\textsuperscript{172} See Pocock’s discussion in “Prophet or Inquisitor” for example.
“end” of the Christian era and the vast spans of time that are being framed by this discussion. It begs the question of where we stand in relation to these numbers; if we are reading Strauss in 1958, for example, on the cusp of potential nuclear armageddon, we might gather some sympathy for Machiavelli’s view. We might take these numbers to be authoritative, to anticipate the end times that are nigh. Here we might also wonder if our era has been over for some time, as Nietzsche summarized in his infamous quotation that “God is dead.” But, more important than finding the exact moment of Western decline is the kind of thinking that we are doing when we ask ourselves these questions. If we take this long-view of history, considering our place within the arc and whether we are in ascent or decline, as Machiavelli and Strauss bid us to do, we are on the terrain of shifting to a view of “world-as-history” that Spengler demanded. These are not the “timeless” questions of political philosophy (like what is the “best” regime?) but something much more urgent and specific to a particular moment: where are we in history, and how can we begin the process of ascending if we are indeed in decline?

But the immense time span that separates 1,666 and 3,000 years is so vague that to take it as authoritative in a precise (that is, scientific) sense is almost laughable. The loose way in which Strauss gives a specific number to the otherwise de-centered sense of decline, itself based on the calculation of a very loose approximation in Machiavelli’s text, can also serve the purpose of helping to create some distance between the reader and the authoritative voice that Strauss must, necessarily, intone by way of writing. If we go so far as to identify something we might call “Machiavelli’s Formula,” a discovered rule of nature that states that no civilization can live beyond 3,000 years, then this formula comes to attain the same status as revealed truth does in more mystical or religious texts. While one could undoubtedly subject Thoughts on Machiavelli
to the same intense cryptographic techniques that occupy those who seek the “hidden”
numerology of the Bible, it is important to point out that Strauss’s occupation with the topic of
authority and its relation to reason should give us pause along this path. Again, a consideration
of Spengler may help to see what is at stake. Spengler, in his chapter entitled “Meaning of
Numbers,” says this:

In order to exemplify the way in which a soul seeks to actualize itself in the picture of its outer world—to
show, that is, in how far Culture in the “become” state can express or portray an idea of human existence—
I have chosen number, the primary element on which all mathematics rests. I have done so because
mathematics, accessible in its full depth only to the very few, holds a quite peculiar position amongst the
creations of the mind. It is a science of the most rigorous kind, like logic but more comprehensive and very
much fuller; it is a true art, along with sculpture and music, as needing the guidance of inspiration and as
developing under great conventions of form; it is, lastly, a metaphysic of the highest rank, as Plato and
above all Leibniz show us. Every philosophy has hitherto grown up in conjunction with a mathematic
belonging to it. Number is the symbol of causal necessity. Like the conception of God, it contains the
ultimate meaning of the world-as-nature. The existence of numbers may therefore be called a mystery, and
the religious thought of every Culture has felt their impress.173

In this passage Spengler points to the fact that number and causality are linked in our
understanding, and that this relation constitutes the “ultimate meaning” of the idea of “world-as-
nature.” As Spengler reminds us, number is a creation of the human mind, it is a “true art” with
similarity to sculpture and music. When Strauss draws our attention to Machiavelli’s Formula,
giving it a mathematical specificity, he merely draws out Machiavelli’s logic to its inevitable
conclusion. Any view of the world-as-nature, built on number and causality, leads to this kind of
understanding of human society unless it draws a line of demarcation between what is distinctly
human and what is merely natural. Spengler is lead to the conclusion that “There is not, and
cannot be, number as such.”174 His relativism, of which Strauss was critical, is thus complete:
every mathematical “style” is rooted in a specific Culture and the kind of human beings to which
it gives rise.

173. Spengler, Decline Volume One, 56.
174. Spengler, Decline Volume One, 59.
Reading Spengler is instructive in another sense. One of Spengler’s central concerns in the early pages of *The Decline of the West* is to question our deeply held ideas of time. These ideas are so fundamental that they organize our experience of the world, our understanding, in profound ways that often escape detection of conscious reflection. It seems more than possible that when Strauss speaks of the “timeless” questions of political philosophy, then, he has in mind questions that pre-exist our modern conception of time. These should not be considered to be “universal” or “always existing everywhere” questions, then, but specifically pre-modern questions that take a different bearing on reality, human existence, and other fundamental presuppositions of conscious reflection. Perhaps we might read Strauss as taking up the gauntlet laid down by Spengler: “We await, to-day, the philosopher who will tell us in what language history is written and how it is to be read.”

This image of history, which renders it as a text that one encounters as a book, brings with it the need for a translator to decipher its message. On the topic of history, there was no more powerful voice during this time period than that of the dictator of the U.S.S.R., Joseph Stalin. Stalin had declared the Soviet state to be the incarnation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the utopian regime that was historically determined to replace capitalism and the pretensions of the West. In response, the West defends itself with the tenets of humanism.

In Strauss’s reading of the events of the twentieth century, it is the rise of Stalinism and post-Stalinism that actually threatens the universalist mission of progress and science. Strauss details an “experience of Communism” that revealed that although the intellectual roots of

175. Spengler, *Decline* Volume One, 8.
Communism and Western society are in fact the same they have a fundamental difference nonetheless. But the nature of this difference, in Strauss’s account, is interesting:

It came to be seen that there is not only a difference of degree but of kind between the Western movement and Communism, and this difference was seen to concern morality and the choice of means. In other words, it became clearer than it had been for some time that no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy and hatred, and hence there cannot be a society which does not have to employ coercive restraint. For the same reason it could no longer be denied that Communism will remain, as long as it lasts in fact and not merely in name, the iron rule of a tyrant which is mitigated or aggravated by his fear of palace revolutions. The only restraint in which the West can put some confidence is the tyrant’s fear of the West’s military power.  

Machiavelli is thus also being mustered in response to Stalinism—and the liberal humanist attempt to put it down. Machiavelli is valuable in this fight because “Machiavelli is our most important witness to the truth that humanism is not enough.” The reason that humanism is insufficient is that mankind must always be on the move. As Machiavelli puts forth: in the realm of human affairs ascent or decline are the only possible vectors. But while it may be tempting to put this ascent/decline polarity in reference to some universal standard of progress, this is not how Strauss reads Machiavelli. This mobility is a requirement of self-understanding, according to Strauss. It is a question that one must pose to oneself—am I in decline, or ascent? Is my politeia in decline or ascent? This is an inevitable question because, for Strauss, human beings are of the sort that we always work against our boundaries. Human beings are by definition “the being that must try to transcend humanity, he must transcend humanity in the direction of the subhuman if he does not transcend it in the direction of the superhuman.” It is by taking up a stance relative to this necessity of mobility that Machiavelli inaugurates a new understanding. He is himself not a prince, but a teacher:

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177. Strauss, Thoughts, 78.
178. Strauss, Thoughts, 78.
This new Chiron defines his position with regard to self-interest. As Strauss notes, the various policies that are recommended in *The Prince* are not justified in terms of the common good; they are legitimated “exclusively on the grounds of the self-interest of the prince” and thus Strauss reads the incongruous Chapter 26 of *The Prince* as “an excuse for having recommended immoral courses of action.”

When we look at the Prince, we see a figure who is familiar to the extent that we posit the continuity of self-interest between us and he.

If the diagnosis of the “decline” of the West entails that the country is deemed unaccustomed to hardship and war, then the diagnosis can only be that one should engage in imperialism rather than await invasion on domestic soil. Machiavelli does counsel expansion and acquisition rather than stagnation and decline. In considering the writings of several prominent neocons, Xenos concludes that “The Straussian element in the neoconservative agenda thus contributed to a political project that aimed at exploiting America’s unrivalled global military power in order to reverse its cultural decline.”

The fear behind this plan is that the enemy, assumed to be strong, will easily conquer such a weak people. This passage comes from Book II, chapter 12, which follows on the heels of the “central” chapter of the *Discourses*, Book

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180. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 80. This conclusion, made within the context of Strauss’s overall argument, is more nuanced than this brief treatment allows for in this space.

II, chapter 11. This chapter declares itself in clear terms: “It is Not Prudent Policy to Make a Friendship with a Prince Who Has More Reputation Than Force.”

In the concluding essay to Liberalism: Ancient and Modern, entitled “Perspectives on the Good Society,” Strauss speaks frankly of actual political events, on the occasion of attending a colloquium. Speaking on a proposal given by a colleague at the Divinity School (University of Chicago), Strauss implores that foreign policy not be guided by faith in God. He writes:

The possibility of retaliation would lose much of its restraining power if the enemy knew that a second strike force which survived his successful attack would never be used against him; hence a decision allegedly demanded by faith must remain the most closely guarded secret: in other words, the tongue must pronounce the opposite of what the heart thinks. Second, by saving the lives of the Soviet people in the contingency under consideration, one would surrender all the have-not nations to Soviet rule and thus deprive them for all the foreseeable future of the possibility to be nonatheistic nations or, more generally stated, to have a future of their own, neither Russian nor American; in other words, Mr. Winter’s proposal is based on a tacit claim to know what God alone can know.

As Tarcov points out, in The City and Man Strauss saw the crisis of the West in terms of a loss of a sense of purpose. Tarcov goes on to argue that Strauss “explicitly denies” that Communism is the danger that constitutes this crisis. In Tarcov’s rebuttal of Gunnell, he nonetheless concedes much ground to the central concern that Gunnell attempted to raise with respect to political philosophy, in that he attributes (with Strauss) the loss of certainty of purpose in the West as explicitly connected to the thought and writings of Nietzsche. This grants the argument its main thrust—that philosophers have been all too quick to define history itself in terms of the flow of ideas through a self-constituting tradition. Tarcov, rightly, points to the fact that Strauss himself was responsible for pushing the limits of tradition—for drawing out forgotten thinkers and texts

182. Machiavelli, Discourses, 150.
and shedding light on their participation in the larger drama of modernity. It seems that Tarcov engages Gunnell on the question of the limits of the canon, rather than on its very existence. But this is likely because Gunnell has trouble settling such an issue in a finalizing manner—or even that he meant to do so. Even if we accept that tradition is a “myth” we must nonetheless acknowledge that myth is a real part of human life. Thus, when Gunnell, in a different article published eight years later, states that Strauss was “the greatest writer of epic political theory in our century” he is quick to follow this up with “what he was saying, what he was doing by saying what he said, and what he hoped to accomplish” are open issues. Gunnell finds it troubling that Strauss makes claims about the figures of the canon that tell a story in which these figures themselves are the constitutive elements of the history of the West. Gunnell writes that “Strauss often speaks of Machiavelli as the turning point not only in the tradition of political thought but in the whole development of modern institutions.” Thus, Gunnell would rather read Strauss as making a rhetorical argument with political intent, saying of Strauss that “many of his arguments can only be understood as rhetorical moves that are at least in purpose ‘political,’ and not simply a form of symbolic action.” For Gunnell, then, the larger project in which Strauss is engaged is concerned not with making philosophers into politicians, but instead in concocting an “antidote” to the crisis of liberal democracy: focusing his attention on education and trying to salvage elements of a classical education. This goal

185. Gunnell, “Political Theory and Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss,” Political Theory 13, no. 3 (1985): 339. This article also contains an excellent discussion of the fraught way in which the idea of liberal democracy is taken up in the body of Strauss’s work.


188. Gunnell draws on the essay On Liberal Education which will be discussed below.
has in mind a cautious use of philosophy—to educate the citizen and the statesman rather than to assume the sovereign power of philosopher-kings.

The attempt to find, in Strauss, the progenitor of neoconservatism has done nothing to settle these open questions. The discipline of political theory likewise remains contested terrain. Gunnell notes that “questions about the conditions and limits of academic political theory and its relationship to politics” were “vivid for Strauss” but that they have nonetheless “become obscure within the contemporary enterprise of political theory.” In his reading of Strauss, which is persuasive on this point, Gunnell argues that Communism has served as a reminder of the truths of classical political philosophy—it is not, therefore, an existential threat to Western society, some completely alien form of human political life, but instead a branch of the West.

Xenos argues that:

The restrictions under which Strauss thinks himself to be writing have nothing to do with Nazism or Communism, but rather with the informal censorship of public opinion or what Heidegger called the dictatorship of das Man and the mode of so-called inauthenticity represented by it, which is characterized by “averageness” and “leveling down.”

These themes are certainly present in Strauss. And while Xenos is right to point out some of the ways in which these themes have been picked up and amplified by neoconservatism, it is important not to ignore other themes in Strauss that pull in opposite political directions.

Gunnell draws on Strauss’s discussion of Aristotle to shed light on the status and history of political thought, especially in relation to the development of modern natural science. He

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189. Gunnell, “The Case of Leo Strauss,” 339. I do not know whether Gunnell is self-consciously taking up the theme of the forgetfulness of modernity in making this claim about the status of the discipline. Whether yes or no, it would seem that Strauss has had a profound impact on the very way in which Gunnell is understanding the discursive object he recognizes as “political theory.”

190. This argument has a sociological basis in, for example, the writings of Karl Mannheim. See Ideology and Utopia: an Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936).

191. Xenos, Cloaked in Virtue, 97. This comment comes on the heels of an illuminating discussion of the epigraph of On Tyranny, which Xenos takes to be proof of the kind of style that Strauss uses in writing—and the kinds of readers he demands.
supports the thesis that Strauss sought to defend liberal democracy, even while acknowledging that Strauss relies on Aristotle and the concept of the regime in order to make this case.

Like Gunnell, I seek to read Strauss as a political commentator. As Gunnell notes, Strauss’s writing is noteworthy in that it:

…displays political passion; and it is intensely rhetorical and evocative. Furthermore, in view of the extensive educational influence and the latent political effects that might (and probably do in the recent administration of government in the United States) attach to Strauss’s work, it must be considered politically consequential to an extent that goes well beyond most academic political theory. Yet, in an equally important sense, it cannot be understood as political unless the real difference and intricate relationship between public and academic discourse is obscured.192

The relationship between public and academic discourse was a consistent concern for Strauss. In attempting to “retrieve” political philosophy, he believed that he was bringing back a meaningful notion of politics to an academy that had forgotten its place in society. But these questions urge us to interrogate Strauss’s intent—what was he meaning to do in writing academic texts, in the manner in which he wrote them, at the time in which he did? And even if it is possible to discern Strauss’s intent, is that the same thing as discovering his teaching? This topic is, not coincidentally, a major theme of Thoughts on Machiavelli. If we seek to understand how we should read Strauss and his intent, we should begin with how he treats Machiavelli’s intent.

Authors, Authority, Reason: Intention or Teaching?

In order to take up the topic of how Machiavelli went about inventing modernity, we have to consider the twofold character of Machiavelli’s teaching. This is explicitly Strauss’s topic in the first chapter of the book.

Strauss’s Thoughts on Machiavelli takes as its object the two texts by Machiavelli that have come to be known so well. On the surface they also appear to be very different works. But, in

Strauss’s estimation, both *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* share a certain similarity, though. Both claim to be encapsulations of everything that Machiavelli knows. Where we might see a contradiction or difference in purpose between these two books we might see therefore a separate set of teachings. Thus, Machiavelli’s twofold teachings arises as a possibility out of our reading of Machiavelli and our taking him at his word. But the distinction between these two texts will quickly come under question in Strauss’s reading. Indeed, he comes to declare that although the relation between the two books is “enigmatic” the twofold purpose is a reflection of a twofold perspective and that each book is “aimed” at a different audience. This dual purpose corresponds to “the difference between the ‘young’ readers and the ‘old.’” What Strauss is doing, then, in considering each book in sequence with an eye toward the larger whole, is properly called a comprehensive reflection.

The theme of comprehensive reflection, begun in the introduction, is carried through into the first chapter. In encompassing the permanent alternatives of human society, political philosophy is a comprehensive reflection that takes both the past and the present *in relation* within its field of view. Thus, when Strauss argues that Machiavelli claims that both of his books are equally comprehensive he puts them into the same terrain, a singular terrain that avoids some of the interpretive difficulty of reconciling the apparently contradictory purpose of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. Strauss also excavates some rules of reading—by way of his observation of Machiavelli’s reading of Livy. The background thesis here is that reading Machiavelli with *how* he is reading Livy in mind will give us a critical vantage point that might help to elucidate


194. This is likewise how Strauss encourages us to read Spinoza. See “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Here Strauss argues that one learns to write carefully by reading carefully, an imperative that is tacitly aimed at his own readership.
some of the more questionable moments in Machiavelli’s text. Of particular importance is the question of Machiavelli’s “silences.” These are moments in the text where one might expect Machiavelli to write about, for example, Aristotle. If Machiavelli remains silent on Aristotle—a pre-eminent authority at the time in which Machiavelli writes, on the matters that Machiavelli takes up—then this is to be taken as a signal that Machiavelli regards Aristotle as not helpful in dealing with the matters at hand. Here, Machiavelli can depend on his readers having certain dispositions and preconceptions, and rely on those attitudes in the writing of the text. As Strauss writes, the “silence of a wise man is always meaningful.” The question of Strauss’s silences, then, emerges. Here, for readers attuned to the nuance of Strauss’s text, the topic of democracy and liberalism, as well as the theory of the state, are subjects that are noticeably absent from Strauss’s discussion. In particular, one cannot help but notice that Strauss ignores a vast body of scholarship on the subject of raison d’état, an idea which is still largely attributed to Machiavelli by many scholars. Each of these silences, Strauss silently tells us, indicates that these areas—considered by many to be important sites of scholarly research—are not important toward the study of Machiavelli.

In the pages that follow, Strauss proceeds to subtly dislodge certain dispositions with which he assumes that his readers will approach the text. The relationship between authority and

195. This thesis, one may surmise, is also a signal that one should read Strauss with an idea of how he is reading Machiavelli reading Livy. This provides a most comprehensive reflection on the reading, allowing one to make judgments that might escape the threat of distortion or prejudice.

196. Strauss, Thoughts, 30. Here I think it is helpful to point out the nuance of saying that Strauss used this as a methodological precept, and what that means for the reading of the text. One does not have to believe that Machiavelli thought “I will ignore Aristotle and everyone will know that means I hate him.” One only has to take for granted the fact that, if Machiavelli says he writes about everything he knows with passion and with clarity, and does not in the process write about Aristotle, that Machiavelli did not think that Aristotle was all that important to the matters he considered. The silence is thus meaningful in conveying a kind of intent, but one that is ultimately determined by the context of the writing and not by the author himself. Strauss’s methodological precept is a way of dealing with the messy questions of authorial intent and contextual determinations, without abandoning the notion that there was a singular author who may be said to have had a singular purpose. Anticipating the conclusions of the rest of this chapter, we might say that Strauss sought to defend an individualism that is not centered on self-interest.
reason is one that emerges as particularly important, a fact which should not surprise anyone who has read any of Strauss’s other works. One example will help to elucidate the way this works in the text. In a close reading of Machiavelli, Strauss shows how Machiavelli modifies a Latin sentence by replacing “authority” by “reasons” and that “he goes on to replace the language of authority by his own native tongue.” This single example of Strauss’s close reading shows how a careful eye can reveal minor details that cause one to view the whole from a new vantage point. It is a window into the entire effort of Machiavelli’s writing—to replace authority with reasons and to put his native tongue in a position of authority thereby. It attunes us to the relationship between authority and reason, and encourages us to read Strauss carefully as well.

It is easy to see how this manner of reading, this methodological precept, can cause a lasting problem with interpreting Strauss. Not only is it paradoxical in its treatment of history and historical perspective, it is deeply unsettling to a certain kind of mind, trained to discern the “central” tenets of a given body of thought in order to categorize and typify it, to dissect it and place it in a jar for scientific scrutiny. To put the point too simply, the challenge that Strauss takes up is to give up both the historicist claim of relativism and the scientific claim to objective detachment.

This is no easy task. Careful readers have seen in Strauss’s concept of “intent” a futile attempt to steer between the middle course. Pocock argues that Strauss imputes a theory of “perfect speech” to Machiavelli: that every word that Machiavelli wrote, including even those words he did not write, lined up perfectly with his “intention.” It matters quite a lot to Pocock that we can determine when and where Strauss got Machiavelli right, and when and where

197. Strauss, Thoughts, 41.
Strauss got Machiavelli wrong. But Pocock elides the distinction between “intention” and “teaching.” He presumes that it was Machiavelli’s intention to convey a singular, particular teaching to his reader. This is a common interpretive reduction in reading Strauss. This distinction is important, though, and pushing on it even a little results in a problematizing of the overt claim that Machiavelli’s intent contains everything he wrote—both explicitly and “between the lines.”

A quick glance at the chapter titles to Thoughts on Machiavelli will perhaps make clear the movement of Strauss’s thought over the trajectory of the book: chapter one is entitled “The Twofold Character of Machiavelli’s Teaching;” chapter two is “Machiavelli’s Intention: The Prince;” chapter three is “Machiavelli’s Intention: the Discourses;” and the final chapter is “Machiavelli’s Teaching.” As these chapter titles make plain, there is a distinction between intention and teaching. In the first place, Machiavelli’s teaching has a “twofold character.” The intention of each of Machiavelli’s major works is then considered, which results in a penultimate chapter about the singular teaching. How are we to make sense of this movement, from a dual-aspect teaching through two different intentions, and resulting in a singular teaching? What exactly is the difference between an intention and a teaching? Reading Strauss is an enterprise that gets very complicated, very quickly: such questions may occur to us without ever having read a single word of the text beyond the table of contents.

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198. Pocock attributes his position to that of the “historian of language.” He also sees Strauss’s apparent obsession with numerology as following from his commitments to the holistic intention of the author. See Pocock, “Prophet and Inquisitor,” 393-4.

199. I am unaware of any systematic attempt to parse the difference in how Strauss uses these two concepts in his philosophical writings.

200. For those who take Strauss’s commitment to numerology seriously it is worth while to note that the final chapter of Thoughts on Machiavelli begins at precisely the halfway point—when counted by page number. As Strauss goes to great lengths to assess Machiavelli in light of where the center of his text is, this fact should alert a careful reader to the fact that the organization of the book by chapter is not indicative of where the center is.
The task of locating a teaching is one that revolves around the idea of authenticity. Take this quote from chapter three as an example:

The Discourses truly convey then, as Machiavelli promises at the beginning of the book, new modes and orders. Just as the Prince, the Discourses present a wholly new teaching which is shielded by a conventional or traditional exterior. But whereas the Prince conveys the wholly new teaching regarding the foundations of society, the Discourses convey in addition the wholly new teaching regarding the structure of society, i.e., the best society.\(^{201}\)

This wholly new teaching is “shielded” by an exterior of familiarity. It is aimed at showing the foundations of society, in the case of The Prince, and at pointing the way toward the “best” society, in the case of the Discourses. But how do we locate this authentic teaching, amidst the dross of the familiar shell?

In a discussion of Plato, musing on the difficulties that arise when one attempts to locate the authentic voice of Plato in his dialogues, Strauss asks “Could it be true that Plato, like his Socrates, the master of the knowledge of ignorance, did not assert anything, \textit{i.e.} did not have a teaching?”\(^{202}\) This question arises from the consideration of the fact that Plato never speaks “in his own voice,” because he wrote in dialog form. Here we are to take a teaching to be assertion—the positing of truth. Strauss then proceeds to draw an instructive distinction: “Let us then assume that the Platonic dialogues do not convey a teaching, but, being a monument to Socrates, present the Socratic way of life as a model.”\(^{203}\) Here, a teaching is contrasted with a “way of life” that might serve as a model. Yet, even this approach is not without difficulty, for Socrates is supposed to be the possessor of a great gift—a soul whose type is not found in all human beings. If this is true then Plato’s dialogues return to their status as authoritative texts that tell us to “live

\(^{201}\) Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 116.

\(^{202}\) Strauss, \textit{The City and Man}, 51.

\(^{203}\) Strauss, \textit{The City and Man}, 51.
as Socrates teaches you to live.” In this paragraph, the idea of a “teaching” has been slightly modified—no longer is it mere assertion but it becomes an authoritative model of a way of life.

What a teaching “is” then depends on who it is that finds it—if we are possessors of the right kind of soul we might find assertions that we can either agree with or disagree with, on the basis of our use of reason. If, on the other hand, we are not so endowed with such “demonic” gifts, we instead find the voice of authority, which consists in a more or less coercive model of how to live one’s life. Much depends, then, on the status of Socrates and his ironic disposition. More still depends on how we read him, how we situate ourselves in relation to him, how we see ourselves in relation to both reason and authority. The very idea of a teaching and what that means, for us, is at stake in our stance to the author in question, whether we take that author to be in fact an authority. In this discussion, as with his exposition on Machiavelli, Strauss accounts for two kinds of readers with a twofold discussion of teaching.

This idea, too, is a common one in Strauss’s work. In his “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Strauss defends the thesis that independent and critical thought has consistently been covered up or encoded in the public writings of philosophers. The relationship of philosophy to public opinion, of the prevalence of persecution in regards to matters of critical thought, is the undergirding framework that allows Strauss to rebuild the history of philosophy. His argument rests on a playful discussion of the nature of “proof” when discussing the task of discovering an author’s real intent in writing any given piece of work. Strauss points to the difficulty that

204. Strauss, The City and Man, 51.

205. Strauss discusses this topic at length. I cite here only one phrase which may be helpful toward the discussion that I present in later pages: “The highest form of superiority is the superiority of wisdom. Irony in the highest sense will then be the dissimulation of one’s wisdom, i.e. the dissimulation of one’s wise thoughts” (51). Could Strauss be saying any more plainly that he does possess the right kind of nature to read Socrates on his level, the level of reason, and that his claim not to possess such a “gift” is meant to find purchase in a certain kind of reader, one who can nod affirmatively and say “no, I am not as smart as Socrates.”
attends any attempt to lay bare the “true” meaning of a work—the censor must make a compelling argument that any perceived deficiency in the work that might lead to heterodox views is not merely a product of chance. Is an ambiguous sentence merely poor writing or proof of heretical intent? Such questions raise the fundamental issue: how do we read the texts of philosophers of the past, and how do we make sense of them for ourselves and our own present? From what standpoint do we judge their intent, and how can we prove such a claim?

One of Strauss’s more infamous ideas may be of help in trying to make sense of this interpretive difficulty. Strauss makes a distinction between the esoteric and exoteric. In its most basic formulation, one used by many interpreters of Strauss, an exoteric writing is said to contain two teachings—a basic, popular one and an obscure, philosophical one. Such texts aim at two different audiences to accomplish two different objectives. To the uninitiated they appear to be orthodox and perhaps even unremarkable or slightly confusing. To the properly educated, they are an encoded message that can be deciphered through the use of cryptic hermeneutics, which reveal a hidden, esoteric meaning.

Such books are not addressed to already wise philosophers, nor to the unwitting masses, however:

Those to whom such books are truly addressed are, however, neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosophers as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation of the popular teaching—obscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc. Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood through the trees, but as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are “written speeches caused by love.”

206. Strauss, “Persecution,” 36. This argument is mirrored in Thoughts on Machiavelli, 53.
But to take this teaching as a solidified body of knowledge, passed on substantively from hand to hand through the ages is to misread the nature of philosophy. Philosophy, here considered, becomes something more like a set of training exercises that can best help its practitioners to be able to think and write in a certain (i.e. philosophic) manner. This mode of life, with an authority secured of its own accord in the world, exists in a state of possible tension with the political body of which it is a part. In describing the difference between philosophy as it exists in a liberal society (with the guaranteed right of free expression) and an illiberal society, Strauss turns to Plato. What appears as beautiful to us, when confronting Plato or any other ancient philosopher, is merely a shallow version of an internal beauty that evades all representation. After “long, never easy but always pleasant work” one can, perhaps, catch a glimpse of an inner beauty which renders ugly that which had appeared to be beautiful prior to the labor of investigation. This task of education, then, becomes one that answers the “pressing question, the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license.”

This penultimate political question is always posed by the inevitable conflicts of politics.

These political questions are matters of some urgency in any present moment. But there is a wealth of historical material available to those who would seek to understand how others have attempted to tackle such massive problems in the past. Machiavelli’s purpose in the Discourses is to “disinter” ancient modes and orders that have been “forgotten, or buried like ancient statues.” Crucially, the problem here is not actually that these ancient modes and orders are not known. The problem is that “Everyone knows of them and many admire them. But everyone

thinks that they cannot be imitated by modern man.” Unlike his contemporaries, who see themselves as radically altered from their predecessors, Machiavelli holds that the difference between moderns and the ancients is “…due entirely to a difference in education and in knowledge of ‘the world.’” This claim amounts to a radical refutation of the claims of the Bible, because Machiavelli is stating not only that imitating the ancients is possible but that it is desirable. Machiavelli attempts to set an example that can be followed, to show how a life lived according to the ancients might look.

But unlike his discussion of Socrates, which sorts two sorts of readers and proceeds on its discussion whilst aimed at two different “levels,” Thoughts on Machiavelli seems to attempt a more sustained approach, one aimed at transforming one kind of reader into another. The opening of chapter four, “Machiavelli’s Teaching,” substantiates this claim. In a way, this is actually the beginning of the book. The previous three chapters have served a ground clearing purpose—beginning with certain problems of interpretation, Strauss has made possible a gap in which we might begin to trace the outlines of a singular teaching in Machiavelli. This teaching has been transformed into something more like a model for a way of life—a model of modern life itself. Here, Strauss states explicitly that his observations on Machiavelli are not meant to “elucidate every obscure passage of the Discourses.” He declares cautiously that:

208. Strauss, Thoughts, 86. Strauss specifically uses the word “purpose” here instead of “intent.” Compare this to page 98, where Strauss uses the phrase “doctrine regarding providence” in reference to “everything he knows” which is contained in The Prince and the Discourses.

209. Strauss, Thoughts, 86. See also 178.

210. It is unsurprising, then, to note that chapter four of Thoughts on Machiavelli begins at precisely the halfway point (determined by page numbers): this theme of the “center” of a work is one that Strauss repeatedly returns to throughout his discussion of Machiavelli. See Thoughts, 30, for example.

211. Strauss, Thoughts, 174.
The utmost we can hope to have achieved is to have pointed to the way which the reader must take in studying Machiavelli’s work. Books like the *Discourses* and *The Prince* do not reveal their full meaning as intended by the author unless one ponders over them “day and night” for a long time. The reader who is properly prepared is bound to come across suggestions which refuse to be stated. Pen or typewriter, to say nothing of hand and tongue, refuse their service. The reader thus comes to understand the truth that what ought not to be said cannot be said.212

Such statements certainly encourage one, amidst the inevitable second-guessing involved with reading or writing about such figures, to give up the quest to put into words the insights of the mind. There seems to be a barrier separating language from world, truth from words. Strauss is clear that the intention of the author is something that remains shrouded in mystery unless one does the necessary work of understanding, a process of pondering “day and night.” Here, reading seems to depend on a distinction between the intention of the author and the materiality of the text itself: as an object the text must “stand on its own” and it seems utterly divorced from the author’s intention. Yet, it is precisely the fact that language and thought are completely intertwined that gives birth to this problem of interpretation in the first place—it is that embeddedness of ourselves in our world, as constituted through our thought, that makes us historical beings in the first place. Our intentions are not always known to us or to those around us with any more clarity than we could attain in approaching the study of Machiavelli. It is a fact that we bring our whole language, our mode of being as constituted through language, to bear on the words of any given text. The norms of “ought” pervade that language to such a degree that we cannot say what cannot be said—there are limits to our thinking that rest solely on opinion or norms. Philosophy as such becomes restless, ungrounded, critical and perhaps even revolutionary.

When we pick up a text that was written in the past, we encounter a voice that has been severed from its body. The mortal limits we inhabit, as finite beings, are surpassed in the act of

writing—so long as there is an encounter between text and reader. But the question of interpretation, which has occupied much modern historiography, remains a thorny one. Strauss puts it like this on one occasion:

To understand the words of another man, living or dead, may mean two different things which for the moment we shall call interpretation and explanation. By interpretation we mean the attempt to ascertain what the speaker said and how he actually understood what he said, regardless of whether he expressed that understanding explicitly or not. By explanation we mean the attempt to ascertain those implications of his statements of which he was unaware. Accordingly, the realization that a given statement is ironical or a lie, belongs to the interpretation of the statement, whereas the realization that a given statement is based on a mistake, or is the unconscious expression of a wish, an interest, a bias, or a historical situation, belongs to its explanation. If the explanation is not based on an adequate interpretation, it will be the explanation, not of the statement to be explained, but of a figment of the imagination of the historian. It is equally obvious that, within the interpretation, the understanding of the explicit meaning of a statement has to precede the understanding of what the author knew but did not say explicitly: one cannot realize, or at any rate one cannot prove, that a statement is a lie before one has understood the statement in itself.²¹³

The same problem exists, no matter how much historical “time” has passed between writing and reading: the problem of interpreting Machiavelli is constituted by a barrier as impassable as the problem of interpreting Strauss. When we encounter a text that has been written by a person who is dead, that text constitutes that person “for us” in way that cheats death. It is this existential fact that Strauss elucidates with his reading of Machiavelli. The distinction he draws here between interpretation and explanation depends on the self-consciousness of the author—that which must be explained is that which is beyond the author’s awareness. An explanation is based on an “adequate” interpretation—we must have some sense of the author and context of a piece of writing in order to be able to see beyond the horizon to which the author was limited.

Choosing which books to read, then, becomes an exercise in discovering which authors comprehended their time and place the best, which of them left as little to the realm of unawareness. A philosopher becomes, according to this line of reasoning, someone who is capable of extraordinary acts of self-awareness. Not just any text or any author can provide us with material that will withstand the kind of reading that Strauss is advocating, then. Those

²¹³ Strauss, “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise,” in Persecution and the Art of Writing, 143.
authors who internalize this fact of existence, who reckon with it on its own terms and engage in a reasoned and careful struggle with its forces, are better able to describe and document this experience. In part, it is what makes Machiavelli such an interesting figure. The encounter with a text is thus an encounter with mortality and death, a look beyond the horizon that constitutes our finite being:

Since man must understand himself in the light of the whole or of the origin of the whole which is not human, or since man is the being that must try to transcend humanity, he must transcend humanity in the direction of the subhuman if he does not transcend it in the direction of the superhuman.214

Assuming that human beings are always “on the move,” Strauss argues that we either ascend or descend—and if this is the fundamental choice then we would be better off in choosing ascent.

An isomorphic situation confronts the would-be social scientist. Discussing the work of Max Weber, Strauss points to the intractable difficulty associated with interpretation and explanation:

Is it not the plain duty of the social scientist truthfully and faithfully to present social phenomena? How can we give a causal explanation of a social phenomenon if we do not first see it as what it is? Do we not know petrification or spiritual emptiness when we see it? And if someone is incapable of seeing phenomena of this kind, is he not disqualified by this very fact from being a social scientist, just as much as a blind man is disqualified from being an analyst of painting?215

This understanding of social science is linked up with Strauss’s critique of his contemporaries and their inability to reckon with tyranny—a criticism of the methods and modes of understanding that were popular at the time of his writing. In looking to Machiavelli, then, Strauss is simultaneously calling into question the “birth” of social science. This reading has everything to do with understanding what Machiavelli was doing in his act of writing. It goes beyond mere interpretation, adding a level of explanation to the reading that is subject to validity testing of some kind, though it is not clear at this point what exactly that corroboration (or not)

214. Strauss, Thoughts, 78.
215. Strauss, Natural Right, 50
would look like. It is essential to realize that Strauss takes Machiavelli very seriously. In witnessing the beginning of the end for Christianity, it is Machiavelli who looks beyond to the future, who attempts to constitute that future through the act of writing. Strauss sees Machiavelli’s long-term project in terms of a profound engagement with the world, one driven by necessity. Machiavelli advises us that “men ought never to give up, no matter what the condition into which Fortuna may have brought them.” In rejecting Christianity, Machiavelli likewise rejects the doctrine of eternal life. He must therefore reckon with and become comfortable with mortality and the finite:

We shall then say that the necessity which makes soldiers fighting against a superior enemy operate well is the necessity, rooted in the fear of death, to act against their natural inclination but within their ability. Generalizing from this, we may say that it is fear, the fundamental fear, which makes men operate well.

To the extent that Machiavelli can be said to have “operated well” he must have been motivated by the “fundamental fear” of death. Self-awareness of one’s mortality combined with a purposive engagement with the world nonetheless—this seems to be the formula of modern heroic action. Those few who are able to transcend their immediate condition and influence the future through the cultivated use of their reason become the signposts in our interpretation and explanation of history.

While critics have noted that there is an air of elitism about these conceptions of philosophy, there is nonetheless some humility present as well. What Strauss calls the “limits of political cleverness” are thus transcended by true wise men, who reject all revelation and the

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216. See Thoughts, 170 for one example of Strauss’s discussion of Machiavelli’s take on the Christian republic. It might better be said that Machiavelli was witnessing the decline of the political entity the Christian republic, rather than the demise of Christianity itself.
218. Strauss, Thoughts, 248.
219. Strauss, Thoughts, 175.
authority based on such revelation. Such people Strauss refers to as *falāsifa* or “Averroists.”

To the extent that such *falāsifa* have a teaching it is more like a model for how to live one’s life than it is a codified body of rules or specific set of truths. Compare this idea of philosophy with how Strauss describes Machiavelli’s project:

> For the time being we suggest that Machiavelli tried to replace the conscience, or religion, by a kind of prudence which is frequently indistinguishable from mere calculation of worldly gain: ‘the true way’ consists, not in obeying God’s invariable law, but in acting according to the times.

Acting according to the times requires something more like judgment than conscience, but Strauss is also clear that there is a distinction to be made between “mere calculation” and Machiavelli’s “true way.” What exactly is the nature of this distinction, though? As Strauss makes clear he sees Machiavelli as initiating the “break” with classical political philosophy, as crafting a new project:

> Machiavelli is the first philosopher who believes that the coincidence of philosophy and political power can be brought about by propaganda which wins over ever larger multitudes to the new modes and orders and thus transforms the thought of one or a few into the opinion of the public and therewith into public power. Machiavelli breaks with the Great Tradition and initiates the Enlightenment. We shall have to consider whether that Enlightenment deserves its name or whether its true name is Obfuscation.

This passage closes chapter three, and thus signals the real beginning of the text. The theme of Machiavelli’s “teaching” of evil occupied the first lines of the book, but that theme has transformed into the Enlightenment itself—or perhaps a darkening of the past that one might better equate with obfuscation. It is only now that Strauss is ready to embark on his true purpose, an interrogation of the relationship of philosophy and politics in the modern era. Machiavelli makes possible a conception of political power that can be informed by knowledge

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—a science of politics becomes possible and perhaps even necessary in order to maintain power in a modern regime.

It is the use of propaganda and images, myths and symbols, that makes such a conception possible—an entire realm of the “imagined republic” becomes necessary in order for the real tension between philosophy and politics to be smoothed over by way of representations. In his discussion of truth and its relation to Christianity, Strauss points out that Machiavelli makes the single most emphatic claim as to the nature of truth: “It is truer than every other truth that where men are not soldiers that is due to a fault of the prince.”

In accounting for the rise in power of Christianity, Strauss argues that Machiavelli sees this as a result of the decline of Rome, not the cause of that decline. He particularizes Machiavelli’s concern with the weakness of the world, pointing to the fact that it is specifically the Roman Church that has made Italy weak at this historical moment, a fact of which Machiavelli is keenly aware.

Thus Strauss concludes:

If the fundamental alternative is that of rule of priests or rule of armed men, then we understand why Machiavelli suggested that the truth “where men are not soldiers, this is due to a fault of the prince” is the greatest truth. Priests as priests cannot defend their subjects against people who are not frightened by maledictions or appearances….The chief reason why Machiavelli opposed the direct or indirect rule of priests was that he regarded it as essentially tyrannical and even, in principle, more tyrannical than any other regime.

If it is the corruption of Rome, and its destruction of freedom through the loss of political virtue, that allowed Christianity the opportunity to flourish, then Machiavelli should not be read as attempting to revive ancient republican virtue. His explication of Rome is not an attempt to “bring back” Roman virtue—an effort which could not, at any rate, be accomplished by way of writing a text. Strauss also notes that Machiavelli is not overly critical of Christian martial

223. Strauss, Thoughts, 178.
224. Strauss, Thoughts, 181.
225. Strauss, Thoughts, 184-5.
ability: “Christians may be good and faithful soldiers because they fight for the glory of God.”

But despite this ability in combat, fostered as it is by a sense of fighting for a power outside of oneself, the “weakness” of the world is still a product of Christian morality. Doubtless relying on his reading of Nietzsche, Strauss reads Machiavelli as holding humanism up to its own standards:

According to Machiavelli, man will not reach his highest stature if he himself does not demand the highest from himself without relying on support from powers outside of him, and if he cannot find his satisfaction in his achievement as his own achievement. Not trust in God and self-denial but self-reliance and self-love is the root of human strength and greatness.

At this point in the text, coming in the final chapter and with the preliminary work of dislodging certain assumptions already accomplished, Strauss points the way to a reading of Machiavelli that can inform a kind of practice of the self. This way of life grounds itself in its own attributes and strengths, accounts for its weaknesses, and does not draw any sustenance from sources external to itself. But note the structure of the first sentence as well: the pronoun “he” is slightly ambiguous—it either refers to a generic “man” or to Machiavelli himself. This grammatical ambiguity is an indicator of the connectedness between Machiavelli and mankind, of the kind of duty that Machiavelli takes upon himself in the act of writing. This is no abstract argument. Given the emphasis on particulars and the insistence on Machiavelli’s personal project, this ambiguity is not ambiguous at all. He refers to Machiavelli. Machiavelli situates himself, as a concrete individual, at the threshold of human development. Machiavelli takes personal responsibility, or perhaps the duty, of guiding human development as such. He sees that self-reliance and self-love are the keys to his own mode of existence, that if he embraces these

226. Strauss, Thoughts, 189.

227. Strauss, Thoughts, 189-90. I do not mean to suggest that Strauss carelessly imports a vision of Nietzsche onto his reading of Machiavelli. Thematically, Machiavelli and Nietzsche share much in common.
principles he will, by relying on his own achievements, work toward the achievement of man’s highest stature. Strauss relies on an ambiguity that is imported by a modern reader, trained as we are through historicism to think of human effort and achievement in purely deterministic and external fashion. Do we not simultaneously snicker and marvel at the audacity that Machiavelli evinces?

At this point in the text, we should be aptly prepared to receive this waypoint on the journey that Strauss has mapped out for us. Yet, being handed this map, we must test its utility with our own reason and compare it to our own experiences in order to make it work for us. And it is here that the distinction between Strauss and Machiavelli collapses: the teaching that Machiavelli offers is elucidated by Strauss, whose authority we should challenge. Strauss self-consciously works to undermine any authority we might give to him. The famous pedagogical maxim that he The goal of Thoughts on Machiavelli is not to “teach” us the “true” teaching of Machiavelli—for that we should surely turn to Machiavelli himself, taking the appropriate posture of deference and submission that is, itself, a kind of product of Machiavelli’s modernity. The goal of Thoughts on Machiavelli is to point the way toward a different reading of Machiavelli, one that does not actually require Strauss’s authority at all. The goal in this case is no more the retrieval of classical political philosophy than Machiavelli’s goal was the retrieval of Roman virtue; that task is impossible. But the goal is surely to challenge modernity, by way of the education of a new class of philosophers.228

Strauss is relying on his conception of classical political philosophy in order to make this argument. There is an inevitable tension, according to this conception of classical political philosophy...
philosophy, between philosophers and the political entities of which they are a part. This claim rests on an assertion about the nature of truth, and it is tied up with the definition of philosophy as turning opinion into knowledge. Since this definition of philosophy defines opinion as opposed to knowledge it also implicitly sets those people who hold opinions to be true against those who have attained some measure of knowledge. When it comes to political things, knowledge contains a unsettling or destabilizing impetus because opinions are what holds together a given social body. But this opposition is nonetheless a more symbiotic relationship than a parasitic one. Philosophy must begin with opinion—what Strauss previously called the surface of things—and must not develop a contempt or haughtiness of opinion. Knowledge thus, in a very real way, depends on opinion as its foundation, or at least as its beginning. But because philosophy does not depend on attaining its goal, universal truths (or truths of the “whole”), it depends on its beginnings. Another way of approaching this topic is to ask the question “in what would a retrieval of political philosophy consist?”

Philosophy, Strauss tells, us in “What is Political Philosophy?”, is “essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth.”229 It emerged in Athens, with the figure of Socrates, in the self-conscious recognition that opinion is always already the background against which we strive to realize knowledge. Philosophy demands ignorance rather than certainty. When it comes to political philosophy, a branch of philosophy, Strauss is emphatic that it constitutes “the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or good, political order.”230


It likewise depends on an assessment of the situation at hand: “All political action aims at either preservation or change. When desiring to preserve, we wish to prevent a change to the worse; when desiring to change, we wish to bring about something better. All political action is then guided by some thought of better and worse.”

Always particular, such analysis is nonetheless guided by the simple intuition that human things can either be in ascent or in decline at any given moment. Political science, on the other hand, is ambiguous because it designates both a normative model of the appropriate nature of political inquiry as well as the empirical work actually being done by people who are called political scientists. The discipline as Strauss found it was vested in thinking of itself as built on the distinction between facts and values.

The science of politics is fundamentally no different from the knowledge of military affairs, culinary arts, or animal husbandry. But due to the fact that the goal of politics is the “common good” and that this idea is in and of itself contentious, the solidity of political knowledge is not as firm as that of raising sheep. Here, Strauss depends on an analysis of the growth of complex industrial societies, arguing that old ways of procuring political knowledge (listening to sages, reading old books) are no longer pertinent in today’s “societies which are characterized by both immense complexity and rapid change.”

Strauss isolates one particular hinge in the path of historical change, noting that the legacy of positivism has lead to the assertion that there is a separation between facts and values—that the proper domain of science is facts and that science itself can say nothing as to values. This assertion has attained the status of opinion—but one that masquerades as truth. The moment this happened according to Strauss

is the last decade in the nineteenth century. This dogmatic claim dominates social science up through the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{234}

But, more vital to understanding his \textit{Thoughts on Machiavelli}, Strauss sees the contemporary positivism of his peers as cultivating a nihilism predicated upon the willful abandonment of moral judgment. This leads to the paradoxical conclusion that “social science cannot pronounce on the question of whether social science itself is good.”\textsuperscript{235} The scientific attitude and approach thus leads down a path to “thoughtless acceptance of received opinion.”\textsuperscript{236}

We should compare this conception to that of “political theory.” Strauss says that political theory typically means a “comprehensive reflection on the political situation which lead up to the suggestion of a broad policy.”\textsuperscript{237} This phrase “comprehensive reflection” should give us pause, because it figures prominently in Strauss’s introduction to the book on Machiavelli. Strauss goes on to show how political theory typically depends on taking for granted the answer to certain questions—that it ultimately rests on common opinion. Political theory appeals to opinions, then, in an effort to effect a specific political change for the better (or, theoretically, purposefully for the worse).

But this opens up another field of intervention: the shaping of public opinion itself, done in a manner that is not open to discussion in a public forum. This is a mode of political leadership, one which Strauss recognizes as explicitly oriented toward controlling future human beings by

\textsuperscript{234} Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 18. Strauss participated in a movement within political science that challenged this dominant orthodoxy. The 1950s and 1960s surely saw the emergence of a crack in the edifice—a slow fracturing which has continued through the present decade.

\textsuperscript{235} Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 19. Here, it is worthwhile to note that Strauss anticipates the current “market-driven” approach to social science, noting that a social science that cannot justify itself remains aimlessly adrift and thereby subject to the whims of the market place.

\textsuperscript{236} Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 24.

\textsuperscript{237} Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 13.
way of a slow change induced by propaganda. A “new ruling class” must be formed, but this class can only be constituted virtually, as it were through an encounter with a text. “Machiavelli is the first philosopher who attempted to force chance, to control the future by embarking on a campaign, a campaign of propaganda.”

With Machiavelli we find the modern shift toward institutionalization: “The shift from formation of character to the trust in institutions is the characteristic corollary of the belief in the almost infinite malleability of man.” Infinitely plastic, man is thus able to be shaped according to a master plan put in action by those who came before. Such origins run contrary to the myths that commonly animate public use of history: “The substance of his political teaching may be said to be the wholly new teaching regarding the wholly new prince, i.e., regarding the essential inherence of immorality in the foundation of society and hence in the structure of society.”

Consider also the fact that Strauss shows how Machiavelli spends a considerable amount of time and effort in critiquing the ideas of modernity, in his comparison of ancient and modern thought. Such a critical analysis of modernity seems to undermine the notion that Machiavelli invented modernity. Did Machiavelli intend to invent modernity? One way of parsing the difference between intention and teaching is to simply describe this as a different way of saying form and content. It is possible to think of form as the somewhat vague intention, and to think of a teaching as more substantive and full of content. In the context of human action, a teaching can

238. Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 46.
239. Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 43.
240. Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” 44.
241. See the discussion in Thoughts, 101-3.
be elaborated and substantiated much more easily than an intention. In order to show how Strauss utilizes this distinction to read Machiavelli, we must turn to the topic of self-interest.

**Self-Interest Beyond Time**

Strauss finds Machiavelli to be the first philosopher who attempted to *conflate* self-interest and the common good, to argue that the self-interested activity of the Prince can or perhaps must lead to the common good. This proves to be Machiavelli’s intention in *The Prince*. His intention is to transplant self-interest into the heart of the Christian ethos.

We can consider this thesis in light of Strauss’s discussion of Machiavelli’s teaching.

“Machiavelli sets forth an entirely new teaching. He is a Chiron of an entirely new kind.”

Taking on the persona of the tutor of Achilles, Machiavelli becomes half man, half beast. In urging that princes should consult their beastly nature, Strauss indicates that this non-human side of Machiavelli portends a greater lesson: “Machiavelli is our most important witness to the truth that humanism is not enough.”

It is worth tracing out Strauss’s logic in this passage. In encouraging beastly behavior, Machiavelli replaces the pursuit of divinity with the imitation of animals. Because “humanism is not enough” human beings must attempt to transcend their own limitations in one direction or the other—either the “superhuman” or the “subhuman” direction.

Using the same phrase, Strauss wrote in his essay “Social Science and Humanism,” that:

Yet, even if all were said that could be said and that cannot be said, humanism is not enough. Man, while being at least potentially a whole, is only part of a larger whole. While forming a kind of world and even being a kind of world, man is only a little world, a microcosm. The macrocosm, the whole to which man belongs, is not human. That whole, or its origin, is either subhuman or superhuman. Man cannot be understood in his own light but only in the light of either the subhuman or the superhuman. Either man is an accidental product of a blind evolution or else the process leading to man, culminating in man, is directed toward man. Mere humanism avoids this ultimate issue. The human meaning of what we have


come to call Science consists precisely in this—that the human or the higher is understood in the light of the subhuman or the lower. Mere humanism is powerless to withstand the onslaught of modern science.\textsuperscript{244} Here Strauss indicates that science has “lowered” mankind to that which is beneath him, to the subhuman. Humanism cannot stand against the claims of science because it does not offer a version of humanity that is based on something above humanity; in taking humanity as the standard by which to judge itself, it concedes the assigning of value to science with its claim to interpret the larger whole to which man belongs. Thus, science smuggles in standards that are lower than man, which come to serve as the criteria by which man is judged despite the claims of humanism.

In replacing the “God-Man Christ” with the “Beast-Man Chiron” as a model for human behavior, Machiavelli is substituting, according to his own argument, one man-made representation for another. It is Machiavelli’s Chiron that is being held out as the appropriate model for human behavior. And since Machiavelli actually has created this image, it is fully his own. It is of human origin. Strauss stresses for us again in this context that Machiavelli takes on responsibility for these arguments, that he takes up the position of the ancients but “in his own name.” It is this personal appropriation of the ancient wisdom that constitutes Machiavelli’s new teaching.\textsuperscript{245}

Strauss seems less concerned with the atheism of Machiavelli, and more concerned with the effects of this image on the broader social context. If both Chiron and God are man-made creations, then it is the effect of this image on those who do not realize them as creations that matters. Which is to say that the “subhuman” and the “superhuman” are not absolutely or


\textsuperscript{245} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 78.
objectively fixed positions, but are relative to the existing social value structure in which they appear. Machiavelli’s is supremely amoral from the perspective of the prevailing Christian ethos. But, as Strauss conveys, the Christian ethos is, at a fundamental level, no different from Machiavelli in the sense that the Bible and the image of God are also human creations. But it is the ability of humanity to understand itself, and on what terms, that comes to be the focal point of the objection to “mere humanism.”

Here we have the question of the relativity of values. For positivism, according to Strauss’s critique, all values are subjective and hence equal to each other. In other words, once Chiron is offered as a possibility Christ becomes all-too-human. Self-interest can thus take center stage as the defining value by which individuals can make judgments. Politics becomes a way of fulfilling desires and needs, a worldly affair of practical men. We find that the final chapter of The Prince is a kind of cover story:

…the immoral policies recommended throughout the Prince are not justified on grounds of the common good, but exclusively on grounds of the self-interest of the prince, of his selfish concern with his own well-being, security and glory. The final appeal to patriotism supplies Machiavelli with an excuse for having recommended immoral courses of action. In the light of this fact, his character may very well appear to be even blacker than even his worst enemies have thought. At the same time however, we are not forced to leave the matter with the remark that the last chapter of the Prince is a piece of mere rhetoric, i.e., that he was not capable of thinking clearly and writing with consummate skill.246

And while Strauss is careful to note that Machiavelli “would not have been human” if he had not been disturbed by the state of his “fatherland,” he does question whether this leads to the conclusion that patriotism was the “core” of Machiavelli’s thought. Instead, Strauss reads Machiavelli from a different standpoint:

The core of his being was his thought about man, about the condition of man and about human affairs. By raising the fundamental questions he of necessity transcended the limitations and the limits of Italy, and he thus was enabled to use the patriotic sentiments of his readers, as well as his own, for a higher purpose, for an ulterior purpose.247

246. Strauss, Thoughts, 80.
247. Strauss, Thoughts, 80.
Strauss thus places Machiavelli onto the terrain of philosophy. By raising the fundamental questions, Machiavelli transcends the limits of the particular context in which he is thinking. By gaining this “height” above the sentiments of his readers and himself, Machiavelli is able to marshall these feelings for a greater purpose. Philosophy is thus self-awareness in that it gives a different perspective on the common opinions that tie Machiavelli together with his fellow citizens.

But Machiavelli’s revolutionary purpose, which seeks to replace the old orders with “a new law which he believes to be better than the old law”248 separates him from his countrymen at the same time. By taking the position of writing to Lorenzo, the current actual Prince of Florence, Machiavelli sets himself up as writing to two distinct audiences, both the individual Prince and the multitude as well. As Strauss notes earlier, a “true” innovator would not need Machiavelli’s counsel in order to obtain his purpose. Machiavelli is thus the “real” innovator.249 It is important to note as well that Strauss attributes this turn to philosophy to “necessity.” What becomes evident is that Machiavelli sees the prevailing ideology of Christianity as one of the greatest stumbling blocks to Italian glory. He seeks to educate the youth, in part by removing their inherited belief in human goodness.250

Machiavelli’s self-interest, in rising above the multitude and giving direction to the young, ensconces his place in history. By taking responsibility for the message of the ancients, in his own name, Machiavelli puts himself in the center of a future that he seeks to construct. And by bringing the youth into alignment with his own self-interest, his enlists an army for his purpose.

248. Strauss, Thoughts, 62.
249. Strauss, Thoughts, 73.
250. Strauss, Thoughts, 81.
Each of these soldiers, however, takes on the ideal of self-interest in a particular way. Indeed, if Machiavelli’s project is successful they will not even realize that they “owe” their conception of self-interest to Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s true purpose thus comes into view: he brings the “true code” which is “in accordance with the truth, with the nature of things;” he is a “founder new social order which is all-comprehensive and not merely political or military.”

But while we may assume that Machiavelli’s new modes and orders are completely new and that they represent a total break with the past, there is something familiar about them. Rome is a model that Machiavelli can work with. Machiavelli puts a Roman lesson at the heart of political activity:

The ancient Roman polity was a work of chance, if of chance often prudently used; the ancient Romans discovered their modes and orders absent-mindedly or by accident, and they clung to them out of reverence for the ancestral. Machiavelli, however, achieves for the first time the anatomy of the Roman republic, and thus understands thoroughly the virtues and the vices of that republic. Therefore he can teach his readers how a polity similar to the Roman and better than the Roman can be deliberately constructed. What hitherto has been a lucky accident, and therefore essentially defective, can become from now on, on the new continent discovered by Machiavelli, the goal of rational desire and action.

Thus the “content” of Machiavelli’s new modes and orders is the same as those of Rome—it is the “character” of them that is “wholly new.” Being “after” Rome, Machiavelli can have it “before” him as an object of contemplation. He can see it on its own terms, whereas those who lived through this period could not achieve this critical distance from their lived relations. Thus, to see a writer “on his own terms” means to see a text within a clearly defined, more or less objective context. This discussion of self-interest brings up the topic of democracy—one that has a historical interconnectedness with self-interest. With the end of chapter two we see a

251. Strauss, Thoughts, 83.
252. Strauss, Thoughts, 83.
firm transition into the realm of “intent” and away from the question of teaching. The questions that Strauss poses at the end of this chapter open up on the *Discourses* in a manner that takes Machiavelli’s intent as its object of inquiry. But, judging from the table of contents, this is a necessary detour on the way toward a discussion of the “true” teaching. This very idea is off-limits to certain schools of thought, which take the author’s intention to be a kind of “unknowable” element of any text. Such readings would have us bracket completely the authorial intent, or (in what amounts to the same thing) explain it in terms of its historical context. The audacity of Machiavelli’s intent, however, surpasses these boundaries. As Strauss shows, Machiavelli declares himself to be an explorer who has discovered new continents, new “modes and orders” that have never before been seen in human history. To the extent that we see Machiavelli as a “teacher of evil” we must consider what the potential relationship is between these new modes and orders and morality. Machiavelli sets himself up to be seen as a the towering figure who brings the truth to the world, in his own name. At the same time, however, by taking up the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns Machiavelli is engaging in a conversation that certainly pre-dates himself. This has the potential to problematize Strauss’s more forceful statements about the creation of modernity itself out of Machiavelli’s texts.

Strauss notes that we might read Machiavelli as “another Fabius” because:

> it is the incredibility of his enterprise which secures him against detection, i.e., against the detection of the intransigence and awakeness with which he conducts his exploration of hitherto unknown territory and thus prepares the conquest of that territory by his brothers.\(^\text{255}\)

This new continent, one assumes, is the one we are inhabiting today. In explaining the rise of Christianity, Machiavelli looks to the weakness of Rome for an explanation of Christianity’s strength. This analysis locates the fractures of Roman rule as the leverage points at which a new

mode of life might take root. Rome was “excessively cosmopolitan or constitutionally exposed to corruption.” It thus brought about its own ruin, destroying freedom and making room for the Christian morality to take over.

Tracking Machiavelli’s detailed but sometimes off-putting reading of Livy, Strauss shows how Livy’s intent infuses the first part of the Discourses, only suddenly giving way to Machiavelli’s intent in a hinge moment contained in Book III, chapter 35. This analysis, however, depends on an independent and critically-minded reading of Livy. What this reveals is that Machiavelli’s intent is not contained between the covers of the text, but nor is it completely conditioned and determined by its historical context either. Machiavelli’s intent, in part, appears in Livy and in a comprehensive reflection that takes Livy and Machiavelli in relation to one another. Such a reflection, if it takes up fundamental questions of human political life, must necessarily seek to be of the whole and not leave out any parts.

What we find in this chapter is not a reading between the lines that reveals Machiavelli’s true intention—as if an intention were a pristine substance of enduring importance for all time. What we find is not a coherent, systematic doctrine or an abstract philosophical vision or utopian ideal. What we see between the lines is the scene beyond the window, between the blinds as it were, the political framing of the project and thus the intent that is behind it. We see beyond the window but at the same time we catch a glimpse of ourselves; we become aware of our own reflection as reflection. With awareness of one’s prejudices and predispositions the self becomes transformed and capable of seeing itself in a fundamentally different way. Reading between the lines is thus less about uncovering the truth and more about seeing the way in which our

256. Strauss, Thoughts, 118.
257. Strauss, Thoughts, 153
previously held perspective frames and guides our perception of the world. Seeing it this way, the text transforms *itself* in dialog with us. Strauss’s esotericism may just be an elaborate game with those who approach the text looking for authority on truth. These readers are lead in circles until, weary with effort, they must cry out “no more!” Then, in the defeat of their purpose, there is a space in which one might stand up again, amidst politics and transfigured in the process. Reason will have supplanted authority, by way of irony, if this alchemical transmutation is successfully achieved. In showing us our own reflection, Strauss allows us the opportunity to take stock of ourselves and make a judgment about where we stand. Such work is the goal of contemplation.
CHAPTER THREE:

In Defense of Contemplation

In order to move away from self-interest and into the realm of contemplation, we can consider the following passage from *Thoughts on Machiavelli*:

Time and again we have become bewildered by the fact that the man who is more responsible than any other man for the break with the Great Tradition should in the very act of breaking prove to be the heir, the by no means unworthy heir, to that supreme act of writing which that tradition manifested at its peaks. The highest art has its roots, as he well knew, in the highest necessity. The perfect book or speech obeys in every respect the pure and merciless laws of what has been called logographic necessity. The perfect speech contains nothing slipshod; in it there are no loose threads; it contains no word that has been picked up at random; it is not marred by errors due to faulty memory or to any other kind of carelessness; strong passions and a powerful and fertile imagination are guided with ease by a reason which knows how to use the unexpected gift, which knows how to persuade and which knows how to forbid; it allows of no adornment which is not imposed by the gravity and the aloofness of the subject matter; the perfect writer rejects with disdain and with some impatience the demand of vulgar rhetoric that expressions must be varied since change is pleasant. The translations of Machiavelli as well as of other great writers, even if they are done with ordinary competence, are so bad because their authors read books composed according to the rules of noble rhetoric as if they had been brought forth in compliance with the rules of vulgar rhetoric. In a famous letter Machiavelli has testified to what he owed to the writers of antiquity and their creations. In the evening, when entering his study he put on regal and courtly clothes and thus properly dressed he entered into the ancient courts of the men of antiquity who received him lovingly. There he fed himself on that nourishment which alone was his and for which he was born; there he united himself wholly with the ancients, and thus did not fear poverty, forgot every anguish, and was not frightened by death. Because of his nature and his devotion he came to surpass Livy. The peculiar charm and the peculiar remoteness of the *Discourses* are due to the fact that a part of their teaching is transmitted not only between their lines, but as it were between the covers of the *Discourses* and those of Livy’s *History*.  

Drawing on a distinction between “noble” and “vulgar” rhetoric, he asks us to consider that a piece of writing follows a different set of rules than the ones with which we are familiar.

Referencing the famous letter of Machiavelli to Vettori, Strauss encourages us to think of reading as an act of conversation that erases historical difference. The experience of encountering Machiavelli, coupled with an understanding of the classics, reveals that he is the inheritor of “that supreme act of writing” that was the finest achievement of antiquity. His claim to have “broken” utterly with the past is thus specious. But Machiavelli himself has let us in on the

secret, as his account of his evening routine makes clear. One translation presents the relevant passage as follows:

When evening comes, I return home to enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered in mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I absorb myself into them completely. And because Dante says that no one understands anything unless he retains what he has understood, I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De principatibus*, in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a princedom, the categories of princedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost.259

Machiavelli writes “tutto mi trasferisco in loro,” rendered here as “I absorb myself into them completely.” He thus claims to completely transfer himself into the past.260 This is purely contemplative—it serves no purpose of bodily desire and in fact it “forgets” the body and its finite nature, its worries and weariness, completely. But it seems possible that it is ultimately his self-interest that serves as the foundation of all of this activity—that it is why Machiavelli writes. He writes in order to retain understanding—gained through contemplation. But the reference to Dante is surely something of a joke; it is not because Dante said he should that Machiavelli writes *The Prince*. And even if Machiavelli does write in order to achieve understanding, it is not clear that this understanding serves any other purpose but itself.

But the way that Strauss glosses this passage is instructive. Strauss claims that Machiavelli surpasses Livy because of his “nature and his devotion,” thus situating this particular letter in relation to the *Discourses* despite the fact that in the original letter Machiavelli refers explicitly to *The Prince*. Here Strauss seems to indicate that Machiavelli was reading Livy in this mode of


260. Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, xxiv. This section of the Introduction contains an illuminating discussion of this letter and its context within the lengthy correspondence between Vettori and Machiavelli.
absorption, that Livy was one of the noble writers of antiquity to whom Machiavelli makes reference here. But this letter of Machiavelli’s to Vettori is written in regard to The Prince, and the authors of whom Machiavelli writes in that book, not Livy. Indeed, Strauss has given other indications in the text that Machiavelli was not reading Livy in this mode at all. Why does Strauss turn our attention to the Discourses then?

According to Strauss, we should assume that Machiavelli was reading Livy as “authoritative” and as if it is, “as it were, his Bible.”261 In this passage above we see that Machiavelli came to surpass Livy because of his “nature and his devotion.” The idea of devotion, with its clearly religious overtones, would seem to indicate that Machiavelli took a posture of submission before the authority of the text. But Machiavelli assumes the Bible to be of human, rather than divine origin.262 He reads Livy in order to discover how Christianity went about maintaining its modes and orders through time. He takes great liberty with Livy’s text, treating it more as artistic materials than a holy relic. Although Machiavelli is “preaching” a kind of supplicant posture to the text and the authority of the ancients, it is clear that he is doing anything but in the actual writing of his texts. Strauss thus points us to the Discourses in an effort to reveal this truth: the Prince is written in dedication to a ruling Prince, whereas the Discourses are dedicated to two friends—mere citizens. In pointing us toward the Discourses in his rendering of this famous letter to Vettori, Strauss is thus guiding us toward the truth of the way that Machiavelli writes, but without laying out the argument clearly and systematically. He requires his readers to do the work of connecting the dots, a crucial component in the process of

261. Strauss, Thoughts, 30.
262. Strauss, Thoughts, 51.
distinguishing *themselves* as readers. If there is a rule here it is this: read carefully, read critically.

This rule of reading, though, is meant to be somewhat cryptic. Strauss argues that reading Machiavelli as he wanted to be read begins a chain of reasoning that comes to undermine the authority of the Bible:

The most superficial fact regarding the *Discourses*, the fact that the number of its chapters equals the number of books of Livy’s *History*, compelled us to start a chain of tentative reasoning which brought us suddenly face to face with the only New Testament quotation that ever occurs in Machiavelli’s two books and with an enormous blasphemy. It would be a great disservice to truth if we were to use any other words, any weaker words for characterizing what he is doing. For it would be a mistake to believe that the blasphemy which we encountered is the only one or even the worst one which he committed.263 Machiavelli’s text reveals this blasphemy, but it also implicates the reader in thinking it. Strauss likens this entrapment to a conspiracy, saying that “Machiavelli compels the reader to think the blasphemy by himself and thus to become Machiavelli’s accomplice.” This becomes possible because Machiavelli has cultivated a kind of “intimacy” with his reader: “He fascinates his reader by confronting him with riddles. Thereafter the fascination with problem-solving makes the reader oblivious to all higher duties if not all duties.”264 This seduction of the reader, the gentle guidance that leads the reader off the path and into the woods, is dangerous. What instruments can guide us in these uncharted forests?

Strauss had indicated in the opening pages of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* that he was interested in Machiavelli’s “comprehensive reflection.” He states, on the second page of the text, that:

It is misleading to describe the thinker Machiavelli as a patriot. He is a patriot of a particular kind: he is more concerned with the salvation of his fatherland than with the salvation of his soul. His patriotism therefore presupposes a comprehensive reflection regarding the status of the fatherland on the one hand and

of the soul on the other. This comprehensive reflection and not patriotism, is the core of Machiavelli’s thought. 265

There is something very similar in the way Strauss is treating Machiavelli’s relation to Livy and his relation to his fatherland. In both cases it is through contemplation or practice that Machiavelli achieves a new, more comprehensive status. The very idea of a comprehensive reflection stands opposed to historicism, which precisely denies the ability of any person to achieve anything like a comprehensive reflection—or one that takes multiple perspectives under another more general viewpoint. Thus, at the heart of Strauss’s reading of Machiavelli is the insight that Machiavelli was doing the kind of work that historicism denies as possible. The work of philosophy is contemplation, the quest to understand the whole. This seems to be the only instrument that can guide us along the rest of the journey. Elsewhere, Strauss restates the idea like this:

The core of his [Machiavelli’s] being was his thought about man, about the condition of man and about human affairs. By raising the fundamental questions he of necessity transcended the limitations and the limits of Italy, and he thus was enabled to use the patriotic sentiments of his readers, as well as his own, for a higher purpose, for an ulterior purpose. 266

As Strauss goes on to describe, he sees Machiavelli as writing to “the young” in an effort to reveal to them the insufficiency of the various teachings that have hitherto been received by them. These received teachings are “much too confident in human goodness, if not the goodness of creation, and hence too gentle or effeminate.” 267 Machiavelli thus creates a unique vision of the world: “In fact, if it is proper to call prophet the founder of a new social order which is all-comprehensive and not merely political or military, then Machiavelli is a prophet.” 268

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265. Strauss, Thoughts, 10.
266. Strauss, Thoughts, 80.
267. Strauss, Thoughts, 81.
268. Strauss, Thoughts, 83.
Machiavelli’s discovery is of a truth that is in accordance with the nature of things, which positions him to accomplish a special kind of conquest: “the discoverer of the all-important truth can conquer posthumously.” It is this correspondence between truth and nature that makes possible the relation of philosophy to opinion. Opinions which coincide with the “higher” levels of nature are “truer” than those that correspond with the “lower.” When they supplant opinions, they erode these opinions and make room for a social and political order that is founded on truth.

In the essay “Political Philosophy and History,” Strauss takes up the relation between philosophy (or the quest for comprehensive reflection) and history, noting that:

The typical historicism of the twentieth century demands that each generation reinterpret the past on the basis of its own experience and with a view to its own future. It is no longer contemplative, but activistic, and it attaches to that study of the past which is guided by the anticipated future, or which starts from and returns to the analysis of the present, a crucial philosophic significance: it expects from it the ultimate guidance for political life. In the realm of politics the demand for contemplation and reflection is rendered unnecessary by the speed of politics and the need for action; political decision-making is seemingly always outpacing the ability of citizens to engage in dialogue and discussion. The doctrine of executive power is devised in response to this need for swift and decisive action; in the present discourse of political leadership it is executive power that holds the reins of decision-making. This results in an uneasy amalgamation of democracy with leadership, a tension that is said to be held at bay by the separation of powers. The relationship of intellectuals to democracy remains just as problematic, though, with regard to the idea of the separation of powers. Even if the legislature


270. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 161. This distinction takes place in a discussion of Tacitus and the way Machiavelli mediates between a contradiction in opinions between Tacitus and Machiavelli. In order to “save both opinions, Machiavelli makes a distinction.”

271. Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” in *What is Political Philosophy?*, 59.
is the legitimate means by way of which the people crafts law and the office holder is the legitimate executor of the law, where does that leave scholars? Benjamin Barber exemplifies one common way of thinking when he remarks that:

…the real strength of democracy is that it rarely takes the voices of scholars too seriously, and the real strength of scholars is that the prudent among them recognize that nobody has elected them to do anything and that their work demands a certain autonomy from practical politics on which both their credibility and perhaps even their safety depend.272

Compare this with the way Strauss describes philosophy:

Philosophy transcends the city, and the worth of the city depends ultimately on its openness, or deference, to philosophy. Yet the city cannot fulfill its function if it is not closed to philosophy as well as open to it; the city is necessarily the cave. The city understood in its closedness to philosophy is the demos in the philosophic sense, i.e., the totality of the citizens who are incapable or unwilling to defer to philosophy273

There are important lessons here for those of us who endeavor to conduct a scientific study of politics. The fact is that “to replace political philosophy by the history of political philosophy means to replace a doctrine which claims to be true by a survey of more or less brilliant errors.”274 Such a view involves the judging of humanity by standards that are by definition subhuman, to fail to account for the whole of which humanity is a part that constitutes that which is “greater” than humanity. It is to relegate nature to the realm of objects meant to serve human needs. It means reading history as “less than” the present because it sees all history as failure. The scientific study of politics must thus understand political philosophy because political philosophy constitutes the origin of social science.

In his defense of the claim that social science, in order to live up to its own pretensions, must understand classical political philosophy as it understood itself, Strauss takes up the question of distortion in the study of history. Against the prevalent claim that all historical

273. Strauss, Thoughts, 296.
274. Strauss, The City and Man, 8.
understanding, by virtue of being tied to its own time, necessarily makes an active distortion of the past, Strauss makes the statement that “…it is hard to see how one can speak of a creative transformation of the original teaching if it is not possible to grasp the original teaching as such.”

His point is that one takes on board the assumption of knowledge of the “original teaching” in order to be able to substantiate such a claim in the first place, thus pointing to its dogmatic (i.e., not proven) status. He nonetheless moves forward from his own assumption, namely that one should bracket one’s viewpoint. This need to bracket or suspend one’s original position in order to appreciate and understand the past on its own terms becomes the basis for an enlarged understanding of social science, one that can potentially even “transcend” the limitations of such a science by virtue of the experience of the scientist: “for he learns to look at things in a manner which is as it were forbidden to the social scientist.”

What is important here is not the “foundational” claim because this is not a claim of knowledge—this is not a project of “first philosophy” or building a structure from the ground up. The claim Strauss is making here depends more on the movement that results from the act of suspending one’s viewpoint; thus, it should be judged on the effects of this movement, or where the process ends up. The result is that a social scientist who transgresses the boundaries of the acceptable comes to take his/her own previous assumptions about the world as a theme of analysis—as the topic of the conversation and thus as a site of potential transformation for the generations to come.

This self-critical stance is vital to the scientific project as such, according to Strauss. It constitutes taking a comprehensive view, of contemplation. What this scientist quickly comes to realize through an engagement with classical political philosophy is that the presuppositions with


which he or she had approached the study of political philosophy are precisely those of modern political philosophy, which are themselves “modifications of the principles of classical political philosophy.”

Our historical context, it turns out, is an embedded one (as historicism has claimed) but the fundamental obfuscation at the root of modern self-understanding is the claim that there is a fundamental difference between modernity and the ancients. This belief in the “break” with the past constitutes a perpetual theme of modernity—it constitutes modern self-understanding. The problem here, though, is that “science cannot teach wisdom.”

Values cannot be discovered in nature through the methods of science and this fact is ignored or covered over by the modern project of enlightenment, resulting in the idea of progress that is so pervasive:

There are still some people who believe that this predicament will disappear when social science and psychology catch up with physics and chemistry. This belief is wholly unreasonable, for social science and psychology, however perfected, being sciences, can only bring about a still further increase of man’s power; they will enable men to manipulate man still better than ever before; they will as little teach man how to use his power over man or non-man as physics and chemistry do. The people who indulge this hope have not grasped the bearing of the distinction between facts and values.

Science as technique can only be employed in the service of manipulation and control. This theme of the “conquest of nature” is a pervasive one in Thoughts on Machiavelli and we will return to it below. Here, what is important to note is that there is a presumed “leap” in the history of humanity that severs any connection with the remote past. Strauss sees a similar logic at work in the self-understanding of science, according to which “the scientific

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280. One common example of this kind of thinking is the structure of the notion of the social contract; here there is a “state of nature” that pre-exists the social contract, which embodies a leap into civil society.
understanding implies then a break with the pre-scientific understanding, yet at the same time it remains dependent on the pre-scientific understanding.”281

This idea that scientific understanding involves an ambiguous relationship with the past is isomorphic with the claim that Strauss is making about historicism. In both cases, the attempt to “break” with the conditions that prevail is both dependent on those conditions and simultaneously a break with them. But the place of this break is strictly theoretical—it is contemplative. It brings with it no imperative for action, no imported desires and/or goals. There seems to be a necessity to transgress for the sake of such transgression itself:

If it is true that every complete society necessarily recognizes something about which it is absolutely forbidden to laugh, we may say that the determination to transgress that prohibition sanza alcuno rispetto, is of the essence of Machiavelli’s intention.282

To be self-critical means, in these terms, to be free; it involves severing oneself from the past and/or one’s inherited dispositions and dogmas at the level of thought. And while these practices of self-criticism are certainly practices—and not purely thought exercises that are not embodied or linked to the world—they are theoretical practices.283 When Strauss discusses philosophy as a “way of life” he has in mind these theoretical practices as exercises that bring about certain results. These results are, however, not essentially linked with philosophy in the sense that philosophy should be seen in service to the passions, which would be a modern understanding of philosophy: “According to the modern project, philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable; it was to be in the service of man’s estate’ it was to be cultivated for the sake of human power; it was to enable man

282. Strauss, Thoughts, 40.
283. Here, Strauss and Louis Althusser come aground on the same problem of attempting to describe philosophy beyond the theory/practice divide.
to become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.”

Philosophy, in the classical sense, is contemplative and proud. This pride seems to be sourced in the fact that it refuses to submit to the authority of anything but itself—reason.

**Return to the Beginning: Original Terror and Philosophy**

…for us physicists believe the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.

—Albert Einstein

Machiavelli’s novelty is a topic that brings us directly to the question of foundation. On one level, we have the rhetoric of Machiavelli. Strauss spends much time on this register. Because Machiavelli is an innovator, who desires to implement “new modes and orders,” his rhetoric has the character of fervid exhortation, encouraging his readers to adopt a new way of living. This presents him with a particular challenge, however. How does one appeal to those traditions and orders that one seeks to change? Because any new thing is categorically suspect, from the view of the ignorant masses, the innovator faces a unique problem: “the innovator arouses the indignation of the overpowering multitude, which clings to the established order.”

Therefore, he must walk a fine line between creation and discovery, just as Machiavelli teaches that his insight into the ancient modes and orders is both a discovery and a creation. It is a discovery in the sense that he finds in the ancients an adequate first try at what is to become a much larger

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285. This quote comes from a letter that Albert Einstein wrote to the family of his friend Besso. For the context and implications from the perspective of a contemporary physicist see <http://www.everythingforever.com/einstein.htm>.

286. This style has been emulated by many neoconservatives, who seem to revel in self-references to Machiavelli. For one particularly impassioned treatise, see Carnes Lord, The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

287. Strauss, Thoughts, 34.
project. The goal here is to bring that which was accidentally discovered into the necessity of discourse, to make it palatable for “the masses,” and to show how “a polity similar to the Roman and better than the Roman can be deliberately constructed. What hitherto has been a lucky accident, and therefore essentially defective, can become from now on, on the new continent discovered by Machiavelli, the goal of rational desire and action.”

The linking up of rational desire and political power becomes the defining characteristic of Machiavelli’s political philosophy.

Part of the Machiavellian mode of innovation, then, works on “the masses,” in a sense. It seeks to work from existing traditions but ultimately tries to destabilize them in order to make room for a new foundation. For example, Strauss resolves the interpretive difficulty presented by the apparently incongruous nature of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* by arguing that the two works are the expression of the same object when seen from two different perspectives. Here, the distinction is eminently practical—between the actual princes and those who aspire to be princes. As Strauss makes clear, the distinction between “kings and tyrants” is one that does not exist from the perspective of the actual prince.

In his now infamous extraction of the significance of the number twenty-six, Strauss reveals an innovation—a “concealed blasphemy”—and argues that by concealing this blasphemy (“God is a tyrant”) from view Machiavelli has drawn his reader (those readers astute enough to figure it out, anyway) into complicity. Machiavelli has compelled his reader to “think” the blasphemy “by himself.”

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But the second register of Machiavelli’s thought that spins out of his innovation is his conception of politics. Here, one can not get away from the talk of founding and origins, of Machiavelli’s constant fascination with renewal and beginning. This discussion, in the context of Strauss’s arguments regarding Machiavelli’s true purpose, culminates in a claim that both reinforces and simultaneously destabilizes the concept of “foundation” in Machiavelli’s understanding of the origin of republics. Because foundations are in need of constant renewal, they are more like an ongoing project rather than a completed masterpiece. Here, the discussion slides quickly into a judgment about the nature of rulership as innovation: “once one realizes this [need for constant renewal], one sees that the founders of a republic are its leading men throughout the ages, or its ruling class.”

Whether in religions or in republics, founders are a class unto themselves precisely because the institution requires a constant effort and it is this effort which gives continuity to a class. Those who can accomplish this renewal walk in the footprints of the original founder, on a daily basis.

The question remains, however— can we really take Strauss at his word here? Remembering that Nietzsche is a pre-eminent influence upon Strauss in his formative years, one can see its echo in a statement like this: “As far as founders are concerned, the distinction between virtuous heroes and extremely able criminals has ceased to exist.” Furthermore, and contrary to Gottfried’s position, which figures Straussians as defenders of this founding moment for purposes of rationalism and as a means of avoiding other uncomfortable questions, here we can’t help but run aground on the question of elitism. As is well known, Strauss professed many

291. Strauss, Thoughts, 44.

292. Strauss, Thoughts, 47. There is also an extensive footnote on this topic on 309-310. Here, Strauss examines Machiavelli’s use of the examples of Agathocles, Cesare Borgia, and Nabis.
times that he felt liberal democracy was the “best” regime. Undoubtedly, many self-proclaimed Straussians believe him and continue to push this argument. I would not attempt to refute claims that can clearly point to such good textual evidence. However, there is even stronger evidence to support an anti-liberal, elitist reading of Strauss. One cannot easily dismiss either of these stances by saying that in one case Strauss is being ironic while holding that in the other case he was not being ironic. Ultimately, I believe Strauss sees himself as operating beyond these categories; just as “the distinction between virtuous heroes and extremely able criminals has ceased to exist,” so too has the distinction between the “liberal” and the “anti-liberal” in the thought of Leo Strauss. How does he accomplish this feat? What is to be gained by following Strauss down this path? In order to begin to answer these questions we must return to the beginning.

Machiavelli’s “return to the beginning means return to the primeval or original terror which precedes every man-made terror, which explains why the founder must use terror and which enables him to use terror. Machiavelli’s return to the beginning means return to the terror inherent in man’s situation, to man’s essential unprotectedness.” Thus, the doctrine of natural right, in its effort to put nature as the foundation of political society, means something very specific: the primacy of terror. In the penultimate passage from this lengthy discussion of Machiavelli and the “beginning,” Strauss argues that Machiavelli’s discussion brings us to this conclusion:

The primacy of Love must be replaced by the primacy of Terror if republics are to be established in accordance with nature and on the basis of knowledge of nature. The beginnings of men were imperfect and low. Man is exposed, and not protected, essentially and from the beginning. Therefore the perfection envisaged by both the Bible and classical philosophy is impossible. But for the same reason for which perfection, and in particular the initial as well as the ultimate Paradise is impossible, there cannot be a Hell. Man cannot rise above early and earthy humanity and therefore he ought not even to aspire beyond

293. Strauss, Thoughts, 167.
humanity. Such aspiration merely leads to the most terrible and wholly unnecessary inhumanity of man to man.\textsuperscript{294}

Machiavelli’s break with both the Bible and classical philosophy resides in this discussion of what we might provisionally call the axiom of unintended consequences. This axiom, specific to certain kinds of action, states that those political projects that seek to perfect human beings—those that take the idea of the perfectibility of human nature as their starting point—can only result in failure and “wholly unnecessary inhumanity.” Knowing this, Machiavelli feels compelled, by virtue of his defense of the common good, to act in the world such that he can help to limit these unfortunate and terrible outcomes that are the inevitable result of human good will. This is the basis for Strauss’s provocative claim that Machiavelli initiates a conspiracy of the ages, to recruit a cadre of readers of future generations. But there is a real limit to Machiavelli’s intention: “Machiavelli cannot compel the people to have faith in him. Not only does he completely lack force; he does not even wish to use force.”\textsuperscript{295} The text itself cannot compel a result—it lacks authority or its own “arms.” Instead, it must rely on the authority granted to it by the reader, authority which can only truly be secured through the exercise of reason. This is why Strauss can claim that Machiavelli’s new modes and orders are “supported only by reason.”\textsuperscript{296} These modes and orders stand in a distinctly temporal relation to those to which they respond—they are post-Christian and “emerge essentially in opposition to specific old modes and orders which are supported only by authority and force. Machiavelli’s critique of the old modes and orders therefore takes on the character of a war waged by an unarmed man, of

\textsuperscript{294} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 167.

\textsuperscript{295} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 168. This is a strange teacher of evil indeed!

\textsuperscript{296} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 171.
a spiritual war.”297 This spiritual warfare is conducted by four tactics: it keeps enemies divided; it appeals to the common good; it aims only at converting a “few;” and it operates through the text.298

The written word, it would seem, is a kind of non-violent civil disobedience. Indeed, Strauss goes so far as to compare Machiavelli to one of the most renowned pacifists in all of human history:

*The Prince*, which is dedicated to an actual prince had led up to the suggestion that Machiavelli imitates Moses, the armed prophet. The *Discourses*, which are dedicated to potential princes, lead up to the suggestion that Machiavelli imitates Jesus, the unarmed prophet. Yet Machiavelli combines the imitation of Jesus with the imitation of Fabius. Fabius, in contradistinction to Decius, judged the slow assault to be preferable and reserved his impetus for the end; choosing the safer way, he gained a more gladdening victory, remaining alive, than the victory which Decius gained by his death. For Decius, imitating his father, sacrificed himself for the expiation of the Romans. Besides, whereas the victory of Christianity was ascribed to the unconquerable decree of Divine Providence, Machiavelli’s hope rests on his assumption that human prudence can conquer Fortuna.299

By way of analogy and reason, we are lead to the conclusion that Machiavelli’s strategy of spiritual warfare, learned as it was by the Christian victory over paganism, is a superior form of propaganda that is designed to bring about the willful coincidence of philosophy and power. Machiavelli is tacitly said to be superior in strategy to Jesus because his victory does not depend on his own death. It founds itself on the original terror that accompanies human life as such, and thus seeks to span the generations. Looking at modernity as the result of Machiavelli’s success thus presents us with an awe-inspiring vision of human capability. But, before we can remain too content with this conclusion, and enlist ourselves in the ranks of Machiavelli’s new army, the final sentence of the third chapter yet again problematizes this conception of the Enlightenment —asking us to consider whether “that Enlightenment deserves its name or whether its true name

is Obfuscation.”³⁰⁰ And thus while showing clearly the relationship between Machiavelli and modernity with a sense of awe, Strauss nonetheless encourages us to keep thinking and not to rest at this convenient plateau.

Before continuing with a discussion of the final chapter of Thoughts on Machiavelli it is worthwhile to pause and consider the status of such venerated traditions as the Enlightenment, as far as some of Strauss’s other writings can help to make clear for us. In discussing the transition in educational practices that accompanied the process of modernity, Strauss says “In order to become the willing recipients of the new gifts, the people had to be enlightened. This enlightenment is the core of the new education. It is the same as the diffusion or popularization of the new science.”³⁰¹ With this development, coupled with the instrumentalization of morality, the stage was set for the most important phase of modern life: “The devising of the right kind of institutions and their implementation came to be regarded as more important than the formation of character by liberal education.”³⁰² If we approach this essay with the question in mind as to what, exactly, is being obfuscated by this enlightening, the answer seems to be natural right. And perhaps this is in part correct. But there is another obfuscation, one that seems more important to Strauss.

Science and democracy, according to Strauss, have a kind of common tap root in universality, which we might distill into a concept of method. “The enlightenment was destined to become universal enlightenment. It appeared that the difference of natural gifts did not have the importance which the tradition had ascribed to it; method proved to be the great equalizer of

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³⁰⁰ Strauss, Thoughts, 173.
naturally unequal minds.”303 In such a division of labor, even if science were to be driven by a few great minds the results could always be translated into a language that anyone could understand. Science demanded of itself that it be universal. Science was brought to bear on human institutions, apparently linking up progress in technique with political organization. The antagonism between the universal mission of science and the doctrine of natural right could not obtain forever. Eventually, in the narrative told by Strauss, wisdom and science parted ways and philosophy, with its inherent antagonism to political life, became obfuscated. It is very important to note that this is the relation between wisdom or philosophy and the universal form of political life that begins with the assumption of the infinite malleability of human nature. What is the role of political power on this terrain? In his discussion of fear in On Tyranny, Strauss states that “The fatherland, or the city, is good for the citizens because it liberates them from fear. This does not mean that it abolishes fear; it rather replaces one kind of fear (the fear of enemies, evil-doers, and slaves) by another (the fear of the laws or of the law-enforcing authorities).”304 The fear of the law thus supplants the original terror, and draws its power from that source. Modern political power, no matter whether we claim it is sourced to a liberal state or to the Communist Party, is founded on fear and trembling.

This is the hinge by way of which we swing into the final, penultimate chapter of Thoughts on Machiavelli. It certainly leaves one feeling a bit adrift, wondering as to Strauss’s ultimate purpose and troubled by the way in which one can so easily be lead into conspiracy or even heresy. One cannot help but wonder: if Strauss reveals Machiavelli’s intention as nothing short of total revolution, then what is Strauss’s agenda in revealing this plan to us? Are we being

enlisted in some kind of mastermind scheme, as the unwitting accomplices in a scheme of epochal proportions? Or are we being enlightened so that we can be inoculated against such a threat? It is the status of our own fear here that is, self-reflexively, acknowledged and worked into the plan of the work. In arguing that Machiavelli uses “original terror” to his benefit, Strauss compels us to look deep into our own soul, to perform a kind of diagnosis on our self in an effort to establish the truth of Machiavelli’s claim on our allegiance. Are we truly the followers of Machiavelli, the teacher of evil?

It is important to note that it seems possible that philosophy takes up a unique position with relation to this “original terror.” The critical, semi-detached part of the reader who contemplates Strauss’s intent is faced with two distinct possibilities: either philosophy (or philosophical education) can serve as a kind of antidote against the effects of this terror, or certain kinds of people, who, by nature possess the right disposition or “soul,” are able to withstand the effects of this terror and thereby engage in philosophical work. Which one is Strauss arguing? What kind of people are we—his readers? Are we up to the task of interpretation, when the bar is set this high? Are we, as modern readers who lack a certain kind of education, already limited in our ability to understand Strauss and thus condemned to ask these self-critical questions, unable to answer them for ourselves? The beginning lines of the fourth chapter will not be of much help in allaying these fears. Instead, let us turn to the last lines.
A Return to End Times

...there is, consubstantially to the time that passes, a time that does not pass, a trial that is reenacted in terms ever new....

—Claude Lefort

Let us turn to the very end of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Here I don’t mean the last words of the fourth chapter, but instead the last words of the text, those that are contained in the last end note. Here, Strauss directs our attention to Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, specifically Book II, chapter five. He likewise directs us to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Xenophon, as well as, in the last instance, to his own note 53 from chapter two. That note, a lengthy discussion of Machiavelli’s treatment of Agathocles and Cesare Borgia, points to the fact that Machiavelli questions the “traditional distinction between the criminal and the non-criminal as far as founders are concerned.”

This topic, however, seems divorced from the references to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Xenophon that appear next to it. Here, the topic is the relationship between innovation and political stability. What is the connection between these two topics? Writing on these very same passages in *On Tyranny*, in another end note, Strauss states:

In *Hiero* 9.9-10 Simonides recommends honors for those who discover something useful for the city. There is a connection between this suggestion, which entails the acceptance of many frequent changes, and the nature of tyrannical government as government not limited by laws. When Aristotle discusses the same suggestion which had been made by Hippodamus, he rejects it as dangerous to political stability and he is quite naturally led to state the principle that the “rule of law” requires as infrequent changes of laws as possible (*Politics* 1268a6-8, b 22ff.). The rule of laws as the classics understood it can exist only in a “conservative” society. On the other hand, the speedy introduction of improvements of all kinds is obviously compatible with beneficent tyranny.

In this note, which cites the same passages as the final note from *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss gives us a clue that can help us to interpret the final pages of that book. We are fortunate


306. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 345. The last note is number 222.


308. Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 120, note 46. For an discussion of the relation of this passage and the text of which it is a part to neoconservatism see Xenos, *Cloaked in Virtue*, 98-100.
that Strauss comments on these same passages, as this makes trying to guess “what he meant” by referencing them a bit more straightforward. Before we can return to this issue of the relationship between innovation and political stability, though, it would be wise to consult Machiavelli himself, namely Book II, Chapter 5 of the *Discourses*. This chapter is entitled: “That the Variation of Sects and Languages, Together with the Accident of Floods or Plague, Eliminates the Memories of Things.”

This chapter is about whether human society is eternal or whether it should be believed that the world is only several thousand years old, as some interpreters of the Bible have asserted. It is in this chapter that Machiavelli makes the claim, so important to Strauss, that “these sects vary two or three times in five or in six thousand years….”

This is ultimately a claim about memory and history—Machiavelli declares that it is the cyclic nature of the change in “sects” that demands an erasure of the previous period of history, because when a new religion emerges “its first concern is to extinguish the old to give itself reputation.”

Beyond human-directed epochal change, though, there is the possibility that natural disasters of epic proportion could result in a “break” in the historical record. The kinds of cataclysms that might occur through more natural means are those that “come from heaven” like plague and famine, or perhaps floods. He declares that floods are the most universal form of cataclysm because they leave in their wake only the “mountain men” who are “coarse” and who have no “knowledge of antiquity.”

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310. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 139. Strauss mentions this passage many times in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*; see 32, 142, 170, 202. He turns this off-the-cuff claim by Machiavelli into a natural law as to the life span of any given religion.

311. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 139.

312. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 139.

313. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 139-140.
flood that covered the Earth in water, Machiavelli points to the fact that Christianity has sought to establish itself as the only historical record. An event the likes of which is described in the Bible would inaugurate a new era because the previous era would have been erased from memory. Almost. In a cryptic passage that sounds like a kind of biographical statement, Machiavelli proclaims “And if among them someone is saved who has knowledge of it [antiquity], to make a reputation and a name for himself he conceals it and perverts it in his mode so that what he has wished to write alone, and nothing else, remains for his successors.” With this statement Machiavelli covers the alternative possibility—that perhaps a single person with knowledge of antiquity might survive a global cataclysm. Even then, that person would presumably be motivated by glory and act in self-interest, making the thought of the ancients known in his own name. Strauss explains this passage as Machiavelli’s way of ascribing the Bible its human origins. What all of this discussion illustrates is that the “source” of an idea is shrouded in darkness—even when we think we discover the origin of an idea in the writing of a given author we should keep in mind that the obscurity that attends such a project of discovery cannot be eliminated. Thus, Strauss is careful not to attribute to Machiavelli any truly substantive innovation. We must be reminded of where Thoughts on Machiavelli began: Machiavelli was not the first to express the opinions that he purveys, but he was indeed alone in daring to “utter the evil doctrine in a book in his own name.”

314. Machiavelli, Discourses, 140. Strauss references this quote on 146 of Thoughts; this passage is directed toward interpreting the Bible, specifically the tales of the epic flood and the story of Noah. Strauss points out that Machiavelli tacitly criticizes Noah and his family, translating this passage as follows: “all rude mountaineers who do not possess knowledge of any antiquity and therefore cannot leave such knowledge to their posterity. And if someone who did have such knowledge were to save himself, he would conceal that knowledge in order to make himself a reputation and a name and pervert that knowledge after his fashion.” Strauss thus erases the reference to writing that animates Machiavelli’s account,

315. Strauss, Thoughts, 147.

316. Strauss, Thoughts, 10.
This solitude in foundation thus obtains in both the establishment of a state and of a religion. In putting the ancient doctrines in his own name, Machiavelli becomes responsible for them, for carrying them on into modernity. He takes on the persona of a survivor of the flood—one who acts as a vessel for the transmission of a forgotten tradition. Thus the appearance of progress and the continuity that it presumes covers over the contingency that accompanies any cataclysm: any presumed continuity between epochs is severed by the self-interest of the “someone” who survives the cataclysm. A radical individualism emerges, on which Machiavelli grounds his entire argument about human nature. The survivor seeks to pass off the knowledge of antiquity as his own and thereby tie his personal reputation to this legacy, thus securing himself a place in history—at least until the next reshuffling of the deck. This narrative also sets the stage for the seemingly inevitable decline of Christianity, which at the time of Machiavelli’s writing was presumed by many to be at the height of its powers.

Strauss is undoubtedly reading into this chapter his own thesis about Machiavelli’s obfuscation—that Machiavelli seeks to eradicate the previous period in order to give himself glory. If we take Strauss seriously that Machiavelli used the example of Christianity to concoct his own trans-generational scheme to change the values of human history, then the Enlightenment (or Modernity) is necessarily an obfuscation whilst simultaneously being an elucidation. Some history is being repressed, shuttered over and forgotten, while new modes and orders are being erected. Machiavelli’s relationship to antiquity thus becomes ambiguous—because we are the followers of Machiavelli those modes and orders that we attribute to him are possibly to be attributed to more ancient authors. But because Machiavelli has successfully “erased” the presence of those authors from his texts, taking over their viewpoint and inhabiting
it in a manner that suits the founder of a new sect, he obfuscates this lineage. This is why Strauss qualifies the notion that Machiavelli is working to obfuscate the status of philosophy.317 The idea that one of Strauss’s central teachings was that modernity represents the “loss” of philosophy proper thus deserves an important correction. It is the meaning of philosophy that has been altered in Machiavelli’s thought, which we have inherited.318 This puts a different spin on the notion of Machiavelli’s intention:

Instead of saying that the status of philosophy becomes obscured in Machiavelli’s thought, it is perhaps better to say that in his thought the meaning of philosophy is undergoing a change. The classics understood the moral-political phenomena in the light of man’s highest virtue or perfection, the life of the philosopher or the contemplative life. The superiority of peace to war or of leisure to business is a reflection of the superiority of thinking to doing or making. Solutions of the political problem which are altogether satisfactory to the good citizen prove to be inadequate solely because they make men oblivious to man’s highest perfection.319

All of this discussion raises serious issues about where we place Strauss in his relation to Machiavelli and to history. Does Strauss see himself as performing the same kind of reading of Machiavelli as Machiavelli performs of the ancients? If Strauss is taking the imminent threat of nuclear cataclysm seriously, as nearly everyone was in the 1950s, then it seems possible that he is attempting to codify a kind of time capsule, a text that will contain all that is necessary to rekindle the tradition of political philosophy after the flood. But can a written text actually accomplish this goal?

Returning to the text, we might begin to reorient ourselves to its teaching and test our various skeptical hypotheses. If we take up the question of the relationship between political stability and technological innovation with this crucial chapter of Machiavelli’s in mind, we can

317. Strauss, Thoughts, 295.

318. We might apply a similar formula to the idea of liberalism. As the title of one of Strauss’s works, Liberalism: Ancient and Modern, makes clear, liberalism is not solely a modern invention. It seems likely that Strauss is implying that it is the meaning of liberalism that has changed in modernity, and part of that meaning is the attempt to establish itself as breaking from the ancient past.

approach the end of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* equipped to make sense of the tangible ambiguity that permeates these final passages.

The final passage of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is worth quoting in full. In order to move slowly, the final paragraph will be divided up into manageable blocks in the pages that follow, interspersed with commentary and interpretation, befitting the style of ancient philosophers. We begin with a discussion of Machiavelli’s “necessity”:

The necessity which spurred on Machiavelli and his great successors spent itself some time ago. What remains of their effort no longer possesses the evidence which it possessed while their adversary was powerful; it must now be judged entirely on its intrinsic merits. Modern man as little as pre-modern man can escape imitating nature as he understands nature. Imitating an expanding universe, modern man has ever more expanded and thus become ever more shallow. Confronted by this amazing process, we cannot cease wondering as to what essential defect of classical political philosophy could possibly have given rise to the modern venture as an enterprise that was meant to be reasonable.\(^{320}\)

The adversary here is undoubtedly Christianity—in particular the Church that has hobbled Italy. But Machiavelli’s project must stand on its own feet; despite being constructed in an antithetical manner, it has a thesis of its own. This thesis is actually an image of nature, seen as the defining characteristic of modernity. Strauss confronts the “shallowness” of modernity, pointing to its conception of nature as the driving metaphor in the prevailing relation of man to nature. When faced with the fact of our expansive shallowness, we cannot help but marvel that such a flawed project was at one time thought to be completely reasonable—even necessary. Our status as moderns is coming into question, as the premises with which we approached Machiavelli have been stripped away. This puts us in a unique position relative to modernity:

We disregard the many answers which assume the truth of the modern premises. The classics were for almost all practical purposes what now are called conservatives. In contradistinction to many present day conservatives, however, they knew that one cannot be distrustful of political or social change without being distrustful of technological change. Therefore they did not favor the encouragement of inventions, except perhaps in tyrannies, i.e., in regimes the change of which is manifestly desirable. They demanded the strict moral-political supervision of inventions; the good and wise city will determine which inventions are to be made use of and which are to be suppressed.\(^{321}\)

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These conservatives knew something that we do not: they knew that technological change produces unintended consequences, and thus that the stimulation of invention has an inherently destabilizing tendency on political order. Remembering what Strauss argued about this situation in the passage quoted above (from *On Tyranny*) we are in a position to juxtapose the rule of law and technological necessity. A conservative society, one steeped in tradition and capable of guiding the pace of technological development, can rely on the rule of law. But a society that is free to develop technology will necessarily impose upon itself the erosion of the rule of law. According to the ancients, the censorship of invention was the necessary remedy to this dilemma, but it ran into a hard limit:

Yet they were forced to make one crucial exception. They had to admit the necessity of encouraging inventions pertaining to the art of war. They had to bow to the necessity of defense or of resistance. This means however that they had to admit that the moral-political supervision of inventions by the good and wise city is necessarily limited by the need of adaptation to the practices of morally inferior cities which scorn such supervision because their end is acquisition or ease. They had to admit in other words that in an important respect the good city has to take its bearings by the practice of bad cities, or that the bad impose their law on the good.322

The coercion of the “bad” upon the “good” by means of arms race—this is the theme to which we return in the final breaths of Strauss’s work on Machiavelli. If a reader is looking for a “teaching” about the world political situation as faced by the United States at this moment in history, there is something of the sort to be found here. What emerges is a kind of Cold War lesson, pried from the grip of ancient thinkers:

Only in this point does Machiavelli’s contention that the good cannot be good because there are so many bad ones prove to possess a foundation. We recognize the consideration which we have sketched in his overstatement that good arms are the necessary and sufficient condition of good laws or in his eventual identification of the most excellent man with the most excellent captain. The difficulty implied in the admission that inventions pertaining to the art of war must be encouraged is the only one which supplies a basis for Machiavelli’s criticism of classical political philosophy.323


If we inquire as to the basis of Machiavelli’s quarrel with ancient political philosophy, we can find it in his recognition of the need for technological innovation, especially as it relates to warfare and the ability of a political entity to defend itself against aggression. His “overstatement” about the relationship between good laws and good arms is meant to point the way toward the “basis” for his criticism of classical political philosophy. But Machiavelli’s “break” with classical political philosophy is not much of a break, since the ancients themselves “had to admit” that the “bad impose their law on the good,” as discussed in the previous passage.

Thus, Strauss is forced to offer a hypothetical rebuttal:

One could say however that it is not inventions as such but the use of science for such inventions which renders impossible the good city in the classical sense. From the point of view of the classics, such use of science is excluded by the nature of science as a theoretical pursuit. Besides, the opinion that there occur periodic cataclysms in fact took care of any apprehension regarding an excessive development of technology or regarding the danger that man’s inventions might become his masters and destroyers.

This is a crucial turning point in the text. Strauss, in the guise of a hypothetical rebuttal, offers us a glimpse of his own voice. But this voice blends with Machiavelli, when we have in mind Book II, chapter five of the Discourses. There is a kind of serenity in the background, against the onslaught of nuclear armageddon. The hope seems to be that “the good city” can be reimagined with relation to a theoretical science and an understanding of history as punctuated by periodic disasters. The very nature of science itself, as intrinsically tied to the development of weapons and as the master/destroyer of mankind, is called into question. The necessary link between modernity and science, which we take for granted so easily, is broken. We get a glimpse between the blinds that we usually frame our vision with: if science is a purely theoretical endeavor, one that is not necessarily tied to the techniques by which inventions like atomic weapons or jet engines are constructed, then the relation of science to the city can be

324. Strauss, Thoughts, 299.
reconceived. The link between wisdom and science, broken centuries ago, might be reforged. This involves changing the metaphor by which we describe nature—we must give up the ever-expanding universe for the sake of a different, more cyclic image:

> Viewed in this light, the natural cataclysms appear as a manifestation of the beneficence of nature. Machiavelli himself expresses this opinion of the natural cataclysms which has been rendered incredible by the experience of the last centuries. It would seem that the notion of the beneficence of nature or of the primacy of the Good must be restored by being rethought through a return to the fundamental experiences from which it is derived. For while “philosophy must beware of wishing to be edifying,” it is of necessity edifying.\(^\text{325}\)

Philosophy takes up the role of instructing, in a moral or perhaps intellectual fashion, though it should beware of taking itself too seriously in this regard. If we ask the question “who” has the “experience of the last centuries,” where we might find such experience, we can only consult ourselves. When reading the *Discourses* Book II, chapter five, do we find that Machiavelli’s viewpoint is literally incredible? Are we confronted with a stance that strikes us as alien, impossible to understand? Strauss also subtly elides the “beneficence of nature” and the “primacy of the Good,” thereby equating both primacy with beneficence and nature with goodness. What is good, it would seem, is natural. But the very idea of what is natural is, itself, called into question. If we perceive nature to be cold, uncaring, expansive and empty, perhaps cruel and intolerant of mistakes, we are not talking about the same nature—such definitions come to define us.

It is worth noting as well that the note about Xenophon from *On Tyranny* references the possibility of beneficent tyranny.\(^\text{326}\) Perhaps, to our ears, the idea of beneficent tyranny is as incredible as the idea of beneficent nature. Such a tyranny is, despite being “manifestly” in need of change, capable of guiding innovation. Is there a teaching about tyranny that Strauss is

\(^{325}\) Strauss, *Thoughts*, 299.

\(^{326}\) Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 120, note 46, referenced above.
pointing us towards? Consulting the chapter of *On Tyranny* entitled “The Teaching Concerning Tyranny” we find that it opens with the assertion that tyranny is “essentially a faulty political order” and that this means that the teaching about the subject has two parts. This is a discussion of “pathology” and “therapeutics.” It is a theoretical science about the nature of tyranny, the problems it entails, and ways to mitigate or cure those undesirable elements. But, lest we think this too easy, Strauss closes this first paragraph with a warning:

> Nevertheless, a certain ambiguity remains, an ambiguity ultimately due not to the unsolved riddles implied in many individual passages of the *Hiero* but to the fact that a perfectly lucid and unambiguous connection between content and form, between a general teaching and a contingent event (e.g., a conversation between two individuals) is impossible. 327

On the terrain of science, this declaration of the intractability of ambiguity is aimed at those who look for axiomatic truths about politics. Nomothetic understanding, which seeks to tie together general law and particular case, is declared to be impossible. The salient ambiguity is not a product of the text itself, but of “the fact” that establishing an “unambiguous connection between content and form” is literally impossible. Strauss points to the contingency of the event that constitute the conversation—a particular event recorded in the form of a dialogue. Connecting this up with a “general teaching” is rendered impossible by this constitutive ambiguity. Science must seek a different mode of understanding nature.

In part, this ambiguity seems to be a product of language. A detailed discussion of Strauss’s position on language would doubtless be helpful but this is not possible within the confines of this chapter. Here, it suffices to note that Strauss discusses the relationship of philosophy to rhetoric in the final chapter of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*; here Strauss notes the distinction between Machiavelli’s conception of philosophy and that of the classics with regard

to the necessity of rhetoric. Alluding to Plato’s metaphor of the cave, Strauss notes that the classic understanding of the city entails a separation between the *demos* and the philosophers:

The city understood in its closedness to philosophy is the *demos* in the philosophic sense, i.e., the totality of the citizens who are incapable or unwilling to defer to philosophy. The philosophers and the *demos* in the sense indicated are separated by a gulf; their ends differ radically. The gulf can be bridged only by a noble rhetoric, by a certain kind of noble rhetoric which we may call for the time being accusatory or punitive rhetoric. It cannot do more than to sketch its outlines. The execution must be left to the orators or poets.328

This conception differs radically from Machiavelli’s, which “takes its bearings by how men live as distinguished from how they ought to live; it despises the concern with imagined republics and imagined principalities.”329 Machiavelli’s philosophy “ceases to be in need of rhetoric” and its goal is to “relieve man’s estate or to increase man’s power or to guide man toward the rational society, the bond and the end of which is enlightened self-interest or the comfortable self-preservation of each of its members. The cave becomes the ‘substance.’”330 The metaphor crystallizes into matter, into substance.

The word “edifying” is also a metaphor: it comes from the Latin *aedificare* or “build”, which is itself a composite of *aedis* (dwelling) and *facere* (make).331 There is undoubtedly a deep resonance here with the German word *Bildung* as well, by which we understand culture as education, and which finds its cognate in English as “building.”332 This manner of philosophy does not seem esoteric or isolated from the *polis*. It seems to occupy a unique, if not privileged, position with regard to popular opinion and what we commonly think of as culture. It challenges us to reframe that conception, to think of culture as (potentially) deliberately constructed rather

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331. Apple Dictionary Version 2.2.3(118.5), Apple Inc.
than the (inevitable) haphazard result of contingent events beyond any human agency.

Philosophy “builds” a dwelling fit for human habitation—it provides a conversation about the “timeless” questions of human life, situating us in relation to history and ourselves. In the moment of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, amidst the alarms of unimaginable genocide and the shambling corpses of the Gulag, the kind of building that Strauss sees fit to construct takes as its foundation an ancient form of experience. These “fundamental” experiences, from which is derived the idea of the “beneficence of nature,” involve a rethinking of these derived ideas by way of return. Thus, Machiavelli’s notion of the beneficence of nature and the tidal, periodic way in which civilizations come and go, is a notion that must be retrieved. We must somehow overcome our incredulity that one could see history in such a fashion, that such an idea is not only plausible but perhaps preferable. We can recognize the necessity of its retrieval through an analysis of our own way of looking at the world, which itself can only be revealed through an encounter with Machiavelli’s thought. *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is thus no more than a roadmap to this idea: a preliminary map that sketches out the landscape. The presentation of Machiavelli’s thought “could not help” in showing that “philosophy and its status is obfuscated not only in Machiavelli’s teaching but in his thought as well.”

Our return involves bringing something new to our reading of history, rather than the continuation of a nostalgic excavation of museum-quality artifacts.

To summarize this point: rather than seeking a conquest of nature, somehow a return to the beneficence of nature is to be sought—which involves embracing the notion of natural cataclysms because these periodic catastrophes prevent the absolute tyranny of technology from

coming to master or destroy humanity. In this case, absolute slavery to machines would amount
to the total destruction of humanity because there would be no kernel of resistance under the heel
of absolute tyranny. Strauss sees the world through a unique lens indeed: at an existential level,
the threat of Communism (with its emphasis on technological emancipation) and the permanent
disruption of modernity (with its emphasis on novelty) can not truly be distinguished.
Elsewhere, Strauss discusses the fundamental experience that he refers to as the “abyss of
freedom” or “the fact that man is compelled to choose groundlessly; the fundamental experience,
i.e. an experience more fundamental than every science, is the experience of the objective
groundlessness of all principles of thought and action, the experience of nothingness.” One
waypoint on the journey toward these kind of fundamental experiences seems to be
Machiavelli’s text, in particular the Discourses Book II, Chapter 5.

What has been “rendered incredible” by the intervening centuries that isolate us from
Machiavelli is that Machiavelli (in line with the ancients) sees cataclysm as beneficent. He does
not respond with the fear that we find so strangely familiar and comforting in the face of crisis
after crisis, pandemic after pandemic, anxiety after anxiety. What Strauss advocates, in these
final lines, is a “return to the fundamental experiences” from which this very insight as to the
beneficence of nature’s cataclysms has been derived. What kind of experiences are these? How
does one go about having them? There is little clarity here—no description of such experiences
or any indication of what they might be like is to be found. Perhaps it is the need to be certain of
our experience itself that underlies our questioning of this idea:

While ancient political philosophy is first of all the analysis of the experience of the Greek city, modern
political philosophy is first of all, in theoretical terms, a hypothesis and thus, in practical terms, a project,
and, in moral terms, a hope. This project, hope, and enterprise have obtained, all said, an extraordinary

result: the construction and consolidation of modern democracy on both sides of the Atlantic. However, a sort of uncertainty or anxiety shadows this triumphant march. The most clear-sighted or perceptive of the moderns have understood or felt that all the practical successes in the world do not remove from the hypothesis its status as a hypothesis. These informed spirits then ask themselves if modern man lives, and lives more and more, in accordance with the democratic hypothesis or convention, what is its underlying experience? Only if one can draw the contours of an experience proper to modern man can modern politics be said to be truly founded, and thus capable finally of shedding its status as a hypothesis.335

This quote, from an essay by Pierre Manent about the work of Claude Lefort (and Strauss) points us toward the essential difficulty. Such experiences, if they are to meet the criteria of being “fundamental,” must, of necessity, be our own. Our self-understanding as “modern” demands a definition of that which is essentially modern, and the terms of modernity situate this definition in terms of individual experience. Modernity has a long track record of defining itself in opposition to that which came before, in breaking with the past. But it takes within its long view of this past civilizations that never questioned their status as civilizations, that never posited their universality and then proceeded to lose that certainty. Nostalgia then seems to be almost inevitable. Indeed, by closing the book at this juncture Strauss encourages us to return to the beginning, if we are still searching for his authoritative answer to the question that he posed for himself. We remain nonetheless quite sure that such a return is impossible, that once we take our presumptions about the world as questionable there is no end to the spiral of interrogation that grips us. In the face of this realization, we might decide to embark on a quest to find these experiences for ourselves, thus bidding farewell to Strauss and his erstwhile guidance.

But if we are not ready to release Strauss from his obligation and if, in indignant voice, we demand more of him, let us end on the same note which Strauss closed his edifying essay “Perspectives on the Good Society.” In discussing the relationship between oral and written tradition, Strauss writes, citing Gershom Scholem, his longtime friend and correspondent,

“Pharisaic rabbinical Judaism always held that the written Torah must be understood in the light of the oral or unwritten Torah, and the most profound reason for this is that the most profound truth cannot be written and not even said: what Israel heard at Sinai from God Himself ‘was nothing but that [inaudible] *Aleph* with which in the Hebrew text of the Bible the First Commandment begins.”

**Thoughts on Strauss**

Strauss reads Machiavelli in a manner that seems foreign to many contemporary modes of understanding a text. In the first place, he reads *The Prince* and the *Discourses* as parts of a complete whole, a whole which constitutes a fully intentional activity that shaped the future in a profoundly meaningful manner. But, more importantly, he simultaneously reads Machiavelli in a mode that calls into question some of the presumptions that he presumes his readers will possess. He endeavors to take be impartial, to transcend the condition of humanity in the direction of the “superhuman.”

The discussion of Machiavelli and the idea of original terror leads us in the direction of existentialism. Existentialism, which Strauss sees as linked to positivism, sees man as essentially “…in the grip of powers which he cannot master or comprehend, and these powers reveal themselves differently in different historical epochs.” Strauss reveals his reading of Machiavelli to contain an implicit critique of the project of existentialism to build an ethics out of the “abyss of freedom.” No edifice can be constructed on this abyss, the nature of which is to

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be groundless.\textsuperscript{338} The only ethics that will obtain, out of such a project, is the purely subjective ethics of “self-interest.” Modernity is the age of self-interest, brought about (at least in part) by Machiavelli and his comprehensive vision.

Machiavelli founds political order on an idea of “original terror” and shows how state power supplants the original, existential terror that grounds the human condition. His analysis of Christianity condemns the attempt to make human beings good through fear of divine punishment, an enterprise that is doomed to failure. While Christians may be good soldiers, they do not make for excellent men because in order to be excellent there is a necessity to sin. This perspective offers a vantage point from which to judge the alleged superiority of Christian morality, which entails unveiling charity as domination and the pursuit of peace as merely another form of warfare.\textsuperscript{339} Religion, for Machiavelli, is useful for controlling the multitude: “the multitude is ignorant, lacks judgment, and is easily deceived; it is helpless without leaders who persuade or force it to act prudently.”\textsuperscript{340} The way in which it accomplishes this goal is to forge a specific kind of subjectivity, which grounds a relationship between the rulers and the ruled. In this scenario, the rulers are the prudent guides for the hapless masses. Although Strauss does not use the term “subjectivity” in discussing Machiavelli’s view of religion and the conscience, it is nonetheless clear that we are on the terrain of what is commonly thought of as subjectivity. His use of the idea of the conscience in his discussion of morality leads to the

\textsuperscript{338} Strauss takes up this topic explicitly in the essay “‘Relativism,’” wherein he attempts to show how Heidegger does not manage to escape the paradox of historical understanding: Heidegger simultaneously argues that it is not possible, on grounds of relativism, to understand a given thinker better than he understood himself and also that all previous philosophies have been ignorant of \textit{Sein} or the “ground of grounds,” a claim that can only be supported if Heidegger does in fact understand the thinkers of the past “in the decisive respect better than they understood themselves” (156).

\textsuperscript{339} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 189-92.

\textsuperscript{340} Strauss, \textit{Thoughts}, 260.
conclusion that “Machiavelli tried to replace the conscience, or religion, by a kind of prudence which is frequently indistinguishable from mere calculation of worldly gain: ‘the true way’ consists, not in obeying God’s invariable law, but in acting according to the times.” This prudence, frequently indistinguishable from vulgar scheming, comes to replace religion as the guiding principle of the times.

Machiavelli thus ties political order and subjective self-interest together, setting the groundwork for modernity. We have seen where Strauss derives this idea of self-interest from in Machiavelli, and how he seeks to destabilize this idea in his readers. Thoughts on Machiavelli thus brings Machiavelli into the contemporary period, as a philosopher of modernity and as in continuity and conversation with the philosophical problems of existentialism. In describing Machiavelli in this way, Strauss ties together liberalism, democracy, existentialism, and humanism. Each of these strands of modernity can be said to be tied together by the idea of self-interest, in part because of the nature of reasoning in the age of modernity. It is to the self that all appeals must be made—both fatherland and soul are contained in the comprehensive reflection that inaugurates modernity. The potentiality of achieving a historical understanding that goes “beyond” the horizon of the given moment, that retrieves the fundamental problems of ancient philosophy, is thus rendered possible by engaging with Machiavelli. Claude Lefort, an astute reader of Strauss and Machiavelli both, put the terms of the encounter between self and text in personal terms: “If the oeuvre is present for me, it is because its presence envelops me, because time is not abolished, but reflected, and because I am implicated in that reflection.”

341. Strauss, Thoughts, 196.

understand a text, we come to question the basic presuppositions that frame our understanding itself, including the notion of the self-interested subject.

Strauss is thus engaged in a project that is also consonant with contemporary efforts to understand space/time in physics. Einstein’s relativity theory was already well established by the time Strauss wrote, although the radical nature of the ideas made them slow to percolate through the larger realm of knowledge. In challenging the distinction between past and present, Strauss might be said to be on the forefront of science, helping to bring the frontiers of knowledge into political science. But this conclusion would go too far, for one simple reason. Machiavelli is the crucial figure in such a project because he had the past “before him” as an object of contemplation and it was this past that conditioned his alleged break with it and gave rise to modernity. Using Machiavelli in this way, Strauss unsettles modern notions of progress and achievement. Thus, even if Strauss’s larger project meshes with what was considered to be the “pinnacle” of modern scientific achievement it ultimately calls into question the ability of human beings to achieve such a pinnacle at all.

What, then, to make of Strauss’s various attacks against the notion of relativism and its cultural effects? If we think that progress requires an absolute standard, and that Strauss is critical of this viewpoint, but likewise find that Strauss is critical of “relativism,” then where does that leave us? Here, engaging in a somewhat speculative answer to this important question, we can only fall back on the texts. Without being able to fully discuss this topic, we note, for starters, that Strauss’s essay on the topic of relativism puts inverted commas around the term. In the edited volume Relativism and the Study of Man, Strauss’s essay is only one of two that utilizes such “scare quotes.” The essay begins by noting that the term “relativism” has “many
meanings.” Of these many meanings, Strauss does not take up the ideas of contemporary physicists. His discussion ranges over familiar topics like freedom, liberalism, science, and values. This essay also contains one of the more sustained treatments of Marxism that one can find in Strauss’s writings. It thus is squarely situated on the terrain of social science, and should be read as an intervention in that specific field. It takes up the question of relativism as it appears on this terrain, in the moment of his writing.

In his critique of the ideas of Isaiah Berlin, on the topic of freedom, Strauss notes that “‘Relativism,’ or the assertion that all ends are relative to the chooser and hence equal, seems to require some kind of ‘absolutism.’” He notes that Berlin hesitates to reach this conclusion, which Strauss sees as the endemic problem of liberalism more generally in that it “has abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic.” Here, we find that Strauss is concerned with a specific form of relativism, namely the relativity of values. The “subjective” nature of value, according to his analysis of the positivistic mode of science, means that reason remains unable to inform judgment about the various possible ends that are possible to a given person. Any choice of values becomes legitimate because it is justified according to the subjective values of the person who chooses. This is the relativism that Strauss is concerned with, as a philosopher and a social scientist. We find that Strauss sees Nietzsche as the one who saw this problem and “faced” it, who “pointed to the way in which relativism can be overcome.” Relativism presented itself to Nietzsche in the form of historicism.

344. A full discussion of this essay will have to wait until another day.
345. Strauss, “‘Relativism,’” 137.
346. Strauss, “‘Relativism,’” 140.
347. Strauss, “‘Relativism,’” 151.
It seems clear that if Einstein is correct and the distinction between past and present is a persistent illusion then this knowledge itself cannot be the result of the achievement of progress, which must of necessity happen through time. And even if modern physics is “late” coming to this conclusion as to the illusion of time, it can’t claim to have arrived at the “peak” of science by virtue of the nature of the claim that it is advancing. Strauss rather adroitly reorients such discussion onto the terrain of philosophy. Indeed, we might point out that the nature of queries about the existence of the universe and man’s place within the cosmos imparts upon them a philosophical character. In taking up such questions in an essay entitled “The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy,” Strauss points out that modern liberals believe that mankind is an “accident” of the universe, that the universe changes state when man emerges. He argues that the ancient liberals saw history in terms of the inevitable cycles that accompany all forms of life, which lead them to turn their attention towards “understanding the permanent grounds or character of the process of the understanding of the whole within which the process takes place and which limits the progress.” The ancients liberals saw this limit as superhuman or divine because it is outside of man’s control.348 For even if time is an illusion we nonetheless experience this illusion and it could behoove us to discover ways of understanding and reckoning with this illusion, in particular if it causes distress. Einstein attempted to use this insight about time to console the family of a lifelong friend, a context that cannot be ignored when thinking about Strauss’s intent in working against historicism. Strauss inveighs us to look “forward” at Machiavelli, to see him as strange and surprising, rather than looking backward with an air of contempt and familiarity. He asks us to do what we believe to be impossible: to shed our

historical station and view the past on its own terms. But if the horizon in which we live is enlarged to the point where the distinction between past and present disappears then the conclusion is inevitable: the past’s terms cannot actually be different from our terms. In contextualizing Strauss’s turn to Machiavelli, we run the risk of lapsing back into the historicist mode of reading whereby we see Strauss as the “precursor” of some present body of thought. Strauss might be seen as some kind of genius who “invented” some new idea or “discovered” some new truth. He might become a guru.

Unlike Machiavelli, though, Strauss never puts his name to anything. He never declares a new doctrine, he never proclaims himself the discoverer of new modes and orders. He works constantly to erase his presence from the text. He is, then, no Columbus. He explicitly takes up the theme of authority and its relation to reason, encouraging his readers to reason through the text for themselves and to take on responsibility for their thoughts. With these ideas in mind, it is readily apparent why Strauss was so revered as a teacher. It may, nonetheless, be possible to attribute to Strauss a kind of “innovation.” But this is an enormous task. If we even want to begin to appreciate Strauss’s innovation we would have to sever our notion of self-interest from the idea of innovation itself—a task that has been rendered extremely difficult by way of Machiavelli’s successful enterprise.

In the end, those who seek to find Strauss’s “true teaching” in a cryptographic message concealed beneath the text do so on the basis of presuming that Strauss had a single, self-directed focus to his writing, and, what’s more, that this focus can be communicated either in a text or underneath a text as an intelligible message. Such readers take on the role of the disciple, searching for the revealed truth of the word. They read Strauss as an authority, a guru who
discovered some elemental truth about the world. In other words, they presume that Strauss did what he says that Machiavelli did. Thoughts on Machiavelli reveals no such concealed mastermind message—indeed by taking up Machiavelli in the manner in which he does, Strauss encourages us to move away from these presumptions.

And, for Strauss’s critics, there is also a moral to the story. The point is not whether Strauss tells a historically accurate account of how Machiavelli came to influence the world of men. One cannot expect Strauss to back up his claims about Machiavelli with a comprehensive social theory, complete with mechanisms and causality. A linear, teleological view of history is exactly what Strauss seeks to undermine. To require this view of him as “evidence” of his claims about Machiavelli is to compel Strauss to be read as they want him to be read. To the extent that we read Machiavelli in the mode that Strauss expects, we have already proven his thesis about modernity and the presumptions that accompany it. He does not need to prove that self-interest is at the heart of modernity, and that it influences nearly every avenue of human thought, if we approach reading him in a mode that is animated by self-interest. Thus, when critics like Gunnell argue that Strauss is “in the end” a transcendentalist who is “looking for the foundation of knowledge” they fail to take stock of what Strauss is doing rather than what he is writing.349

Our conception of philosophy, and of the need (or not) for philosophy, is the ultimate target. Against those who interpret Strauss as arguing that philosophy is only destabilizing of the

349. Gunnell, Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 159. Gunnell’s criticism of the trajectory of political theory after the intervention of figures like Strauss, what he calls the “alienation” of political theory, rests on a “historically characteristic conflation of political theory in and about politics and the self-interest attaching to that blurred distinction” which inevitably means that “political theory would equate its dilemmas and solutions with those of politics” (159-160). It is precisely this alienation from politics that Strauss was attempting to head off, however, in my reading of Thoughts on Machiavelli. The topic of self-interest, and its centralized position in the discourse of politics, is vital toward making this meta-discursive attempt legible.
polis, however, we can turn to the final passage from *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Here, philosophy is “of necessity edifying.”

It constructs a dwelling fit for human inhabitation—one that addresses the fundamental questions about human life and our meaning in the world. One comes then to seriously question the idea of freedom that is at work here. Can we think about freedom without falling back on the idea of self-interest? If philosophy were to be severed from freedom, if reason and freedom were to part ways, it might be that philosophy could succeed in its attempt to be edifying. It is thus modern philosophy, with its abiding attempt to lash freedom to reason, that is called into question. But, as Strauss has reminded us, modern philosophy is based on classical philosophy. We must not presume, with nostalgia, that the past was somehow more perfect or more complete than the present. In the end, Strauss encourages us to see continuity where modernity preaches “break, break, break!”

For this reason it is certainly reasonable to call Strauss a conservative. He emphasizes tradition over novelty. For this reason, we cannot consider him to be an innovator like Machiavelli. He recoils from bringing his self-interest into the focal point of his thinking. This brings up the topic of Strauss’s proclaimed friendship with liberalism. His attack on the notion of self-interest, with its historically embedded relationship with liberalism, represents a serious criticism of the possibilities of liberal democracy. One has to wonder, in the face of such a critique, whether liberalism needs a friend like Strauss.

This attack likewise undermines the effort to construct an ethics of liberalism out of individual freedom. It questions, radically, the ability of liberalism to withstand the dual threats that have emerged, according to Strauss’s own criticism: its lack of self-certainty and the threat
of communism. On this terrain Strauss is contributing to debates about Stalinism and the Cold War, about the prospects of international peace and stability and the emergence of cultural relativism. He seems to support Machiavelli’s thesis that “humanism is not enough.” While he certainly sees liberal democracy as the better option when compared with the alternatives, it is less clear what this means in the face of the perception that the West is in decline. His “defense” of liberalism as a doctrine involves showing its fundamental inability to offer a set of values that could be unreflectively asserted by its members. All values are subject to critical self-examination, to interrogation and to re-evaluation. Liberalism, in allowing open discussion of such fundamental issues, cannot support itself on the kind of self-certain foundation that had previously been possible. Thus, in decline, the West lingers in its dotage until the dawn of the next era. This was already the status of modernity as Machiavelli found it: “oblivious of the fundamental issue and therefore rent into many warring schools or factions, as encumbered with innumerable texts, treatises and discourses, and as boasting of many proofs which were no proofs.”

But perhaps there is yet hope. The close of Thoughts on Machiavelli attempts to render the problem anew. Here, it is our attempt to lay siege to nature, to bring it under heel and render its secrets into data, has culminated in a frustrated attempt to control human nature. On this path we head only for disaster. Strauss indicates that one possible alternative for the future is a return to the idea of the beneficence of nature, which involves looking back beyond the dichotomy between nature and culture, world and man. This would apparently involve having a kind of “fundamental” experience—a groundless experience. Strauss has given us two sketches of such

350. Strauss, Thoughts, 154.
an experience—the merging with the ancients recounted by Machiavelli in his letter to Vettori and the contemplation of the immensity of human history as recounted in the *Discourses* Book II, Chapter 5. In both cases, the illusion of time is shattered. If one were to try to imagine a possible present from the standpoint of an important past decision—if one had made the decision to go to college or to not get married, or to move to China—one can start to get a glimpse of the kind of experience to which Strauss is alluding. It is completely and absolutely impossible to imagine what the effects of that decision would have been; while we may speculate in a vague and idle fashion the fact remains that it is beyond the powers of the human mind to consider seriously such an alternate path through history. At the crossroads of experience, in the present, one encounters the limits of what is speakable or thinkable. A philosophy that begins from this starting point must, of necessity, be edifying. It must somehow build a future that cannot be imagined in advance, cannot be predicted. But Strauss does not dare to take up the necessary work of molding the future; he is content merely to educate.

We must take Strauss seriously. He is, after all, a writer. And a “writer is a creator” which, when it is done well, according to Strauss’s Machiavelli, is superior “to doers and speakers of the highest order.” Writing is of a different order than action or speaking. In writing, Strauss does take up a certain kind of responsibility. But, unlike Machiavelli, it does not appear that Strauss is engaged with the kind of project that seeks to bridge the gap between this era and the next. The very capability of any historian to situate a viewpoint external to history, one that could take a “comprehensive reflection” on this era and the next, is rendered impossible by Strauss’s argument. That will be the task for future philosophers. And if that future is to have any

meaning, if it is to have work for itself that imbues it with meaning, then it must of necessity be of a different tenor than that of the previous century. But if that future work is to be possible at all, it would seem, the tradition of political philosophy would have to play a fundamental role in establishing continuity with both past and future.

Strauss’s discussion of intention and teaching, as well as his exploration of Machiavelli’s axiom of unintended consequences, brings into stark relief the issue of intention in history. The question here is how much we can know about what we do intend, how much we can infer about the intentions of others, how much we can expect that our actions will work to bring about our intentions rather than some other set of unanticipated outcomes. The distinction between intention and teaching works to show how an original body of thought can be “corrupted” by those who proclaim to be its adherents—this idea is helpful, in fact, for interpreting Strauss and his influence on the movement known as neoconservatism. There are many works that seek to elucidate what Strauss’s teaching was. As the previous discussion has made evident, though, this question is not the only one that is important. It remains to be seen what Strauss’s intention actually was, and this discussion is only the first faltering steps in the direction of understanding. In order to establish Strauss’s intention what is required is a long and laborious effort, of which this work is only the beginning.
CHAPTER FOUR:
Dictatorship, Democracy, and Political Leadership

By ever and anon putting an end to the existing state power and creating it anew out of itself, does not universal suffrage put an end to all stability, does it not every moment question all the powers that be, does it not annihilate authority, does it not threaten to elevate anarchy itself to the position of authority?
—Karl Marx, “The Class Struggles in France.”

Privileges were exorbitant in Stalin’s time, but they were precarious. The apparatchik apparently at the height of his power ran the risk of landing in jail and then trekking to Siberia. Periodic purges prevented the men of the apparatus and other beneficiaries of the regime from consolidating their position. On the morrow of the death of their tyrant and benefactor, their collective aspiration was for security of tenure, for stability, allowing them at least to enjoy their privileges in peace (and, who knows, passing them on tomorrow to their children…).

The story of the twentieth century is still being written. Nonetheless, we in the United States are accustomed to thinking of democracy as the victor of the century-long struggle against the forces of communism. Democracy, so the story goes, is the most stable of all forms of government and best expresses the will of the people. Where the people is assumed to be sovereign there is a need for an idea of equality, a notion with a rich and storied political history. In the pages that follow I will not be telling a story about democracy and equality. Instead, I will be focused on the notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a concept of political leadership that has its roots in the past century’s political upheavals and accompanying tectonic shifts in discourse. This antiquated idea gives us a window into contemporary discourse that would not be possible if one were to remain on comfortable terrain. This is not a story about the opposition between communism and capitalism, nor about the profound difference between democracy and dictatorship. It is not about the stability of democracy or the ephemeral grip of the dictator. It is


a story about the historical, discursive interconnection of these two so evidently opposed traditions and modes of governance.

The political events of the twentieth-century molded the discourse of political leadership in profound ways. Emergent out of the international labor struggle were powerful forces that sought to effect dramatic social change through a scientific understanding of human history. The beginning of the century saw such powerful ideas as “the dictatorship of the proletariat” and “the vanguard party,” as well as the “worker’s council” (or the “Soviet”) take center stage in international debate. With roots in the upheaval of the previous century, the early period of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a powerful and remarkably cohesive international socialist movement. This movement took upon itself the task of nothing short of social revolution—to transition the world economy from the periodic crises of capitalism into a utopian-scientific future. It meant to, literally, make history.354

But even as robust discussion and international solidarity grew, the movement foundered on nationalism and “chauvinism” at the outbreak of World War I. The German Social Democratic Party, as well as the parties of other developed industrial nations, took up the nationalist cause in support of imperialist war. As the infamous Second International backpedaled from the goals of international socialism, Lenin and the Bolsheviks began preparations for the most audacious scheme of the century. Convinced that the “dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” could be a reality, the Bolsheviks capitalized on the weakness of the bourgeois government that had come to power in the February Revolution of 1917, ushering in the October Revolution of that same year. This event sparked a wave of revolutionary sentiment and action throughout Europe,

354. For an excellent account of the period leading up to the Russian Revolution, in terms of the idea of making history, see Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History (New York: Doubleday, 1940).
and helped bring an end to World War even while heralding the start of an intense civil war in Russia. It was an event of unprecedented boldness that, in the end, opened the way for untold atrocity. But before the horrors of Stalin, before the “necessity” of failure, there was a moment when the world was, perhaps, ready for revolution. Upon assuming power in Russia, the Bolsheviks declared the existence of the world’s first worker’s state: the living and breathing dictatorship of the proletariat.

But even if the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat now seemed tangible it was quickly evident that the crisis of international socialism that was signaled in 1914—with the upsurge of nationalist sentiments—was still very much a factor in whether the fledgling Bolshevik state would stand or fall. There was no possible consensus on the meaning of these propitious events. The Marxist laws of history had, seemingly, been broken: a relatively poor, largely peasant country had achieved a socialist revolution ahead of its industrialized peers. Had the class struggle, the veritable “motor of history” been concluded in that unlikely “backwater” of Europe? Was a deepening democratic revolution coming to Europe? Was a world dominated by class and privilege about to be supplanted by a utopian commune? Would international socialism sweep the parliaments of Europe into the dustbin of history, or would they reinforce democratic procedures with revolutionary content?

At this moment, before the onset of the ossification of Stalinism and the “Cold War,” the world seemed impossibly poised on the brink of an international socialist revolution—but the nature of this revolution was as unpredictable as it was unsteady. Instability seemed to be the net result of the rapid advances in technology and social reorganizations that followed in their wake. This instability was the source of much consternation and theorization as new political entities
threatened to change the vocabulary of politics. It seemed possible that all efforts to define the
dictatorship of the proletariat, to assess its meaning in history, were doomed to be outpaced by
the unfolding of events themselves—with a logic and motive force of their own.

Looking back from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, can we find an explanation
for the tumultuous events of the last century? What are we to make of ideas like the dictatorship
of the proletariat? While it has become common place to see Lenin as the author of the doctrine
of the vanguard party, an idea that (it would seem) still has some weight in contemporary
political analysis, where did this doctrine of class dictatorship come from and why has it dropped
off the grid? Why has the vanguard party occupied our imagination even while the idea of the
worker’s council, the true “soviet,” has garnered far less attention? One explanation can be
found at the level of the discourse of political leadership that we have inherited. The way that we
think about politics and about leadership will influence the way we read the events of the
previous century. In our vocabulary, the dictatorship of the proletariat finds little purchase.
Dictatorship is conflated with Stalin, who is conflated with communism and totalitarianism.
While such ideas of political leadership seem like a distant, if not dangerous, memory of the
Stalinist legacy, they have very little to do with Stalinism in practice. In fact, this fatalistic
interpretation that begins and ends with Stalinism as the most important reference point for any
analysis of the legacy of communism is only made possible because of discursive “ruptures” that
break off our horizon of intelligibility. While it may seem obvious that dictatorship is opposed to
democracy, that Stalin was a dictator and that communism inevitably leads to totalitarianism,
these seemingly self-evident truths obscure more than they reveal about the political events that
have given rise to the contemporary discourse of political leadership.
Ironically, the very necessity that they espouse is a defining characteristic of Stalinism itself. Stalinism had always been a doctrine of necessity, from its roots in the early civil war of 1918-1921, to the grim policies dealing with grain shortages through the 1930s, to its war-time policies in the face of Nazi aggression during World War II. When we tell ourselves a story in which democracy is necessary, when it is the logical and inevitable outgrowth of development and the passage of time, we unwittingly utilize a Stalinist logic. This necessity of democracy makes critique and dissent that much more difficult. In an era where liberal democracy is held to be the pinnacle achievement of civilization itself, counter-discourses can only appear as antiquated implements of a bygone era or as radical utopian visions of an impossible future.

The goal of this chapter is to attempt a leap over the chasm created by such a rupture—through an archaeology of the discourse of political leadership—as it centered on this question of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is the beginning of future work that will need to be done, to trace the discourse that precedes the theoretical turn and that structures the problematic of the vanguard party. Let us be clear: the rupture that I speak of exists in a particular manner, in the discourse on political leadership as it morphs throughout the twentieth century. In this chapter, I attempt to locate this transformation by way of a consideration of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which leads of necessity into a discussion of the counterposed

355. The use of the idea of archaeology as a mode of analysis of discourse situates this inquiry in a post-Foucauldian landscape. As I will discuss in the conclusion, the subject matter lends itself to this kind of analysis, in which the theoretical and political levels are indistinct and traditional methods of historiography often miss the most important political events, even while more “elevated” theoretical analysis stray too far from the concrete. There are a host of accounts of the political events that concern me here, told from the perspective of the sober political scientist; these have been most useful but they lack a conceptual appreciation for the long-term theoretical developments that make comparison across centuries both challenging and vital. Likewise, theoretical literature on the major figures considered below (e.g. Marx, Lenin, Althusser) often concentrate only on the specific theoretical or historical constellation each figure acted within, or concentrate solely on the discourse of Marxism as such, without taking account of the force of political events in relation to developments ‘in theory.’ As an archaeological analysis, this chapter seeks to overcome the limitations of each of these approaches. The discourse of political leadership is a perfect candidate for such a mode of inquiry, as I hope will become clear. Whether it has been successful or not will be left up to the reader.
terms of “democracy versus dictatorship” that seems so obviously self-evident in the language of our times. As we will see, the idea that dictatorship and democracy are political opposites was foreign to the inventors of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and in fact to nearly anyone who used the term “dictatorship” at all in the nineteenth century. This fundamental difference of vocabulary is due to the prevailing discourse of political leadership and its transformation. It is the fact of the transmogrification of this word over the course of the twentieth century that presents an interpretive difficulty for the historian. It is the fact of this transmogrification that presents a worthwhile problem for the political theorist. By taking up this challenge I seek to problematize ideas that seem so obvious to our democratic sensibilities, and in so doing renew the democratic tradition itself. The more modest but equally important goal is to set the stage for a discussion of the work of Louis Althusser, who remains one of the most influential and yet divergently interpreted theorists of the previous century. Althusser, as a member of the French Communist Party and as an avowed Marxist, was active during the period of de-Stalinization in which the discourse of political leadership took a turn toward the present. His voice was a contributor to many of the debates that find their historical origins in the events that I will be describing below.

From the period of 1917 until the party congress of 1976, in France, the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat remained a viable political force. The linkages that we take for evident between communism, totalitarianism, and dictatorship had not yet been forged in iron. It is not until the post-Stalinist era that totalitarianism and communism become conceptually fused, 

356. In 1976 the slogan was officially abandoned. It is certainly true that previous decades had weakened its mass appeal, but nonetheless the party and the slogan were active components of French political life. With the advent of “Eurocommunism” in the late 1970s, the social democratic revolution was, it would seem, complete.
and it is not until the ideas of democracy and dictatorship become opposites that the contemporary field of democratic theory can come into being.

In taking up the challenge of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the hallowed tenets of liberal democracy must come into question. But in calling such notions into question there lies the opportunity for a much needed renewal of a tradition of liberal democracy that is not as monolithic or as unchallenged as it may seem. In fact, a close scrutiny of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat will reveal unsettling truths about the history of democracy and its relationship to socialism. By centering on ideas of political leadership we bring into focus the commonality between these two discourses—their common historical trajectory. Such a view destabilizes our political lexicon and justifies a fresh historical analysis. By taking a historical view we bring into focus the ruptures that characterize any discourse as it evolves over time. By bringing together the two forms of analysis (discourse plus history) we compose a larger picture, working on and within the discourse in an effort to change the direction of that discourse itself. As we shall see, the effort that I am undertaking in this chapter is, itself, a mode of political leadership that has its origins in the historical processes that I am seeking to analyze. I, too, am seeking to shift the discourse and focus intellectual attention. This theoretical mode of leadership is, by no means, the only available mode of political leadership. Nor is it “the best” or the “most effective”—in fact, it has serious limits. But, *a propos* of the topic of this chapter, it is the mode of political leadership that was inaugurated by such figures as Louis Althusser, in an effort to think through the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the post-Stalinist era.

It was the attempt to think through the failures of the revolution, failures going back to 1848 and 1871, that brought forth the problematic of ideology and, taken up by the emergent
movement of structuralism, gave birth to the discourse of the “death of the author.” The momentous debates about the dictatorship of the proletariat are a direct forerunner to more familiar debates and more familiar ideas, and they have shaped the contours of academic thinking. In this chapter, I will show the historical and theoretical underpinnings of the structuralist and post-structuralist currents of contemporary thought via this unlikely avenue.

Such an approach is not without risk, and its success can only be determined from within the very discourse that grants intelligibility to such an effort in the first place, a paradox that we shall have to suspend in order to make the jump. But if the effort of political leadership is to be grounded at all, it must re-enter the scene with an eye toward concrete problems. In the pages that follow, the “necessity” of Stalinism will be held in abeyance, as will the “intrinsic” character of the lineage demarcated by the proper names Marx, Lenin, Stalin. I will not assume that communism necessarily leads to the iron-fist of personal dictatorship, nor will I assume that the tradition of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism is a relic of a bygone era. Far from a theoretical conjuring trick, or a narcissistic conceit, this theoretical bracketing is absolutely necessary in order to see the effects of the event whose contours I am attempting to trace. There is a very good reason for this: to interpret Stalinism as “inevitable” is, itself, a result of the discursive effect of the transformations of ideas of political leadership that have reverberated into our own interpretive framework—as a result of Stalinism itself. In this very real sense, in terms of the boundaries of what we can think, we still live under the grip of Stalinism’s legacy.

The result of this legacy is that the dominant discourse of political leadership that we have today, in the United States, is inadequate to the tasks that face us as citizens of the nation-state in a globalizing world. As has been remarked, we are more able to think about the end of the world
via some form of cataclysm rather than imagine a change in the mode of production and the
social relations that we inhabit. Undoubtedly there is something about the way we think about
democracy, and ourselves, that lends itself to this lack of imagination. A convenient narrative
has been woven whose purpose is to hold together the otherwise chaotic events of the twentieth
century. In this story, there is a good side and a bad side, a democracy and a dictator. When
forced to choose, who would not want democracy over dictatorship? Even if democracy had its
faults, these could not approach the level of atrocity committed by the regimes of the dictators.
The tyrannical side of Lenin molded the Soviet revolution and its vanguard party, paving the way
for the emergence of a tyrant whose only competitor for the title of “world’s most evil man” is
Adolf Hitler. For advocates of the fairy-tale version of democracy, it has been a hard nut to
swallow that Stalin’s Red Army was the vanquisher of Hitler—this fact alone is very likely the
reason that fascism has become the most notorious calamity of the twentieth century. Stalin’s
victory over the Nazi menace reinvigorated the international communist movement when it
seemed poised to slip below the waves of history. But when the terrors of the Gulag and the
show trial began to be known, the idea of “totalitarianism” was created as an umbrella to cover
both communism and fascism. For a long time, the justification for U.S. international
intervention was to check the spread of communism and defend freedom from those who sought
to undermine democracy at home and abroad. The events of 1989-1991, so this story continues,
prove that communism was a utopian idea with little practical value when pitted against a liberal
democracy that had been coupled with capitalism. The events of the close of the century thus
leave communism a very close second to fascism in the contest for “world’s worst ideas.” The
events in the middle of this story, coincident with the middle period of the century, are of the
utmost importance in its unfolding. Stalin has been a stand-in for the despot, a dictator whose “cult of personality” resulted in the Gulags and the icy grip of bureaucracy. Communism has been tried, this story goes, and it has failed. It has lead to the Gulag. The “Cold War” was an event that shaped all the peoples caught within its grip, and its effect—in particular—upon the “victor” and the discourses that we hold so dearly are not yet fully comprehended.

One cautionary note to those who are so infected with a hatred of communism that they cannot bear to look upon the ideology that shaped world history in the previous century: I am not attempting to “retrieve” ideas of political leadership that have been left behind. In taking up this subject, I am not proposing a new worldwide communist movement. While I am not claiming to be a “neutral” observer of these events, I nonetheless attempt to maintain a critical distance. It is possible to write about Marx and Marxism without being a Marxist, especially since this term has meant so many different things to so many diverse peoples. This is not a call for a reinvigorated “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The time of international socialism modeled on the Bolshevik revolution is long past. But it is an equally bad idea to consider the events of the twentieth century as pre-determined or otherwise “necessary.” There were definitive turning points, hinges in the path of events that could have produced a much different world than the one in which we live. In these hinges there are lessons for those of us who seek to write politically: there was, once, a possible future that seems impossible now. It is a testament to the emancipatory power of Marx and Marxism that these ideas have not died with Stalin or the Soviet regime. There seems something terribly amiss with the idea that collective political action with an eye toward emancipation and changing the world for the better must inevitably end in terror and death camps. Others have taken up the struggle for the emancipation of the exploited
classes of the world under many different banners, and it is not the place of a political theorist to
direct or manage such movements.

The more modest goal here is to highlight the historical content of ideological notions of
leadership* that are nearly omni-present in the United States today* by way of a comparison
selected to produce a contrasting effect. This contrast makes visible the discourse that we inhabit,
in all its historical complexity. It simultaneously questions the seemingly self-evident. As we
shall see, the “leap” that I am attempting can be interpreted within a theoretical framework of
political leadership as well; it is a product of the same historical debates that have given rise to
the thesis of the inborn tendency of socialism—and, in fact, of all emancipatory politics—to fall
into tyranny. This discourse is the reason that I feel compelled to offer these qualifications, and
why cautious readers are somewhat justified in holding a latent concern that I am trying to swoop
in and save the international communist movement. As I have stated, this project is a part of a
much needed renewal of the traditions of democracy. The idea of the dictatorship of the
proletariat was instrumental in winning the Russian revolution, and it very nearly lead to the
international socialist movement that was aspired to by its main proponents. It has its origins as
a rebuttal to Marx’s opponents who preached of the need for a charismatic dictator to take the
reins of government and usher in the new age of socialism. It deserves analysis on these grounds
alone, as a historical formulation that found meaning in so many minds. But it is a worthwhile
topic for another, more problematic reason. As my analysis of the concept will show, the
dictatorship of the proletariat is an idea situated over a fault line in democratic theory *itself*. It
reveals a distinct *lack of a theory of democratic political leadership*. The Bolshevik party, in its
practice, vaulted this chasm—and it was in the process of justifying their revolution that the idea became so important to the rest of the world.

Marx had always seen the proletarian revolution as a deepening and continuation of the ongoing bourgeois revolutions—he developed the idea of a “permanent revolution” (later resurrected by Trotsky) in order to focus attention on the always necessary task of politics. One cannot rest on any victory in the realm of politics. Revolutions do not end with the collapse of a tyrannical regime. Marxists of all stripes—but especially the Bolsheviks—have looked back to the French Revolution of 1789 as an important popular victory on the “road to socialism.” Even this lineage, with its Napoleons and its Empire, was yet a source of inspiration. The 1871 Paris Commune was often cited as the first experiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the washing away of the bourgeois state and the creation of a new mode of human collective existence. It was seen as the bearer of the legacy of the French Revolution, a banner that the Bolsheviks eagerly raised in Petrograd. Such stories weave together events to produce continuity and give meaning to human society. Such theories of history “as progress” are no longer popular amongst many intellectuals. In a postmodern age, so it goes, such “grand narratives” produce incredulity rather than solidarity. But, lest we fall back on a story of progress in which the “post-“ follows the modern, and the incredulity is itself a progressive stage away from the quaint naïveté of the past, we should take seriously the heritage of ideas that otherwise seem so passé.

And so, onward to the history of an evidently bad idea.
Into the Breach: The PCF and the Politics of Cold War

The historical moment that represents the hinge between an unimaginable past and the present discourse of political leadership is postwar France. Caught between the emergent powers of the Cold War, France was a uniquely contested political space in which the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) played an instrumental role from its position on the margins of the parliamentary system. Sympathetic to communism but indebted to America, the French people manifested some of the most potent forms of antagonism that typified the Cold War order. As a would-be global imperial power, France was also the site of a powerful anti-colonial effort. Aligned with Moscow but sympathetic to the struggles for independence that provoked such violence, the PCF was pulled in many directions. Nonetheless, the leadership of the PCF maintained an overt and nearly constant alignment with Moscow and the policies of the Soviet Union. It became notorious in the international communist movement as a staunch supporter that would often resort to dogma to support its position. Because of this tenuous position, it remains a vital site from which to look at the discourse of political leadership in the twentieth century.

Until 1976 the PCF openly endorsed the goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat, even while its practical operations were guided by other modes of political leadership. For our purposes, the period of interest begins in 1947 and extends to 1976. Between these two signposts the PCF underwent dramatic transformations in its orientation and platform. The international context of the Cold War gave a new urgency to questions of war and peace, and Stalin’s influence upon the Western communist parties rose and fell. Since the “Bolshevization” of the PCF in the 1920s, it had developed in a direction away from its traditions of syndicalism. First, the factory replaced the commune as the foundational unit. Second, the autonomy of the
low-levels of the organization was limited. Third, the organization of the party was altered such that a nucleus of leaders was created amidst an array of functionaries. Tiersky elaborates on these changes: the victory of Leninist tendencies over Juaresean Social Democracy, the “transferrence of the major revolutionary impulse in France from the anarcho-syndicalist currents to the Communist Party” and lastly the purge of Trotskyite elements which resulted in complete Stalinization by 1934. Another commentator argues that Bolshevization was a “watchword of the fifth Congress of the Comintern in June-July 1924. It was the precise counterpart of the cult of the dead Lenin in the USSR and its actual content was the same: unqualified submission to the Troika as the supposed guardians of Leninist orthodoxy and hostility to all critical voices, above all to Trotsky.” But even as this Bolshevization was coming into its own there was a key development in Russia: Stalin consolidated power between 1925 and 1934. As a member of the fledgling Third International, the PCF was shaped by these developments. It is very common to equate the Bolshevization of the PCF with the imposition of the “Jacobin” mentality. While such a view is in some ways correct, drawing attention to the ambivalent relationship between these ardent communists and the democratic traditions of

357. Kriegel, The French Communists chapter 8. Interestingly, Kriegel claims in the opening line of this chapter that “Apparatus is a word the communists don’t like and never use” (187). I don’t know that Althusser ever read this book, but its criticism of the Communist Party is very much in line with his own criticisms in the 1970s. His deployment of the terminology of “apparatuses” is well known. In addition, Kriegel’s prescient claim that Althusser (in 1967) fits a pattern of communist intellectuals who are caught in a double bind. “The communist intellectuals, in an effort to protest the role that is thrust upon them, and more generally, to protest a global evolution that alters the deeper significance of the communist phenomenon by drastically clericalizing it, tend to move in two more or less contrary directions. When, like Althusser, they seek to follow both of these partially opposed directions, they end up by being fragmented. On the one hand, they wish to destroy the party as a pseudo-church, to return to rationalism and find the road back to the positivism of the great men of the early socialist movement. On the other hand, they want to destroy the party solely in its functional capacity as a Catholic church. This they hope to accomplish by reincarnating it as a church of the Reformation” (182).

358. Tiersky, French Communism, chapter two. Tiersky takes up Kriegel’s three-stage Bolshevization argument uncritically in this chapter. Jean Juarès was a leading social-democrat in France in the decade leading up to World War I.

359. Hallas, Duncan. The Comintern, 108. Quoting Lenin, Hallas goes on to show how Lenin reviled such practices of transforming revolutionaries into “harmless icons.”
Europe, it also helps to obscure the nineteenth-century meanings of the notion of dictatorship. In addition, this reading of the thought of Lenin produces a sort of distortion of Lenin’s unique mode of political leadership, casting it in terms of a polarity between democracy and dictatorship.

1947 is often said to be the “official” beginning to that unofficial war known as the Cold War. This conflict is riddled with paradoxes and aporias, and its world historical effects are far from resolved. What concerns us here is the response of the PCF to the unfolding events of the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the discourse of political leadership that developed through this same time period. Because it was a minority party in a parliamentary system, and because it was aligned with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the PCF found itself in something like a theoretical clearing. The claim that the dictatorship of the proletariat was in effect in Stalin’s Soviet Union was accepted as a simple truth by the PCF leadership, though this question divided the international socialist movement at large. The PCF leadership, outside “legitimate” democratic procedures and institutions internal to France, were in a position to give this vague idea a real content. While “what Marx meant” was a perennial topic of discussion, the concrete answers to this question were subject to shifting historical pressures. By all accounts, socialism represented a viable force on the world stage—a fact that

360. The previous period is narrated in detail by Alfred J. Rieber in Stalin and the French Communist Party, 1941-1947 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962). Rieber summarizes this period: “From 1941 to 1947 the French Communists and the Soviet Union planned and worked actively toward the ultimate establishment of a ‘people’s democracy’ in France” (358) but that “no conclusive evidence exists to show how the Soviet Union or the French Communist Party intended to carry out the final stage of the revolution” (360).
could not be ignored so long as the Soviet Union “centered” the debate and represented itself as the vanguard of the imminent world revolution.\textsuperscript{361}

But this simple truth of the “inevitable” victory of the proletariat was not simply applied to the case of France. The attempt to develop a particular strategy by which to implement the revolutionary message of the codified dogma of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism (and later, Maoism) was necessitated by the void created by the Bolshevik revolution. Competing narratives rushed to fill that void, to give a content to the otherwise ineluctable events that had taken place in Russia. And even if Engels had, in 1875, predicted that the Russian revolution against the Tsar was a necessary precondition for the German proletariat’s victory at home, the events of World War I had driven a deep rift between the German and Russian socialist parties. The events of 1914 are well known: upon hearing that the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) had voted for the kaiser’s war budget, Lenin was incredulous. Surely, he thought, these were propaganda rumors. Stunned, and lacking the ability to make sense of these developments,  

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\textsuperscript{361} Russia’s place in the worldwide struggle for socialism was the topic of much debate in Marxist circles. It is far too complex a question to delve into here. Suffice to say that Engels wrote in 1882 that “the onset of the revolution [in Russia] is only a question of months. Our people in Russia have virtually taken the Tsar prisoner, have disorganised the government and shattered popular tradition” (“Engels to Eduard Bernstein,” Marx and Engels, \textit{Collected Works} Vol. 46, 208). In 1875, some months having come and gone, Engels wrote that “Developments in Russia are of the greatest importance for the German working class. The existing Russian Empire represents the last great mainstay of all West European reaction. That was demonstrated with striking clarity in 1848 and 1849. Because Germany neglected to stir up revolt in Poland in 1848 and to wage war on the Russian Tsar (as the \textit{Neue Rheinishe Zeitung} had demanded from the outset) that same Tsar was able in 1849 to put down the Hungarian revolution, which has advanced to the gates of Vienna, to sit in judgement over Austria, Prussia and the minor German states at Warsaw in 1850, and to restore the old Federal Diet. . . . No revolution can achieve ultimate success in Western Europe whilst the present Russian state exists alongside it. But Germany is its closest neighbour, and it will therefore be Germany that will feel the first impact of the Russian armies of reaction. The overthrow of Tsarist Russia, the elimination of the Russian Empire, is therefore one of the first conditions of the German proletariat’s ultimate triumph” (“Introduction to the Pamphlet ‘On Social Relations in Russia,’ \textit{Collected Works} Vol. 24, 103). I mention these statements of Engels because they interrupt a certain narrative of Marxism—wherein the industrial revolution inevitably brings about socialism in the most advanced nations. As these brief quotes show, and as Marx and Engels constantly demonstrated in their practical activity, they believed that the socialist revolution would be global. From the juxtaposition of these quotes, one can see that the 1917 revolution in Russia is not only predicted (albeit not as timely as Engels might have thought) but it is seen as a necessary component in the worldwide revolution towards socialism; Engels goes so far as to make it a \textit{precondition} for the German proletariat’s “ultimate triumph.” This was, obviously, not the position taken by Bernstein and Kautsky.
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Lenin turned toward a study of Hegel and Marx, looking for answers in the tomes of philosophy. The “collapse” of the Second International, brought about by the outbreak of war, remains a pivotal moment in the international socialist movement, a moment that created a rupture from which there has arguably never been a recovery. One of the touchstones of this crisis was the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. If one wants to understand why Soviet-Franco relations after the second “Great War” were so strained, and why French foreign policy ultimately aligned itself with the United States, one needs only to look back to the first “Great War” and the increasingly tense relations between the “non-revolutionary” states of Europe and the “revolutionary” society of Russia.

It is clear that 1947 is a watershed year for postwar developments within France. It was a major turning point in the life history of that mysterious class known as the intellectuals as well. “After 1947 with the outbreak of the Cold War, the emergence of the Zhadanovist doctrine of the two camps and the exclusion of the CP [Communist Party—the PCF] from the government, it became very difficult for Party intellectuals to write critically. Unless one were prepared to fall into the camp of the Americans with their anti-Communism—and very few French intellectuals were—Marxism had to be identified with Russian socialism without qualification.” In a polarized political landscape, one had to choose sides. Indeed, this doctrine of Cold War merely reformulated the main political thesis of Marxism from the previous century, putting the class war into the realm of international politics.


But when we counterpose this claim to one made by Tony Judt we see an interesting contrast: “By the late 1940s, information about life under Stalin and his system was readily available to anyone….The revelations of the late forties, not to mention those of a later generation, were only news in the sense that some people were choosing to hear them for the first time.”

Those who supported the Soviet Union were caught in an impossible position: to criticize Stalin was to betray the Bolshevik Revolution and fall into anti-Communism, thereby supporting the American initiative— which had been made all too palpable by the onset of the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine. The polarity of the political situation, reflected in the real choices made by intellectuals in France, left little room for neutrality or a critical perspective—yet Judt feels it is necessary to call attention to the fact that intellectuals could have chosen differently. In fact, his book-length inquiry into the French intellectual dilemma lapses into moral judgment at critical interpretive moments. The alleged standpoint of the intellectual, responsible for his or her decisions in a way that others are not, is a common motif in discussions of Marxism. We shall have ample opportunity to return to this subject in the pages that follow.

What seems certain is that, at this historical juncture, the role of the intellectual vis a vis political

364. Judt, Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 101-2. Likewise, in his analysis of the show trials of the 1930s and 1940s, Judt sees political opportunism and manipulation as the driving factors in what he describes as a gross betrayal of intellectual responsibility. Even those who could not, in good conscience, stay within the official organs of the PCF nonetheless played an essential role in the persistent ignorance: “The truly valuable intellectuals were not those who joined but those who remained outside the fold, providing the Stalinists with intellectual credibility by their support and their independent status as thinkers, scholars, or journalists” (118). There was thus very little room to maneuver: if one left the Party one could only serve the Party in a more “valuable” role. If this is the case, though, then it seems too easy to merely assign moral responsibility, especially since few intellectuals of this time period saw their actions in this light.

365. Judt justifies his position thus: “Because intellectuals write, and thereby leave a record of their former opinions that cannot easily be erased, they are constrained in later years to admit that yes, they did say and do those absurd things. But it is not sufficient to draw a veil over those years and claim to have grown beyond the foolishness of youth. Even though we may not be the person we were, in a certain philosophical sense, we alone can take responsibility for the deeds of the former self” (5). In an age of social media and massive data storage by government agencies and corporate entities, Judt’s lesson is perhaps one that everyone should take to heart. But this claim to a sovereign, singular self that can take responsibility is one that we will have to analyze more carefully below.
conflict and revolution resurfaced as a major topic of public discussion. Throughout this time period, it was the leadership of the Soviet Union, exercised through the figurehead of Stalin and the organization of the Comintern of the Bolshevik Party, that set the terms of communist politics. And, as is well known, the Zhadanovist doctrine of the “two camps” left little wiggle room for Communist supporters abroad; what is perhaps worse is that Soviet science at this time was also cast in terms of “proletarian versus bourgeois science,” a project that met an ignominious end when the innovations of Soviet “proletarian scientists” failed to bring about the promised technological revolution. As even this episode shows, the “nation-less” status of ascendant science was fractured through political activity.366

But even as the 1950s dawned, bringing increasing technological change and the ascendancy of science to its own position of “dictatorship” (a position, it may be argued, it still occupies today), the political fate of the PCF remained grim. The title of François Fejtö’s chapter devoted to this time period aptly grasps the situation: “Political and Organizational Manifestations of the Cult of Stalin Within the PCF.”367 In the campaigns that unfolded against Yugoslavia (and Tito) and the notorious show trials the PCF “distinguished itself by especial

366. Much has been written on this topic as well. The “Lysenko Affair” is perhaps the best known example of proletarian science gone awry. Here in the United States, though, politics was transforming science and philosophy as well. See George Reisch, How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science: To the Icy Slopes of Logic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Reisch’s book contains the following epigram: “‘Every action, in the middle of the twentieth century, presupposes and involves the adoption of an attitude with regard to the Soviet enterprise’ (Raymond Aron, The Opium of the Intellectuals, 55)”. Aron, classmate of Sartre, evidently felt the pressures of the political situation most acutely. This attitude was expressed much earlier by Bertrand Russell, in his The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008). Originally published in 1921, this work is the result of Russell’s trip to Bolshevik Russia. It is a sympathetic treatment that situates the Russian Revolution as among the most important events in world history. He states: “I feel that Bolshevism is a matter of such importance that it is necessary, for almost every political question, to define one’s attitude in regard to it; and I have hopes that I may help others to define their attitude, even if only by way of opposition to what I have written” (9).

But this fury was directed in all the wrong places. In 1953, when spontaneous strikes broke out across France, the PCF remained a helpless bystander, unable to capitalize on these propitious events. Yet as the PCF remained excluded from official government duties during the Fourth Republic, it was forced to develop itself into a counter-culture. While Marxism remained a popular intellectual topic, infused in debates over humanism and existentialism and voiced by such prominent figures as Sartre and Camus, Merleau-Ponty and Aron, the international communist movement remained crippled: no major communist revolution took place in a major European state, despite the prognostications of many an erudite mind. As existentialism prompted a serious re-thinking of such Marxist ideas as alienation and the dialectic, but seemed unable to offer a justification for a revolutionary politics, the revolutionary wave that began in 1917 sank slowly back into the depths. The events of 1956-1968 marked a transition into a new phase of the post-revolutionary international communist movement. Although it would take some time for the final vestiges of this concept to be erased from political platforms and slogans, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat had been evacuated of its revolutionary content.

368. The show trials were those of of Rajk in Hungary, Kostov in Bulgaria, and Slánský in Czechoslovakia. in 1952 the “Marty-Tillon” affair became public as well.

369. Fejtő, The French Communist Party, 34-5. This position of ineffectiveness was not unique to the 1950s—in fact, the PCF had failed under similar conditions in 1936 (Hallas, The Comintern, 146-150).

370. This is the argument of Annie Kriegel, and it is taken up in many places after her foundational work in the 1960s. See Aux Origines du Communiste Français (Paris: Flammarion, 1969). Also, The French Communists: Profile of a People (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972)

371. This situation was complex, especially since existentialism had emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War as critical of the PCF. Les Temps Modernes, first published in October of 1945, evinced a leftist critique of the parliamentarism of the PCF and its disarming of the Resistance guerrilla units. Begun by such figures as Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty (amongst others) this journal, under the auspices of the emergent phenomenon of existentialism, represented a revolutionary platform underpinned by a focus on intellectual responsibility. Existentialism’s revolutionary potential would soon run thin, however. For a discussion of this period, see Arthur Hirsh, The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz (Boston: South End Press, 1981), especially chapter two.
In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret” report to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party became public. In it, the emergent leadership of the world communist movement recognized the need for de-Stalinization and the need to make a break with the past. But even as this event brought to light the atrocities of the Stalinist era, it centered its analysis on the idea of the “cult of personality.” With such an obviously faulty explanation for such a very real problem, the stage was set for an opening up of the communist movement. Internationally, this document became a watershed moment in the history of the century. It was to be followed in short order by the Soviet military invasion of Hungary. Khrushchev’s speech is a remarkable document, and one that can help to bring into focus some of the issues that are at stake in these international debates. A line-by-line analysis would be interesting but would take us too far off track. Instead, I will concentrate on the responses to this speech offered by the PCF and others.

The PCF published its response in June of 1956, in which it called for a “thorough Marxist analysis to determine all the circumstances under which Stalin was able to exercise his personal power” even while being sure to note that they were skeptical of the conditions under which the report was made public, that “the bourgeois press has published a report attributed to comrade Khrushchev.” In this statement, the PCF does not use the language of dictatorship to discuss

372. Columbia University’s influential Russian Institute published a volume entitled The Anti-Stalin Campaign and International Communism: A Selection of Documents (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956) that collected many of the public statements made by major communist parties in Europe. It also included a “Foreward” that situated these events in the following terms: “The subject is, of course, closely linked to two larger questions which go back to the origins of the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement: the question of the leadership within the Communist Parties and the question of the relations between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and other Communist Parties. Both these questions came to be active issues after Stalin’s death in March 1953, as is evidenced by the perceptible, if somewhat fluctuating, decrease in the volume of praise for Stalin, by the public emphasis on collective leadership, and by the Soviet approach to Tito’s regime in Yugoslavia. The XXth Party Congress of the CPSU led to an intensification of these trends, in the growing criticism of the ‘cult of the individual’ (or ‘personality cult’—Kult lichnosti), in the disbanding of the Cominform, and in the stress upon a variety of roads to ‘socialism.’ Quite evidently, the Communist world was in a state of flux well before the June revelation of the secret Khrushchev report” (v).

Stalin. While Stalin is denounced for abusing his power, he is also granted a special place in
Communist history for his leadership during times of extreme duress for the Soviet Union and
the international movement. The French were not alone in towing this line, as is evident by the
British Communist Party’s response two days later. It was left to the Italians to raise the issue
of dictatorship in specific terms:

After a century has passed, the concept of dictatorship of the proletariat must be thought out again and
reconsidered in relation to a society where the influence and weight of the proletariat and of the workers in
general have become a determinant in public life and where, in countries democratically and socially more
advanced, the state reflects the continuous evolution of class positions. With regard to Russian experience
in particular, it is a fact that the February Revolution would have disappeared without trace, and the
October Revolution would not have gone beyond the phase of civil war and the interference of the
imperialist foreigners, if the proletariat had not shown indomitable will and the ability to take control of the
apparatus of power of the tsarist state, to smash it, and to provide a substitute. But it would be absurd to
close one’s eyes to the fact that the dictatorship of the proletariat has resolved itself into a dictatorship of
the Bolshevik Party, and this in turn into a personal dictatorship of Stalin, and thus put itself beyond the
bounds of the prophecies and concepts of the masters of socialism.

Invoking the legacy of Gramsci, Togliatti called for a reinvigoration of doctrine that, based in the
national experience of Italy, would offer a unique perspective on the events of the international
realm. Within these debates, the legacy of Lenin and Marx remained very much at the center.

Worker: London: June 22, 1956. This statement is typical: “We recognize that in spite of the grave harm caused by
these abuses the Soviet people achieved very great and historic successes. In the face of terrible difficulties, they
established socialism, withstood and defeated the Nazi onslaught, and reconstructed their country after the
unparalleled devastation of the war. This achievement deserves the admiration of all and shows the superiority of the
socialist system over capitalism and the creative possibilities it opens up for the people” (176).

375. The Anti-Stalin Campaign, Pietro Nenni, “Il rapporto Krusciov e la polemica sul Comunismo,” Avanti! (June

376. The Anti-Stalin Campaign, Palmiro Togliatti “Report to the Central Committee of the Italian Communist
Party” (June 24, 1956):193-267. This speech was published on June 26 in L’Unità but was not reported in the
Soviet Union. The PCI emerged as the most vocal critic of Stalinism in the immediate aftermath of the Khruschev
speech; the fact that Gramsci enjoys a certain theoretical prestige in today’s conjuncture is undoubtedly related to the
PCI and its efforts to ground a criticism of Stalinism on the basis of the theoretical work of its founder. Indeed, the
claim that the “last great theoretical debate” in Marxism was between “Gramsci and Althusser” seems to be a
slightly distorted representation of the emergence of this fracture in the world socialist movement. It is important to
note that Togliatti espoused a traditional view of the dictatorship of the proletariat: “First of all, the affirmation of
the class nature of the state and of all states, both of the state directed by the bourgeoisie and of the state directed by
the working class, is a part of the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat. ‘Every state is a dictatorship,’ said
Gramsci. This statement is true and remains valid. The building of the socialist society constitutes a period of
transition between the revolution which demolishes capitalism and the triumph of socialism and the transition to
Communism” (233). Togliatti goes on to cast doubt on the notion that the “bourgeois” state apparatus cannot be
used in service of the socialist revolution, presaging the Eurocommunist movement.
And, as in 1914, the question of nationalism would haunt these discussions, prompting an international movement to reckon with its nationalistic tendencies. The attempt to restore the International, now being renewed under Khrushchev, had gone terribly wrong under Stalin. The famous split in the international communist movement, which arose at the outbreak of World War I and caused Lenin and the Bolsheviks such consternation, was now undermining the efforts of the PCF to remain a viable political force in France.

Upon the demand of many European communist parties, the CPSU issued a resolution published in *Pravda* on July 2, 1956 wherein they attempted to explain how Stalin had been able to stay in power for so long, how the cult of personality had been able to thrive in such an insidious manner. The CPSU traced these developments back to the origins of the socialist society, and the plans that were created to revolutionize society:

> This complicated international and internal situation demanded an iron discipline, a continuously growing vigilance, and the strictest centralization of leadership, which could not help but have a negative effect on the development of certain democratic forms. In the course of a fierce struggle against the whole world of imperialism, our country had to submit to certain restrictions of democracy, justified by the logic of our people’s struggle for socialism under circumstances of capitalist encirclement. But these restrictions were at that time regarded by the Party and the people as temporary, subject to removal as the Soviet state grew stronger and the forces of democracy and socialism developed the world over. The people consciously assumed these temporary sacrifices, seeing as they did new successes of the Soviet social system every day.\(^{377}\)

The temporary dictatorship that was seen as necessary is ultimately given a (albeit rhetorical) democratic basis: it is the will of the people, who “consciously” chose a temporary dictatorship rather than suffer defeat at the hands of the forces of imperialism. But even if this is reasonable and even if it may be necessary to resort to extraordinary methods to maintain democracy, how did Stalin manage to take over the state of emergency and stay in power for so long?

> …we should not forget that the Soviet people knew Stalin as a person who always acted in the defense of the USSR against the intrigues of the enemies, and that he fought for the cause of socialism. At times he applied unworthy methods in this struggle and violated the Leninist principles and norms of Party life. This

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was the tragedy of Stalin. But at the same time all this made more difficult the struggle against the lawless deeds perpetrated, because the successes of the construction of socialism and the consolidation of the USSR were ascribed to Stalin as long as the personality cult prevailed. Any action against him under these conditions would not have been understood by the people. Moreover, such a stand under these conditions would have been regarded as a stand against the cause of socialist construction, as a blow against the unity of the Party and the entire state, which would have been extremely dangerous in the situation of capitalist encirclement. In addition, the successes which the working people of the Soviet Union attained under the leadership of their Communist Party had aroused justifiable pride in the heart of every Soviet person and created an atmosphere in which individual mistakes and shortcomings seemed less important against the background of such enormous successes, while the negative consequences of these mistakes were quickly made good by the colossal growth of the vital forces of the Party and the Soviet society.

Here, the CPSU’s response seems implausible, even if it has a certain logic. Stalin did not have an official government position up through 1934, relying instead on his post as general secretary of the CPSU. Stalin would have been subject to immediate recall at any meeting of the central committee of the party, and he could have been suspended by the Politburo as well. In fact, it was precisely this tenuous position that resulted in his efforts to consolidate power and purge the Politburo of his enemies. The existence of “justifiable pride” at the victories of the Motherland are likely only after the repulsion of the Nazi invasion of 1941 (at the Battle of Stalingrad) and the march towards Berlin. As Khrushchev had himself argued, Stalin had grossly underestimated the threat of Nazi Germany and had failed in his duties as military commander throughout the war. If Stalin enjoyed immense popularity, it was only after the repulsion of the Nazi invaders, a threat which Stalin himself had downplayed because of the non-


379. Duncan Hallas, The Comintern: A History of the Third International (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 1985), 144. But even if this was true in the early part of Stalin’s ascent, it is unlikely to explain the purges of the 1930s. With the exploration of archive materials unavailable before the collapse of communism, Getty and Naumov argue that “Stalin’s serpentine and convoluted road to terror can no longer be explained by organized resistance to him. The notion that we have clung to for so long—that there must have been ‘liberal’ or ‘decent’ Bolsheviks who tried unsuccessfully to stop Stalin’s plan for terror—is no longer tenable. Instead, the real picture is even more depressing than a heroic but futile resistance to evil. At every step of the way, there were constituencies both within and outside the elite that supported repression of various groups, sometimes with greater vehemence than Stalin did” (The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), xiv.
aggression pact between Russia and Germany which had caused a disturbance in the PCF.\textsuperscript{380}

What could have allowed him to rise to power in the first place, and then to stay there throughout the tumultuous thirties?

The answer must have something to do with the growth of a vast bureaucratic apparatus. This bureaucracy, which has been called the “rule of nobody,” has also been seen as the emergence of a new class—in the Marxist sense. There was a prolonged debate about the nature of this bureaucracy within the international communist movement, and it found its way into academic scholarship as well. Trotsky’s initial criticism against Stalin’s deformation of the worker’s state gave way to a second wave of Marxist criticism that saw the growth of the bureaucratic state apparatus as consolidating the power of an emergent class of managers.\textsuperscript{381} In supporting the thesis of the “cult of personality” Khrushchev thus insulates the current leadership from these pointed critiques of bureaucracy itself, even while tacitly blaming “the people” for their support of Stalin. Here, the notion of popular sovereignty serves as a displacement of responsibility: “rule by the people” becomes synonymous with “rule by nobody.” More of an excuse than an explanation, the CPSU statement embraces the polarity of dictatorship-democracy, but ultimately comes down on the side of democracy. It is popular sovereignty that can legitimate a personal dictatorship: who are the Politburo to unseat a popular leader?

\textsuperscript{380} Prior to the signing of this pact, the Nazi party was considered to be a common enemy of the PCF and its Soviet handlers. After the pact was signed, the PCF was in the awkward position of having to openly embrace the fascist threat to France.

\textsuperscript{381} In particular one can cite James Burnham and Max Shachtman: Shachtman, \textit{The Bureaucratic Revolution: The Rise of the Stalinist State} (New York: The Donald Press, 1962) and Burnham, \textit{The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World} (New York: John Day, 1941). The ex-Trotskyist group \textit{Socialisme ou Barbarie} in France developed this critique in a third wave of criticism. Of note in particular is the work of Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis on this front. Ernest Mandel also developed a critique of the psychological and ideological basis of bureaucracy, what he called the “dialectic of partial conquests.” See Mandel, “What is the Bureaucracy?” in \textit{The Stalinist Legacy}, 60-94.
Even if Khrushchev himself did not advance an accurate analysis of the situation along Marxist-Leninist lines (as had been requested by many European parties) he did open up a space for a discussion of these issues, on the international scene, in a way that was unprecedented during Stalin’s reign. Within the Communist Party, ideas of political leadership were openly challenged in the aftermath of Khrushchev’s 1956 “de-Stalinization” effort and the violent invasion of Hungary in that same year by Soviet military forces. The PCF was slow to embrace these changes. During the invasion of Hungary, as well as the unrest in Poland of October 1956, the PCF encouraged the firmest response from its Soviet leadership. Intellectuals outside the party seemed demonstratively more legitimate in their opinions than their doctrinaire counterparts who stayed tied to a political platform. Sartre, who had been a vocal proponent and marching companion of the PCF from 1952-1956, abruptly reversed position and condemned the invasion of Hungary. The journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, however, was the only one to frame the revolution in Hungary as a proletarian uprising targeted at the bureaucracy itself.

Although Khrushchev denounced the “cult of personality” of Stalin, he seemed unable to break from the idea of personality itself—his “secret” speech is ladled with a generous helping of effusion for Lenin. This is how he introduces the great figure of Bolshevik mythology:

> The great modesty of the genius of the Revolution, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, is known. Lenin had always stressed the role of the people as the creator of history, the directing and organizational role of the party as a living and creative organism, and also the role of the Central Committee. Marxism does not negate the role of the leaders of the working class in directing the revolutionary liberation movement.


This doctrinaire statement about the role of leadership is no startling revelation. What makes Lenin so great is that he did not think of himself as a dictator. What Stalin, therefore, did wrong was to assume such powers for himself—to forget that it was not he who is making history, but the masses. Stalin forgot that his ultimate source of power was the people. In the Soviet Union, this narcissism had well-documented and disastrous effects. With the entire state apparatus at his hands, Stalin’s personal failings could result in death, famine, or even the annihilation of the human race (if the Cold War had simmered over into a “Hot” one). This fact makes all the more striking the manner in which the Soviet party attempted to encourage de-Stalinization of its most staunch European allies. The documents sent to the PCF and the PCI by the CPSU relayed the following directive: “You, too, must change your methods of leadership, because, as the personality cult, personal leadership and disregard of party rules did considerable harm to us in the Soviet Union, such harm would be even greater in your case since you have not yet taken power.”

This statement can only be fully appreciated in light of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and its long history within the socialist movement. Suffice to say, if the goal is taking state power then anything that hinders the achievement of that goal is a most serious error. If the goal is to emancipate the working class, and the only way to accomplish this goal is the revolutionary seizure of state power, and if the cult of personality prevents or hinders such operations, then the cult of personality can be seen as a serious weakness indeed. But the logics that are encapsulated in this claim defy reason when seen from another vantage point. For how could the PCF, a minority party excluded from government and having no army, no nuclear

weapons, no Gulags, be subject to a more serious threat from the subversion of leadership?

What would the result of such a subversion be? The fact that this missive makes sense, that it has its own rationality, albeit a foreign one, is evidence of the fact that there is a discursive rupture which must be bridged if one is to gain any understanding of the historical conjuncture that now seems so distant. It has been argued that these discursive ruptures are the result of unpredictable events, such as the de-Stalinization campaign in the wake of Stalin’s death. If this is so, then the events that follow 1956 only make our task of understanding that much more difficult.

The early 1960s witnessed a new crisis: the conflict between Russia and China that came to be known as the “Sino-Soviet split.” In terms of this conflict, the PCF had always remained an ardent supporter of the Soviet side. While a precise date of the schism is impossible to fix, one can take August 5, 1963 as the point of no return, at which time took place an act that “put an end to all efforts at compromise.” The act in question was the signing of a test-ban treaty, a goal that fell in line with Moscow’s “peaceful coexistence” slogan. In fact, the Chinese went so far as to publicly condemn the PCF and its submission to the Soviet “baton” in no uncertain terms. The main line of Chinese dissent stood against the hegemony of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)—a debate that was often cast in terms of “centralism” versus

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387. The conjuncture in which Althusser wrote spanned his public lifetime, and would demand its own monograph in order to be fully appreciated. Such efforts have been underway; the first was Gregory Elliot’s *The Detour of Theory* and the most recent was Warren Montag’s *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Perry Anderson reckons that the Sino-Soviet split is the “founding moment” of Althusser’s early work, a fact which has eluded such eminent interpreters as E.P. Thompson. See Anderson *Arguments Within English Marxism* (New York: Verso, 1980), 106. If there is one document that inaugurates the “split” it is the 1960 release of *Long Live Leninism* by the CCP.


389. Fejtő, *The French Communist Party*, 146-7. The PCF had long been allied with the CPSU, and this claim was not without merit. PCF alignment with the Soviet cause, on a public level, dates to the 1960 Moscow Conference.
“polycentrism.” During this period, the Chinese maintained that the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was the essence of true Marxism-Leninism. But the political edge of this debate hinged on the nature of the Soviet claim to “peaceful coexistence” and the very nature of the transition from capitalism to socialism, themes that had a long lineage in the annals of Marxism. The very idea of leadership in world politics was contested by the Chinese communists. At this moment, the legitimacy of the Russian claim to be the existing dictatorship of the proletariat, and thus the vanguard of international socialism and the center of the international communist movement, was called into question. This anti-Soviet campaign would find an eager audience in a generation of French students and workers, who turned to Maoism as an antidote to the Stalinist legacy of the PCF. In this moment, ironically, it was the Stalinist line that was seen as reformist, with the slogan of “peaceful coexistence” being interpreted as code for passive reform. The Chinese Communist Party took the events of 1956 as an opening to push their criticism of the CPSU and call attention to the lack of a real “Marxist” analysis of the phenomenon of Stalinism.

The rift in the PCF was evident as early as 1957, despite its having weathered the storm of 1956 much better than its counterparts in Europe. This internal rift was emblematic of the world situation, and in fact was likely organized by the anti-Khrushchev faction centered on Molotov. Thus, the PCF found itself in 1957 in a tentative alignment with the CCP and their

390. Hirsh, *The French New Left*, 162. This position was a constant of the Chinese message for decades. In 1971, the 100 year anniversary of the Paris Commune, the Chinese Communist Party published the pamphlet “Long Live the Victory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!” (Foreign Language Press, Peking). Critical of the Khrushchev “revisionist” line, this pamphlet calls for the continuation of the international socialist revolution, under the banner of the dictatorship of the proletariat and cast in terms of anti-colonial struggles.


392. Fejtö, *The French Communist Party*, 84. Fejtö reports that Thorez had gone so far as to compose a congratulatory missive to Molotov when it seemed likely that Khrushchev would lose power, in summer of 1957 (92).
call to recreate a unified international movement. This alignment rested on the criticism of Soviet domination of the movement, the manner in which the Khrushchev speech was leaked, and the tension between the revolutionary goals of the PCF and its reformist tendencies. In 1957, Moscow released a declaration that set the stage for the oncoming Sino-Soviet split even while it papered over the real differences with verbal ambiguities. 1958 saw the “Great Leap Forward” and a resurgence of the idea of permanent revolution within the CCP. In France, 1958 marked the triumphant return of de Gaulle, the beginning of the fifth Republic. Throughout this time period the PCF remained virtually allied with the CCP, but vocally supportive of Moscow.

The 1960s

In 1960s France, a whole generation of students stood poised to change the world. Dominique Lecourt put it like this:

The question tormenting students in our era involved not their future, but the contribution they could make to building a society where any repetition of the tragedies through which our century had lived would be averted. In effect, we wanted to make a clean sweep of the past. We wanted to succeed where our parents had failed. Hence our zeal for rethinking the world, by making the most of what we had.

And Perry Anderson describes it this way:

Typically, the rebels of 1956 had appealed to the humanism of the young Marx against the administrative and intellectual repression of Stalinism; they had defended the cause of national independence and local tradition against Russian monolithism; they had rejected manipulative and putschist practices in the labour

395. Raymond Aron noted that the Fifth Republic constituted a “return to a parliamentary type of empire in which the emperor, elected for seven years by universal suffrage, exercises the authority of the head of the executive and freely uses referenda and plebiscites” (Democracy and Totalitarianism (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), xi. Thus, during a period in which as non-communist a figure like Aron could describe de Gaulle’s rule as the result of a “legal coup d’état” (viii), the PCF could muster little by way of resistance.
movement, for a consensual popular politics. By the early 1960s, these themes had become standard slogans of the official Communist leaderships themselves.\footnote{Anderson, \textit{Arguments}, 106. Anderson goes on to ask: “For all the passionate polemics and self-questioning of the hour, it might be said that overall it is the dearth of sustained study of Stalinism that is remarkable, rather than any pattern of cumulative research. Did the levy of ’56 produce a single substantial book, or even analytic essay, on the USSR in the later Kruschev years? Did it investigate the roots of the Sino-Soviet conflict?” (119). He cites the “lack of specialized skills and interests in Russia, Eastern Europe and China among the intellectuals who left he Communist movement in that year” as a primary reason, but doesn’t stop there: “It is difficult not to wonder whether the results of the socialist humanism of the time were not so analytically meagre because of a premise continually visible in \textit{The Poverty of Theory}: the belief that the real work was already done—the \textit{moral} critique of Stalinism which rendered painstaking sociological or historical inquiry into the dynamics of Eastern societies supernumerary, or secondary.” (120).

The meeting of the General Council of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in June of 1960 saw the CCP pushing its critique of the policy of peaceful coexistence, and the PCF found itself forced to align with one side. In the events that unfolded, the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat was debated. Thorez spoke of the necessity of revolution: “Efforts of opportunists and revisionists, in France \textit{as elsewhere}, consist in effacing this necessity of the revolutionary act. They interpret the manifold forms of transition from capitalism to socialism as a possibility to make and not to make revolution, to establish and not to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.”\footnote{Speech recounted in \textit{Problèmes du mouvement communiste international}, Paris: PCF, Jan. 1963. Cited in Fejtö, \textit{The French Communist Party}, 123. An astute reader of the situation and the text, Fejtö shows the messiness of the 1960 conference: “Compared to the 1957 conference, there was by 1960 a sort of reversal of alliances. The ‘centralist’ coalition had disappeared, and one now found together on the same side those Communist parties which had remained the most Stalinist (French, Czechoslovak, Bulgarian, and East German) and the Polish and Italian ‘revisionists,’ all rallying around the ‘de-Stalinizer’ Khrushchev. To make the confusion complete, ‘centralism’ was verbally defended by the Chinese, who, however, in fact openly refused to endorse decisions by the alleged ‘center,’ while Khrushchev refused to have the ‘leading role’ of the Soviet Union mentioned in any declaration—in order to be able to continue to exercise it in practice!” (121).}

In choosing alliance with Moscow over Peking, the PCF chose to accept Khrushchev’s arguments regarding the cult of personality, and to defer any further critique of Soviet society or Stalinism. In 1961 the PCF published a resolution repeating Khrushchev’s stance. They stated that:

\begin{quote}
The cult of personality resulted neither from the nature of the socialist system nor from the leading role played by the Leninist party. A further proof of this is the fact that the one and the other found the necessary
\end{quote}
strength within themselves to extirpate the phenomenon foreign to them. The cult of personality and its consequences are in fact in contradiction to the principles of Marxism-Leninism itself, which show that the masses are the ones that make history. The cult of the personality and its consequences are defects inherited from the capitalist regime and bourgeois individualism.399

In calling for the dictatorship of the proletariat, through a revolutionary act, and decrying the cult of personality as a survival of capitalism, they tacitly endorsed the understanding of the necessity of violent repression of counter-revolutionary tendencies. The belief that politics can, from the “top down” suppress such an entity as “bourgeois individualism” through violent means rests on the assertion that such forms of thought only exist by virtue of the fact that living and breathing members of a certain class espouse them. Logically, if one can remove the members of a class from a polity one can surgically remove the ideology that is tied to that class. In the intellectual arena, the critique of Stalinism rested on moral and humanist grounds, and could not offer an opposition to this interpretation. In fact, the humanist critique and the Khrushchev line proved good traveling companions.

In 1964 Khrushchev and the leadership of the Communist Party (and thus of the USSR) parted company. This was a very important moment for the PCF, coming as it did in the wake of Thorez’s death. While on the one hand it motivated a push for independence on the part of the PCF from its Russian polestar, the PCF was not quite willing to take up the cause of the Chinese either. In the resulting shake-up of international communism, the center threatened to collapse:

The event had such far-reaching, world-wide repercussions in all Communist parties, including the traditionally most docile East European satellite parties, because, in the view of the manifest weakness of the movement’s ‘center’ (the disunity and cracks in the Soviet party, and the lack of elegance of the methods used in making the change of leadership), the other Communist parties found themselves thrown back upon their own resources. They now had to depend on their popular bases and the masses needed for their development, that is, the national conditions of their origin and growth.400


But for the PCF, the immediate result was a rush toward the Soviet party and a retreat from democratization—a process that was admittedly far less involved than it had been in other communist parties. But even if the PCF refused to admit it, the course had been changed. A clearing had opened in which criticism might take root. Louis Althusser was an important figure in the emergent opposition within the PCF—an opposition which developed specifically among the students of the École Normale Supérieure on the Rue d’Ulm, and resulted in the monniker ulmiste or ulmard being given to its proponents. By 1966, these oppositionists were excluded from the PCF, although Althusser remained a member.

Writing in 1967, Fejtö could aptly survey Althusser’s position within this constellation of forces:

The chief inspirer of this trend is a brilliant philosopher, Louis Althusser, whose articles published within the last few years in various reviews (La Pensée, La Nouvelle Critique) have been collected in a book edited in 1966 by an ardent pro-Chinese ex-Communist, François Maspero: Lire Marx. A second work, written in cooperation with other Communist intellectuals, Lire le Capital, was published shortly thereafter. Attempting simultaneously to return to Marxist orthodoxy and to assimilate the contributions of such disciplines as psychoanalysis and anthropology while severely criticizing the PCF’s prolonged theoretical sclerosis, Althusser develops—without leaving the theoretical field, but with great intellectual rigidity—theses with political implications close to the Chinese positions.

Althusser’s influence was based in a popular oppositional movement, and having effects within that movement that worried the PCF. The publication of Reading Capital (1965) was a decisive point in Althusser’s evolving notoriety. Althusser had already come under attack from the PCF theorist Roger Garaudy, and “Ulm thus became a double instrument contesting the traditional university structure and the PCF leadership.”

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Committee meeting to “ideological and cultural problems,” one central concern of which was whether there was a “Marxist humanism” or not. Althusser was called to defend himself. The resulting resolution censured Althusser, confining him to a narrow field and discouraging any further political effects from his theoretical interventions. The PCF, meanwhile, had been attempting to convene an international meeting of the Communist Parties for the purposes of obtaining an official writ of excommunication for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As these developments reveal, those who argue that antihumanism was the mobilizing force of the 1960s in France, the key current of thought that led to the massive rebellions of May 1968, have much to account for in advancing this narrative.

The developments of 1968 could warrant their own chapter. For our purposes, though, it is sufficient to note that the interpretations of these events remained locked within a discursive framework firmly anchored to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. With the failure of the movement to translate into a full-fledged revolution, André Gorz stated that “the need for a new vanguard party is clearer than ever.” The problem of structure and its hold on human action and potential became a theoretical focal point for the next generation of scholars and activists. The problem of Stalinization, when counterposed to the successes of 1917, established the limits in which this problem could be thought on the Left.

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404. Fejtő claims that the resolution was misinterpreted by many contemporary observers: “Fundamentally, in matters of politics the resolution continued the basic ideas of the positions defended by Garaudy. As for Althusser, he was informed that he would be allowed to pursue the activities of a specialist restricted to his field—in which case he would be allowed freedom of expression—but he would be strongly opposed if he ventured further on a political level.” (203).

405. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H.S. Cattani, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990). As Dominique Lecourt points out, this thesis is not without its problems, especially given the fact that most of the slogans used in May ’68 were of a humanist flavor. See Lecourt, *The Mediocracy*, 24-7. Lecourt’s position is reinforced by Mark Poster, who argues in his *Existential Marxism* that existentialism was the driving influence throughout this period—a philosophy that certainly has a humanist tendency.

De-Stalinization & the Problem of Legitimacy

Even as the PCF leadership reluctantly groped their way toward a de-Stalinization, propelled more by force of circumstance than a genuine spirit of reformism, there was a limit in what they were capable of achieving in this regard. Between 1959 and 1961, Khrushchev’s efforts resulted in a wide-scale replacement of party leadership in Moscow and its satellite republics. The target of Althusser’s intervention was the “theoretical Stalinism” that still prevailed—the whitewashed version of Stalin that still hung in the minds of the PCF leadership and crippled its ability to maintain itself as a viable political force. The most pernicious effect of this theoretical Stalinism was the clamping down on intellectual production and discussion—the lack of a free exchange of ideas. This lack of discussion prevented the party from adapting to changing circumstances: as any good materialist will tell you, historical development in material relations demands changing ideas and practices to keep pace with the changing world. In seeking to re-emphasize materialism and denigrate idealism, Althusser was targeting the intellectual police actions of the PCF. Yet, perhaps because he was a member of the PCF and sought to stay that way, he was charged with the very kind of police action that he was attempting to call into question. Althusser and Althusserianism were, from the start, political theories:

“Althusserianism was not an avatar of Stalinism. On the contrary, it was Althusser’s iconoclasm within the PCF which initiated a genuine theoretical de-Stalinisation.”

One of the primary modes of this theoretical surgery, by way of which Stalin’s ghost might be forcibly purged from

the communist movement, was Althusser’s written texts. And the notion of a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and the PCF’s problematic espousal of this idea, formed a crucial part of his critique.

Within the PCF, this term had come up for debate as early as 1964. Admittedly, some of the party’s platform had already shown the strain of trying to incorporate a revolutionary idea like the “dictatorship of the proletariat” into the mission of a mass party. But in 1964, submitting to pressures from below, the PCF leadership permitted a discussion on whether or not the party should drop this idea completely from its platform. Georges Marchais, the very same person who, twelve years later, would be instrumental in the removal of the idea from the party platform, would be a vigorous defender of keeping the concept on the agenda.410 As early as 1956, Maurice Thorez had expressed a certain ambivalence about the concept, saying that “The variety of forms…has nothing to do with the content of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This content must always be the same. It is not different from one nation to another. Its model was and remains furnished by the country of the October Revolution…. [and is] based on the soviet system.”411 As we saw earlier, Thorez rebuked the PCI in 1960, and staunchly defended the dictatorship of the proletariat as the only road to socialism.

The necessity of violence as the basis of this dictatorship was a constant theme. Take this quote from Waldeck Rochet: “While fully guaranteeing the development of the largest possible democracy for the immense mass of the people, it will be necessary that the new [socialist regime] adopt laws tending to protect and defend the new social organization and take measures

410. Tiersky, *French Communism*, 293. The arguments presented by those elements who sought to abandon the concept are remarkably similar to those that were presented by the leadership itself in 1976.

in order to insure respect of the laws.”\textsuperscript{412} Such statements must have seemed ominous indeed to
those parties committed to the liberal democratic tradition and skeptical of the process of de-
Stalinization. It certainly made forging alliances with other parties on the Left all but impossible.
Yet, by 1971, the term had disappeared from the PCF program; Marchais stated that “We no
longer employ that expression, because, as a result of fascism, the word dictatorship evokes a
regime which excludes democracy and liberty.”\textsuperscript{413} In the space of ten years, the PCF had gone
from condemning bourgeois individualism and endorsing the revolutionary act of establishing
the dictatorship of the proletariat, to endorsing democracy and liberty. Such reversals were all
too typical of life under Stalin, when a change in foreign policy of the Soviet Union translated,
through the Comintern, into changing party lines across Europe.\textsuperscript{414}

Euphemisms had often been substituted for this idea, such as “the proletarian regime.”\textsuperscript{415}

Much of this ambiguity had to do with the PCF and its ability to create and maintain alliances
with other parties on the Left, in particular the socialist parties. In the creation of these alliances,
the debate centered on the idea of shared power and the fate of the transition into socialism.
Whereas the PCF often sought to ally itself for pragmatic reasons with other Left parties, those
parties believed that the PCF would, if it succeeded in taking power, take the route of the
Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{416} A party that seeks a “dictatorship” of itself is not a good electoral ally.

\textsuperscript{414} The most notorious example was the unexpected invasion of the USSR by Germany in 1941. Overnight the
“war that on June 21, 1941, was an imperialist war in Britain and France became a war for democracy on the
22nd.” (Hallas, \textit{The Comintern}, 162).
\textsuperscript{415} Tiersky, \textit{French Communism}, 294
\textsuperscript{416} The socialists had not made use of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat since the 1920s. The idea of the
\textit{vacances de la légalité} was briefly put in its place, but this term too fell out of use (Tiersky, \textit{French Communism},
295).
The debate finally came to what Tiersky has called the “vital center” when “in addition to verifying the erosion of the “chain of legitimacies” on the international level the discussion came to settle on the last remnant of the special legitimacy of the Communist party in the national revolutionary struggle; that is to say, the French Communists agreed to debate the fundamental Leninist addition to Marx: the necessity of the Party and the extent of its distinct role in the transition from capitalism to socialism.”

The chain of legitimacies that Tiersky describes is familiar to students of democratic theory. In such a chain, the Party becomes equivalent to the class, which itself is equivalent to the national interest at large. Tiersky notes that the PCF had made claims to be the “representative of the national interest,” but he goes on to argue that this claim is essentially Jacobin-Soviet in nature because it claims to be the “most legitimate representative of the polity.” Tiersky establishes a “classic model which defines an ‘authentic’ socialist regime as one in which the Communist Party is the guide, vanguard, and orienting force: in short, the dominant ruling power.”

In looking to the Bolshevik example, Tiersky glosses over the nuance that animates the PCF’s internal debates. By looking for equivalences, he glides over important distinctions. The story that Tiersky tells, drawn from Isaac Deutscher’s influential work, has become something of a myth of the Russian Revolution. What appears to him as “naive” in the Bolshevik view of the

417. Tiersky, French Communism, 295.

418. It is worth noting that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed a similar idea of “chain of equivalences” in their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (New York: Verso, 1985). They argued that a discursive strategy of articulating such equivalences was the only way to achieve power within a democratic framework. This book, however, develops a “logic of political action itself” that goes beyond socialist politics to join up with emergent political movements centered on (for example) feminism, ecology, or racial justice. Indeed, uncoupled from any “real” set of economic interests, such a socialist strategy resembles socialist movements of history in name only—a fact that is a consequence of their concept of the “floating signifier.”

419. Tiersky, French Communism, 297.

420. Tiersky, French Communism, 297.
masses is that they expected that the masses would follow them in the construction of socialism. When this did not happen they banned opposition parties completely because the people had lost faith in the ability of the Bolsheviks to follow through on their promises. In the context of the PCF debate, this narrative was a powerful one. There is little doubt that the socialist parties had real anxieties about sharing an electoral strategy with a party that claimed Leninist heritage, given the behavior of the Bolsheviks in the immediate aftermath of their victory. But what this narrative ignores is precisely the unique claim to legitimacy that the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat represents. It cannot be equated with the will of the people, nor with can it be said to lay claim to be “representative of the polity” in its entirety.

With this somewhat messy history in mind, we must turn to the problem of legitimacy that the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat invokes. It is common for democracy to justify itself on the basis of popular sovereignty. Even formal models of democracy, by which democracy is defined and legitimated by the existence of certain institutional structures, ultimately bases itself on rule of the *demos*. The people, in order to rule, must have both a common will to rule together and an agreed upon set of procedures by which to reach decisions. For centuries, the social contract tradition has offered a powerful model of legitimacy: according to the social contract theory democracy ultimately relies on the consent of the governed. Consent, either tacit or voluntary, underlies the notion of legitimacy that bourgeois democracy has put forward since the time of the “Glorious Revolution.”

421. The notion of tacit and voluntary consent has a central place in the work of John Locke, whose *Two Treatises of Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) is considered to be a bulwark of social contract theory. Originally published in 1690, on the heels of the Exclusion Controversy and the bloodless revolution that established constitutional limits to monarchical power, this text was a touchstone of democratic theory and practice for centuries to come. The bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were a constant source of inspiration to socialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Opposed to the will of the people stands the will of the minority, or perhaps an individual. Such persons impose their will upon the rest, occupying a position of dictatorship over the demos. If we read the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat through this lens of democratic theory, we miss its unique meaning and potential in a constellation of available ideas of political leadership at the turn of the twentieth century. One common error is to juxtapose the “Jacobin” mentality to the “liberal-democratic” and thus align the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the Jacobins and the “excesses” of democracy. This notion manifests itself in various modes. Here, it will suffice to examine Tiersky’s interpretation of the Bolshevik revolution, in which he situates Montesquieu versus Robespierre: the liberal-democratic tradition versus the Jacobin “will of the people.” He situates the dictatorship of the proletariat within the orbit of the Jacobin model:

The development of a single-party dictatorship under Lenin and Stalin was not predictable from the tenets of classical Marxism. However this may be, in identifying the Marxist-Leninist parties alone with the authentic ‘will of the people,’ the Russian Bolsheviks consecrated the Jacobin notion of democratic dictatorship as the essence of what Marx had called the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.” Moreover, in developing the theory of the Soviet Communist Party as the ‘vanguard of the vanguards,’ the Jacobin conception was rendered essential to the Stalinist perspective on the level of the international communist movement as well.\(^\text{422}\)

It is somewhat unfair to accuse Lenin of using the language of the “will of the people” to justify the single-party regime of the Bolsheviks from 1917 until his death. Given that the Narodniks had monopolized this language in the Russian context since the middle of the previous century, and since Lenin was a careful reader of Marx, he veered away from this kind of legitimation of

\(^{422}\) Tiersky, *French Communism*, 9.
his political party. For a Marxist like Lenin, the notion of the unified “people” erases the inherent class distinctions that make such a unity artificial. Lenin contorted himself in all manner of verbal acrobatics in order to avoid using the terminology of the “will of the people” to justify Bolshevik rule. In the first place, the Bolshevik party always represented itself as the deputy of the revolutionary class, the proletariat. When the political conditions demanded an alliance with the peasantry, in order to cement Bolshevik victory against its rivals, Lenin changed tactics. But he did not resort to a notion of the unified people. At a basic level, it seems hard to place Lenin’s motive for such a clumsy formulation as the “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” where he might just as easily have said the “dictatorship of the will of the people” or the “democratic will of the people.” This verbosity is a result of a delicate conceptual balancing act which has its origins in the political movement. It has all the hallmarks of clumsy, technical jargon rather than slick advertising phrases. The idea of the “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” is one that seeks to define, with scientific precision, what exactly it says and what it advocates.

423. “Narodnik” is a catch-all term for a multitude of political movements during the nineteenth century in Russia. Loosely speaking, it represents the Russian populist movement that was the immediate precursor to the Bolshevik revolution. Lenin’s older brother had been hanged as a result of participating in a plot to execute the Tsar, during the period of Narodnik insurrection. For a full account of the movement, in all its nuance and complexity, see Franco Venturi, Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1960). The word derives from narodnost, which, Venturi notes, is “derived from narod, meaning both ‘people’ and ‘nation’ (like the German Volk)” and in the middle of the nineteenth century this word had a “political intonation, one of reaction against the French Revolution, against the subsequent national and at the same time liberal movements” (19). As with the appeal to popular sentiment that Stalin would undertake, this absolutist appeal to popular sovereignty was meant to legitimate the prevailing order even while it offered a basis to criticize that order.

424. Lenin, “The Revolutionary-Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry”, Collected Works Volume 8, 293-303. This pamphlet was written in 1905, during the first (failed) revolution against the Tsar. The matter at hand was the participation in the newly minted Duma—a “bourgeois” institution. The central theoretical and political issue was whether Russia was able to transition to a socialist revolution without undergoing a bourgeois revolution first. Lenin, at this point, believed in the necessity of a bourgeois revolution in Russia, and thus advocated for socialist participation in the Duma against the “Social-Revolutionaries”: “Social-Democracy has constantly stressed the bourgeois nature of the impending revolution in Russia and insisted on a clear line of demarcation between the democratic minimum programme and the socialist maximum programme” (294).
In 1903, the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) made the historic move of putting the phrase dictatorship of the proletariat into the party program. This “Second Congress” was also of historical importance because it inaugurated the famous split between the “Bolsheviks” and the “Mensheviks” that would be so vital in shaping the following years of revolutionary struggle in Russia. Despite this fundamental controversy, however, the vote on the content of the program was almost unanimous. Herein, the RSDLP acknowledged the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a result of the need to suppress opposition after it seizes power. It was not Lenin, but his mentor and future rival Plekhanov who proposed this language. In fact, Lenin’s use of this phrase in 1905 signaled his common heritage with the Social-Democratic movement of Europe, even while showing his own innovation with the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat: his appendage of “…and peasantry” is a political slogan that indicates to the peasants that the oncoming socialist regime will not seek to exploit them. It is also formulated against Trotsky at this moment, who is arguing for the idea of a “permanent revolution.”

In 1905, Lenin reconsidered Marx’s words of 1848 on the question of popular sovereignty and its relationship to dictatorship. In the articles Lenin cites from the Neue Rheinische Zeitung,

425. This Congress has received much historical attention. See Draper, The Dictatorship of the Proletariat, chapter three for an account of its context and a portrayal of these events. Of note in particular is Trotsky’s assurance that the dictatorship of the proletariat was “not a Jacobin act” (Draper, Dictatorship of the Proletariat, 69).

426. For a discussion of Lenin’s innovation and its political context see Draper, The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’: From Marx to Lenin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987). Especially chapter four. It is important to note that Draper makes the case in chapter three that Plekhanov, the elder statesman of Russian socialism, was responsible for the development of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat that Lenin picked up in 1905. “In 1892 and 1893 Plekhanov’s passing references to the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ were uninformative, but one must pause at the fact that his short article of 1893, in the French party’s organ, ended with an italicized invocation of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat as a means to attain the end which is the socialist organization of production’: that is, he used the term virtually as a routine agitational synonym for the socialist goal in general. This sort of thing will not be commonly seen in the socialist press until after 1917” (67).

427. Shachtman, Bureaucratic Revolution, 175.
Marx seems to advocate for the dictatorship of popular sovereignty. Yet, even at this crucial moment, when Lenin is polemizing about the question of a constituent assembly, he does not invoke the language of the will of the people. In fact, he goes out of his way to emphasize the divided nature of the concept of the people under Marx’s theory of class struggle: “Marx speaks of the ‘people’. But we know that he always fought ruthlessly against petty-bourgeois illusions about the unity of the ‘people’ and the absence of a class struggle within the people. In using the word ‘people’ Marx did not thereby gloss over class distinctions, but united definite elements capable of bringing the revolution to completion.”

During the Third Congress, the issue was becoming more acute:

A revolutionary people strives for the sovereignty of the people; all the reactionary elements defend the sovereignty of the tsar. A successful revolution, therefore, cannot be anything but the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, whose interests, equally opposed to the sovereignty of the tsar, coincide. After the overthrow of the autocracy, the struggle will not cease, but become more intense. That is precisely the time when the reactionary forces will organise for the struggle in real earnest. When we have won the sovereignty of the people, we shall have to consolidate it—this is what is meant by the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship. We have no reason whatever to fear it. The establishment of the republic would be a tremendous victory for the proletariat, although, unlike the bourgeois revolutionary, the Social-Democrat does not regard the republic as the ‘absolute ideal’ but merely as something that will guarantee him freedom to wage the struggle for socialism on a broad basis.

This formulation sets up two notions of sovereignty, arguing that one is more real than the other.

If a people really is “revolutionary” then it is forged into a kind of temporary unity for the purposes of waging a common struggle against the absolutism of the tsar. This sovereignty, even if “won” will have to be consolidated. The goal, for Lenin here in 1905, is the establishment of a republic. Such a republic can only be founded on the action of the people—but it is not the whole unified people who will undertake this founding. There seems to be no need of a unanimous social contract. This effort of consolidation of the sovereignty of the people is what

Lenin calls the “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship”—an idea that sounds more like the institutionalization of new “modes and orders” than the creation of a “general will.” In this taking up the themes of Machiavelli rather than Rousseau, Lenin nonetheless comes back to Marx: the implementation of the bourgeois republic is a necessary step (in 1905) on the way to socialism because it will “guarantee” basic freedoms necessary to the continuation of the struggle toward socialism.

This “guarantee” is a curiosity for someone who seems to put so much weight on the power of the bayonet over the power of the law. Whence the guarantee? Could a liberal constitution offer such a guarantee to socialists of the future?

If, however, the autocratic government is really overthrown, it will have to be replaced by another. This other can be only a provisional revolutionary government. It can base itself for support only on the revolutionary people—on the proletariat and the peasantry. It can be only a dictatorship, that is, not an organisation of ‘order’, but an organisation of war. If you are storming a fortress, you cannot discontinue the war even after you have taken the fortress. Either the one or the other: either we take the fortress to hold it, or we do not storm the fortress and explain that all we want is a little place next to it. 430

Here we reach a crucial distinction that Lenin seems uncomfortably ambivalent about. One the one hand, he claims there is a distinction between the “provisional revolutionary government” and the “revolutionary people.” This is a classic liberal democratic formula: the people, as sovereign, are the base of support for the government. But the “people” is not all the people—it is specifically qualified as the proletariat and the peasantry. And these people are the “revolutionary” elements of the larger population. In Lenin’s thinking at this time it would seem that the bourgeoisie is the revolutionary class in Russia, but that it is incapable of bringing about the revolution that it needs in order to assume power. This line of thinking has its origins in Marx and his rumination on the German bourgeoisie, so Lenin seems to be on safe “Marxist” ground at least as far as this hypothesis goes. But what about the powerful images that follow?

“It can be only a dictatorship.” Is the “it” the provisional revolutionary government? The “it” from the previous sentence would seem to confirm this hypothesis. If that is the case, then Lenin is equating the dictatorship with a specific government. Thus, the distinction between the “base” and the “superstructure” crumbles: the government is nothing less than the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasants, upon which it is based. There seems to be no room whatsoever for a revolutionary bourgeois government—unless perhaps it is based upon the revolutionary activity of the proletariat and the peasantry. What can we make of this conceptual muddiness? In such moments perhaps it is best to do what Lenin would do: return to Marx.

Lenin’s use of the word order in inverted commas echoes back to Marx’s 18th Brumaire, in which Marx lambasts the “parties of order” as the reactionary forces that attempt to forestall the revolution of 1848. Indeed, in this text, Lenin recounts the Marx of 1848 as an authority for his own position.431 The way that both Marx and Lenin are undergirding their claims for political power is to build a scientific theory of development, in which “revolutionary” merely equates to “forward moving,” or in the direction of resolving inherent contradictions in the given social system. The analysis of capitalism, which remains to this day one of Marx’s most lasting contributions to both the practice of social science and the revolutionary socialist Left, is the basis for these claims about the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It has been suggested that Lenin “got Marx wrong” on this question, that he distorted the original meaning of Marx and Engels to include the idea of suppressing counter-revolution after the successful revolution.432 Given that Marx and Engels never had a successful revolution to

431. Much could be said about the image of the fortress as well—an image that appeared in Machiavelli’s The Prince and which Althusser would use against the PCF in his essay “What Must Change in the Party” (New Left Review 109 (1978): 19-46.

think about, it seems fruitless to take this argument too seriously. The Lenin of 1905 was already thinking ahead to victory, it would seem, a strategy that seems to have worked out. Indeed, it is to Lenin’s credit that he constantly adapted his thinking to the situation as it developed, rather than to stay clinging to outmoded ideas. But even this attempt to think ahead of the curve has its limits. And if Lenin had some conceptual muddiness in his use of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, perhaps the revolution of 1917 forced this muddiness to become more clear.

It seems likely that a tentative hypothesis could be offered that could account for the changing usage of the term without relying on an attempt to dredge up “Marx’s original intent.” The historical events that occur between 1848 and 1917 seem like good candidates for this account: the terminology changes as the political situation changes and as the opportunities for revolution come and go, some seized and others let slip. While it is certain that Lenin’s unique formulation of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry had political motivation, it was not this extended version that found its way into the European public forum of 1917. And it was not this extended version that Stalin would invoke as dogma to justify his regime. In tacking on ideas, Lenin seems to push the idea to its breaking point: at its most extended this idea becomes the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, as known through the revolutionary vanguard party and its professional revolutionary science, as manifested through a revolutionary provisional government on the road to a socialism which is itself a step in the development of international communism.

Lenin justifies his position in 1905 as related to the well-organized nature of the proletariat at this critical moment. Unlike in 1850, when Marx could not even raise the question of the proletariat participating in a provisional government in Germany, this is a viable option for the
revolutionary class in Lenin’s time. What has changed? What Marx lacked, according to Lenin, was a *party*; “thus, the idea of an independent workers’ party, which has become with us bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, was then something new.” What Marx needed, before it would even be conceivable as to whether the proletariat could participate in representative bodies of any kind, was “a working-class organisation behind him.” This idea of the modern, mass party is also one that shows a real difference in the Leninist ideas and those of the Jacobins.

In 1917 Lenin revises his position once again. Whereas the goal of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” had been the slogan before the February Revolution, the disasters of the Provisional Government lead Lenin to formulate things differently. If the objective of bourgeois revolution was to be rid of the last vestiges of medieval society then the socialist revolution would have to be something altogether different. The theory of “dual power” would emerge out of this conjuncture. According to Lenin, the emergent power of the worker’s and soldier’s councils constituted a new state in and of itself.

By 1921, after the successful October Revolution and after the tumultuous events of the civil war, Lenin would have yet more material by means of which to reconsider his idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Where does he end up on this line?

When the revolution finally occurred, the formula proved to be disorienting and worthless. The revolution took on an unexpected form—not of a revolutionary provisional government in conflict with Tsarism, but of a revolutionary democracy (the Soviets) in growing conflict with the Provisional Government run by the bourgeoisie.

The Bolsheviks took no immediately socialist actions upon taking power in 1917. Situated between the Soviets and the Provisional Government and its policy of continuing the war, the


Bolsheviks were not poised to implement a dictatorship of their party. The events of the years to come would challenge the emergent regime in manifold ways, and Lenin would be removed from the stage in short order. We all know how this story ends up: Stalin takes over the dictatorial party apparatus, builds a bureaucratic machine, and dominates the federation of Soviet socialist republics. But between the 1917 revolution and Stalin’s assumption of power lies an ocean of possibilities.

**Democratic Dictatorship**

On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the October Revolution, Lenin offered a sober analysis of where the previous four years had taken the Bolshevik party and the Russian people:

> The direct and immediate object of the revolution in Russia was a bourgeois-democratic one, namely, to destroy the survivals of medievalism and sweep them away completely, to purge Russia of this barbarism, of this shame, and to remove this immense obstacle to all culture and progress in our country.436

What should replace this barbarism? Bourgeois-democratic institutions? No:

> The Soviet system is one of the most vivid proofs, or manifestations, of how the one revolution develops into the other. The Soviet system provides the maximum of democracy for the workers and peasants; at the same time, it marks a break with bourgeois democracy and the rise of a new, epoch-making type of democracy, namely, proletarian democracy, or the dictatorship of the proletariat.437

This type of democracy gives new content to the ideals of democratic politics. Where the Bolsheviks helped to cleanse the stage of its medieval survivals they accomplished a bourgeois democratic preparation for socialism. By instituting policies that targeted religion, women’s suffrage, and national oppression, the Bolsheviks merely take up the banner that was first held high by their bourgeois forebears, who “promised to rid mankind of medieval privileges, of sex


inequality, of state privileges for one religion or another (or ‘religious ideas’, ‘the church’ in general), and of national inequality. They promised, but did not keep their promises.”

There is no language of the will of the people in this document. There is no invocation of the solemn oath of popular sovereignty. There is, in its place, a narrative of historical development in which government plays a pivotal role. It is the self-organization of the masses that gives rise to the theory of dual power and to the critique of formal/institutional democracy. Democracy is not a plateau that, once enshrined in a constitution, demands no further politics. Indeed, in this analysis, democracy is always tied to the idea of class but, because of this, democracy is always a moving target. In taking power, the Bolsheviks saw themselves as advancing the cause of democracy. This was not democracy accomplished through its opposite, dictatorship, however. Shachtman argues that:

In actual life, Lenin’s old formula could not achieve the purpose of guaranteeing the democratic revolution which he had assigned to it. He saw that the dual power in which the formula was partly realized meant in reality the subordination and thwarting of the aims of the revolution: the Provisional Government was able to maintain its anti-democratic régime only by virtue of the authority with which it was clothed by the collaborationist representatives of the revolutionary democracy—or by crushing the Soviets. The democratic revolution could be guaranteed only by the Soviets taking over all the power, not because revolutionary will and a power-centered party organization sufficed for that purpose, but because, in addition, they won the freely-given support and leadership of the Soviets. In championing the struggle for all power in the Soviets, Lenin was indeed abandoning an obsolete formula, but not by a hair’s-breadth did he violate his democratic convictions.

Yet, even if Shachtman can see Lenin abandoning his slogan in the moments of the revolution, it is clear that he did not completely abandon it. Indeed, he speaks in these terms in 1921 on the fourth anniversary of the revolution. There is apparently a necessity to use this language, to give certain kinds of reasons for the actions that one undertakes as a leader. The mode of political


439. This idea, too, finds its way into contemporary political theory. See Sheldon Wolin’s “Fugitive Democracy” Constellations 1, no. 1 (1994), 11-25.

leadership that holds together the various ambiguities and contortions of Lenin’s shifting vocabulary remains consistent. It is one that is motivated by a world-historical picture of social progress, and that has an end state that is different from the present moment. It takes upon itself the burden of shifting the world to this new stage of historical development. If liberal democracy has a “vision” of leadership, it can only be to represent the interests and desires of the people accurately and efficiently. Liberal democratic leadership caters to the people, but cannot envision any sort of change, even those that would be of benefit to the people, by virtue of its language of needs and desires. But this is not Lenin’s mode of leadership. He is neither dictator nor democrat. Enlightened statesman is more accurate, but even this idea has a certain hollow ring to it in today’s terminology of critical skepticism. As I will argue below, Lenin’s mode of political leadership occupies a unique position in the historical trajectory of the discourse on leadership. It is not easily categorized. In part this is due to its ambivalent nature, as well as its audacity. Some of Lenin’s claims seem so bold as to defy credulity. Can he really believe that he and his party can take over a government and forcibly usher in the new era of communism, in which all classes will be abolished? It is easy to dismiss these beliefs as naive. Brows furrow when Lenin claims that by taking up the socialist agenda, the problems of bourgeois democracy are solved “in passing.” 441 Surely he could not have been so naive.

The imperialist war that had resulted in so much death and destruction was a product of the international policy of finance capital, according to Lenin. He repeats this connection in the context of speaking about the transition to the NEP. Why? He specifically contrasts the dictatorship of the proletariat with the imperialist domination of the planet. 442 In this new

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441. Lenin, “Fourth Anniversary,” 54.
dictatorship, inaugurated by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the policies of international finance do not find a willing partner. Lenin has positioned the dictatorship of the proletariat between the historically obsolete peasantry, with its gusto for nationalist aspirations, and the predatory world of international finance. This position was criticized early on by Karl Kautsky, whose 1918 *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* was a broadside against the aspirations of the Bolshevik revolution. Here, Kautsky lays out a dichotomy between dictatorship and democracy that would come to be definitional for critics of Lenin’s party. Although skeptical of the potential for the Bolsheviks to usher in a new era of socialism, Kautsky places final hope in the concept of democracy: “The essential achievements of the Revolution will be saved, if dictatorship is opportunely replaced by democracy.” In holding democracy and dictatorship as alternative *methods* of achieving socialism, Kautsky sets up a conceptual framework that would prove to be enduring.

For us, therefore, Socialism without democracy is unthinkable. We understand by Modern Socialism, not merely social organisation of production, but democratic organisation of society as well. Accordingly, Socialism is for us inseparably connected with democracy. No Socialism without democracy. But this proposition is not equally true if reversed. Democracy is quite possible without Socialism. A pure democracy is even conceivable apart from Socialism, for example, in small peasant communities, where complete equality of economic conditions for everybody exists on the basis of participating in privately owned means of production.

The terms “social organisation of production” and “democratic organisation of society,” when conceived as two *different* elements of the equation of socialism, are uncomfortable circumlocutions of the traditional Marxist lexicon. What is at stake in their opposition is the nature of society itself, which is forced to occupy two positions simultaneously, both acting upon production and as the target of democratic organization. It is the role of political leadership, as

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seen through Kautsky’s lens, that makes possible this proposition about the prospects of socialism.

Kautsky sees the idea of dictatorship as essential to the thought of Blanqui and Weitling, two revolutionaries who believed in the power of violence to solve society’s problems. Wary of the tendency of underground movements to generate what he calls “Messiah-consciousness” of their leadership and their “dictatorial habits” Kautsky calls for the open political struggle for democracy. Yet, for all his pointed criticism of Lenin’s utopian ideas, Kautsky remains tied to a notion of popular struggle that cannot believe that there could be any reversals in the long march toward the inevitable future. The “evolutionary” tendencies of Bernstein find political formulation in Kautsky, and the movement that Marx and Engels chastised for its bourgeois democratic aspirations supports the massive slaughter of World War I.

Shachtman and Kautsky, and many others, who remain locked in a dichotomy of dictatorship/democracy fail to take account of the real innovation that is involved in Lenin’s political leadership. Some supporters of Lenin are also conceptually limited. They remain committed to a democratic Lenin who sometimes uses dictatorial means. On the other hand, recent biographers have attempted to show how Lenin paved the way for Stalin because of his dictatorial attitude that only rhetorically practiced democracy. Where Kautsky can compare the “method” of dictatorship with the “method” of democracy, Lenin sees a more dialectical

445. Kautsky, Dictatorship, 20. Weitling, Kautsky tells us, “wanted the greatest geniuses to govern. They would be selected in a competition by scientific assemblies” (21).

relationship between the two. Indeed, for Kautsky’s entire theoretical edifice to stand it requires a conjured abstract position remarkably similar to that invoked by Cortes: one remains capable of choosing between dictatorship or democracy in the same manner as Cortes claims to choose between two forms of dictatorship. The voluntarism of this political theory places the “will” at the center of all political activity, as sacrosanct. “Every conscious human action presupposes a will.” The “This Will is created by the great industry.” As economic development proceeds, it brings with it a consciousness in the form of the proletariat. As we will see below, this position is tacitly similar to Lenin in one important dimension. Exploited, in poverty, the proletariat seeks to attain for itself the riches of the capitalist social organization. Thus, one cannot really choose dictatorship, which is why Kautsky’s opposition remains a sterile one. Even the Messianic vision of a Weitling is “based, however, solely upon the expectation that the revolutionary army will find the right man” which is counterposed to “the conviction that unless the proletariat can free itself Socialism must remain an Utopia.” Either charismatic leadership or spontaneous collective action. But under each of these possibilities, for Kautsky, is the rational individual who chooses a method, who chooses a party, who chooses a government. Lenin did not assume this rational individual in his political activity. He did not base his political theory on a voluntarism that could be grounded in the epistemological position of the individual. As a social theory, Lenin remained committed to the notion that society is riven with conflicts

447. This is a central claim of Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, and the idea that democracy is a method by which the people chooses its elite becomes integrated into modern political science through the work of thinkers like Joseph Schumpeter. See especially his *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).


and that these conflicts produce different kinds of people with different conceptions of the world. The salient point politically is that these positions are not reconcilable with one another through formal political means. Thus, when Lenin invokes the dictatorship of the proletariat he implies a pastoral mode of leadership.

In a pastoral mode, the dictatorship of the proletariat could be likened to a shepherd who keeps wolves away while the sheep can mature and thrive. In this model of government the problem is not that the sheep cannot survive on their own, that they need paternal guidance because of some intrinsic immaturity or intractable deficiency. There is no expectation that the sheep will one day mature into wolves—the problem is that the sheep are incapable of defending themselves against the wolves. In Lenin’s worldview, this is the very definition of the peasantry, as tied to the traditions of serfdom. But if the peasants remain sheep in the teeth of the wolves, where do the proletariat stand?

…it must be said that large-scale machine industry—which is precisely the material source, the productive source, the foundation of socialism—calls for absolute and strict unity of will, which directs the joint labours of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people. The technical, economic and historical necessity of this is obvious, and all those who have thought about socialism have always regarded it as one of the conditions of socialism. But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one. Given ideal class-consciousness and discipline on the part of those participating in the common work, this subordination would be something like the mild leadership of a conductor of an orchestra. It may assume the sharp forms of a dictatorship if ideal discipline and class-consciousness are lacking. But be that as it may, unquestioning subordination to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry. On the railways it is twice and three times as necessary. In this transition from one political task to another, which on the surface is totally dissimilar to the first, lies the whole originality of the present situation. The revolution has only just smashed the oldest, strongest of the fetters, to which the people submitted under duress. That was yesterday. Today, however, the same revolution demands—precisely in the interests of its development and consolidation, precisely in the interests of socialism—that the people unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour. Of course, such a transition cannot be made at one step. Clearly, it can be achieved only as a result of tremendous jolts, shocks, reversions to old ways, the

451. This idea was also expressed by Shachtman: “Nowhere has the peasantry, by itself, acting independently, been able to take the leadership of a nation, organize the life of society and keep the reins of government in its own hands. For that, it is socially incapable, as has been proved over and over not only in the modern West but in the backward, overwhelmingly agrarian countries of Asia as well. It simply suffers from a social position which Marxism at any rate, did not create, but an understanding of which is indispensable to the eventual elimination of all classes” (Bureaucratic Revolution, 184).
enormous exertion of effort on the part of the proletarian vanguard, which is leading the people to the new ways. 452

Lenin invokes a powerful image that reveals much about his conception of political leadership. Conceived as patterned on the daily life of the factory worker, who submits to what Engels would call the “authority of steam,” the subordination of the many to the will of the leadership is a habit born in the factory. 453 It can take the form of subtle orchestration in the case of those who are well disciplined, or it can take the form of “sharp forms of dictatorship” if the workers are not as iron-like as they must be. Organizing the revolution on the pattern of industry, Lenin looks for an army of machine-parts with which to construct the society of the future. Whereas later theories of existentialism would see alienation in the workplace, having read Marx’s exhumed 1844 Manuscripts, Lenin sees a certain aesthetic beauty of purpose. The irony here is that the position of leadership is ultimately that of the capitalist. For Lenin’s orchestrator/dictator is the figure who sets the machines in motion, who gives each person his place in the assembly line, who envisions the final product and who embraces the risks—even while the employees embrace their place in the division of labor and put their bodies at risk near the gears and pistons. Lenin’s orchestrator/dictator is nothing more (and certainly nothing less) than an entrepreneur who seeks to reorganize society itself. The changes that come to psychology come as a result of the reorganization of social life—a process that has only just begun in Russia and that is not guaranteed by any natural laws. This is a unique formulation of political leadership:

And our whole task, the task of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks), which is the class-conscious spokesman for the strivings of the exploited for emancipation, is to appreciate this change, to understand that it is necessary, to stand at the head of the exhausted people who are wearily seeking a way out and lead them


453. Here Gramsci would seem to have learned from Lenin when he said “hegemony is born in the factory.”
Lenin goes on to extol the “genuine democracy” of the mass meetings, pointing toward the formation of what he calls “voluntary discipline.” This voluntary discipline Lenin contrasts with the discipline that was formerly “forced upon them by the exploiters.”455 This text is noteworthy in that Lenin makes clear the necessity, under certain conditions, for a single person to stand at the top of the dictatorship of the proletariat, above the party, in the shoes of supreme leader. But it seems equally evident that dictatorship of the proletariat is an image of workplace discipline:

> The more resolutely we now have to stand for a ruthlessly firm government, for the dictatorship of individuals in definite processes of work, in definite aspects of purely executive functions, the more varied must be the forms and methods of control from below in order to counteract every shadow of a possibility of distorting the principles of Soviet government, in order repeatedly and tirelessly to weed out bureaucracy.456

He invokes the image of “iron battalions of the proletariat” as the force that will usher in the new socialist relations.457 This is a main point of dispute between Kautsky and Lenin—Kautsky (and Bernstein) argue that the social conditions must change before the political revolution, whereas Lenin argues that the political revolution makes possible the retroactive creation of its own conditions of possibility.458 This mode of political leadership did not die with Lenin—in fact, Bukharin expressed it in 1925, when arguing that the Bolsheviks needed to switch tactics from force to persuasion:

454. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks,” 270.
455. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks,” 270.
458. In contemporary theory this distinction still provokes controversy. Lenin’s most vocal proponent in today’s theoretical milieu is undoubtedly Slavoj Žižek, whereas Hardt and Negri have argued a position much closer to that of Kautsky. Étienne Balibar, for his part, has tried to mediate these two positions. See Balibar, “Communism as Commitment, Imagination, and Politics” in *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference* (ed. Slavoj Žižek, New York: Verso, 2013).
No theme better reflected Bukharin’s political thinking and his reformism. In addition to industrialization, social revolution involved educating and remaking people, undertakings that required a new kind of political leadership which, for Bukharin, was pedagogical. Addressing party and particularly Komsomol activists, who outnumbered their elder comrades in the countryside and therefore often represented the party in the village, he explained that ‘the task of political leadership is in the broadest sense of the word… a social pedagogical task.’ If the new economics was evolutionary, the new politics was pedagogical—paternalistic, benevolent, and gentle.\(^{459}\)

In this moment, what Bukharin is advocating is the renewal of the local soviets which had been destroyed during the civil war. Here, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat reveals its more gentle (even if avowedly paternalistic) character. Lenin had made a similar argument in 1918:

Soviet power is nothing but an organisational form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the dictatorship of the advanced class, which raises to a new democracy and to independent participation in the administration of the state tens upon tens of millions of working and exploited people, who by their own experience learn to regard the disciplined and class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat as their most reliable leader.\(^{460}\)

If the Soviets are the organizational form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, then the vanguard party fades in importance. Here is a critical juncture in the revolution, before the years of civil war have taken their toll. The Soviets remain a viable governing force, and the party seems prepared to take a subordinate position. Lenin refers to the “highest type of state—Soviet power.”\(^ {461}\) After the revolutionary seizure of power, the necessity of the party comes into question. The new phase that Lenin sees involves a particular goal:

The bourgeoisie in our country has been conquered, but it has not yet been uprooted, not yet destroyed, and not even utterly broken. That is why we are faced with a new and higher form of struggle against the bourgeoisie, the transition from the very simple task of further expropriating the capitalists to the much more complicated and difficult task of creating the conditions in which it will be impossible for the bourgeoisie to exist, or for a new bourgeoisie to arise. Clearly, this task is immeasurably more significant than the previous one; and until it is fulfilled there will be no socialism.\(^ {462}\)


\(^{460}\) Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks,” page 265.

\(^{461}\) Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks,” page 245.

\(^{462}\) Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks,” page 245.
By pointing toward the use of political power for the creation of a set of conditions that will make socialism possible, Lenin invokes a spirit of Marxism that is far removed from the evolutionism of Bernstein and Kautsky. If there is a mode of political leadership that emerges from Marxism in the twentieth century, this is surely it. For while Bernstein and Kautsky take a position of leadership in the social democratic party, and within the theoretical universe of Marxism as well, they ultimately defer this leadership to the evolution of productive forces. They leave the necessity of leadership to the future. Lenin, too, looks toward the future but with a different orientation to that future. Lenin is looking forward to a time when the pressing necessity of the situation will give way to the implementation of order:

Dictatorship, however, is a big word, and big words should not be thrown about carelessly. Dictatorship is iron rule, government that is revolutionarily bold, swift and ruthless in suppressing both exploiters and hooligans. But our government is excessively mild, very often it resembles jelly more than iron....The struggle must also be waged by means of coercion. As the fundamental task of the government becomes, not military suppression, but administration, the typical manifestation of suppression and compulsion will be, not shooting on the spot, but trial by court....But our revolutionary and people's courts are extremely, incredibly weak. One feels that we have not yet done away with the people's attitude toward the courts as toward something official and alien, an attitude inherited from the yoke of the landowners and of the bourgeoisie.463

The ultimate limit to the implementation of order from above is an attitude of alienation. This limit encounters Kautsky's position, when he argues that any attempt to implement a revolution before its time is bound to fall back upon the use of force. As Kautsky points out, the dictatorship of the proletariat, as proclaimed in Russia, rests on a base of peasants: “What is represented to us as the dictatorship of the proletariat, if it were logically carried out and a class were able to exercise directly the dictatorship which is only possible for a party, would turn out to be the dictatorship of the peasants.”464 The fact that the peasantry, and not the proletariat, are the majority, means that either the dictatorship of capital or of the proletariat is alien to them.

What Kautsky calls the “object lesson” of the use of the method of dictatorship is that the forced implementation of socialism brings about civil war. Rather than resort to the expediency of violence, Kautsky advocates a gradualist reformism in the spirit of democracy:

So we are driven back upon democracy, which obliges us to strive to enlighten and convince the masses by intensive propaganda before we can reach the point of bringing Socialism about. We must here again repudiate the method of dictatorship, which substitutes compulsory object lessons for conviction.  

This, too, is a pedagogical position. From a stance of expert knowledge of the economy and its development, as “tested” through democratic elections, the social democratic party can “know” where it stands on the path to socialism. Its task is to convince the masses of the truth of this knowledge. Thus, although Kautsky views the different methods toward the same purpose as antithetical, he does so from a vantage point that is ultimately identical to that of Lenin. In each case, the leadership of the political body is in possession of a truth that reveals objective knowledge about the place of that political body relative to the rest of the world. The peasantry and the “unenlightened” (lacking class consciousness) proletariat are the target of propaganda techniques in order to bring them to the right way of thinking. This pedagogical stance is buttressed by a body of expert knowledge.

But even if this mode of leadership shows a pedagogical face to the peasantry, it reserves a violent facade for the bourgeoisie, at least during the early period following 1917. The organizational power of the Soviets, which had made possible the Bolshevik revolution,

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466. This would change as Lenin recognized the need to incorporate the skills of the petty-bourgeois and bourgeois elements into the infrastructure of the state. But even this firm resolve had a dual nature: “We have nothing to teach them, unless we undertake the childish task of ‘teaching’ the bourgeois intelligentsia socialism. We must not teach them, but expropriate them (as is being done in Russia, ‘determinedly’ enough), put a stop to their sabotage, subordinate them as a section or group to Soviet power. We, on the other hand, if we are not Communists of infantile age and infantile understanding, must learn from them, and there is something to learn, for the party of the proletariat and its vanguard have no experience of independent work in organising giant enterprises which serve the needs of scores of millions of people.” (Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality,” *Collected Works* Volume 27, 350.)
remained a potential check on the growth of bureaucracy according to Lenin and Bukharin.

Bukharin saw these local soviets as an essential element of the apparatus that could transform existing Russian society into socialism:

He viewed the nationwide pyramid of soviets as a grassroots teaching ‘laboratory’; upper levels were to be dominated by party members, assuring ‘secure proletarian leadership from above’; lower levels (village soviets mainly), however, were to be populated increasingly by ‘nonparty masses,’ because local soviets constituted ‘the laboratory in which we convert the peasants, overcome their individualist psychology, win them over, teach them to work in harmony with us, educate and lead them along the…socialist road.’

While this pastoral vision is itself a kind of archaic mode of governance, it is deployed here in a specific manner and with a specific conceptual arsenal. Thus, through Lenin’s writings and those of Bukharin, we see that the specific role of the vanguard party comes into question. This was the formation of the problematic of the vanguard party that would come to dominate thinking about political leadership throughout the century. The language of the dictatorship of the proletariat, forged as a weapon in a brutal struggle between the absolutism of the Tsar and the fledgling Bolshevik party, can easily flavor our understanding of this situation. It was precisely in the need to relate to the peasantry, to broaden the base for its “dictatorship,” that the Bolsheviks confronted the limits of their previous ideology. The personage of the “kulak” was a pivotal focal point of this political struggle, since he had been the target of ferocious attack by Lenin and the party and yet there were elements of the New Economic Policy that seemed to promote the existence of kulaks.

But it is also at this point that Lenin makes a curious detour. On the eve of the transition into the New Economic Policy (NEP), Lenin justifies this transition as a hard lesson learned from

467. Cohen, Bukharin, 204.
469. The kulak is a specifically Russian category that has a long history in socialist thought. It would detract from the central purpose of this essay to explore the relationship of the kulak to political leadership in the village, but this topic would undoubtedly be interesting in its own right.
struggle and experience. He points to the assumption on the part of the Bolsheviks that enthusiasm would be an adequate means to attain communism, and gestures to a new basis for success: “aided by the enthusiasm engendered by the great revolution, and on the basis of personal interest, personal incentive and business principles, we must first set to work in this small-peasant country to build solid gangways to socialism by way of state capitalism.”

This theme, as well, was taken up by Bukharin in the decade following Lenin’s death, and it animated his theoretical and political justification of the NEP.

To rephrase this idea, in the context of Lenin’s previous discussion: the obstacle encountered thus far in the implementation of the socialist agenda is the ideology of the peasantry, susceptible as it is to bourgeois manipulation and due to its exploitability as a slave mentality. Both Kautsky and Lenin agree on this point. Lenin saw in the body of the soviets a means of correcting this problem, by giving practical experience to the masses. Kautsky saw the Constituent Assembly as the only “legitimate” means of assessing the readiness of the masses for socialism. When the Bolsheviks dissolved the Assembly in 1918, in large part due to the fact that they had lost their majority position in this body, they apparently reverted to a dictatorial method of government. The period of civil war that would last until 1923 was just beginning, and (legitimately or not) the party invoked a state of emergency in order to defend the fledgling regime. Once the civil war was definitely won, the broad basis of the soviets was crushed. Despite the efforts of Bukharin (after Lenin’s untimely death) to resurrect them, they disappeared from the scene. Faced with a ravaged countryside and waning popular support, the Bolsheviks


471. This tale is told in great detail in Cohen, Bukharin, chapter six.

472. Kautsky says this explicitly in chapter seven of The Dictatorship of the Proletariat.
steered a new course. The “New Economic Program” was launched as a means of reorganizing the country in the face of what came to be seen as “imperialist encirclement.”

The NEP was under immediate criticism as a lapse back into capitalism, a fall away from the achievement of socialism that was posited to have occurred with the ousting of the Tsar. In promoting certain forms of market relations, and allowing small industrious peasants to thrive, the Bolsheviks seemed to be smuggling capitalism into a socialist state, the hallowed dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin, as has been noted, was criticized for taking liberty with the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat on the grounds that he “distorted” Marx’s original meaning by including the necessity of violent suppression of counter-revolutionary forces. Here, though, Lenin points toward a different boundary, one that limits the ability of the worker’s government to implement widespread social change. This is the limit of politics itself, and it is not to be solved with violence. And while this line of thinking had a powerful ally in Bukharin, it was Stalin’s road that was taken instead.

**Back to the Beginning: Dictatorship and the Cult of Personality**

The myth that the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat comes from Blanqui has been propagated for some time. Draper has done an admirable job of showing how Marx and Engels developed the idea of the dictatorship of a class in order to combat the Blanquist notion of dictatorship of the elite. If this is true, then Draper has a solid case against Lenin as well, since Lenin is most often thought of as the theorist of the vanguard party. But Draper makes the case against Lenin on slightly different grounds, arguing that Lenin incorporates the idea of the necessity of violent suppression into the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat—a slightly different kind of “error:”
This is how the term came from Marx’s pen in 1850: an instrument of the re-education of the Blanquist and Jacobin-revolutionary currents around Marx’s own circle. The marxological myth which had ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ pegged as a ‘Blanquist’ idea had history turned upside down. ‘Dictatorship of the proletariat’ came into existence as an attempt to show would-be revolutionaries that there was another way of being revolutionary, Marx’s view.473

Indeed, in “The Class Struggles in France,” Marx argued thus:

…the proletariat increasingly organises itself around revolutionary Socialism, around Communism, for which the bourgeoisie itself has invented the name of Blanqui. This Socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations.474

Marx counterposes this class dictatorship to the kind of “doctrinaire Socialism which subordinates the whole movement to one of its elements, which puts the cerebrations of the individual pendant in place of common, social production and, above all, wishes away the necessities of the revolutionary class struggles by petty tricks or great sentimental rhetoric.”475

In this passage, which is the first use of this idea of the class dictatorship in Marx’s written work, Marx is indeed making a distinction that seems very important. It is precisely opposed to this idea of the individual dictator, that reduction of the whole to merely one of its elements, that Marx is writing against. Indeed, he sources this individualization of political leadership to the bourgeoisie, who has “invented” Blanqui as the stand in for the real process of class struggle that is inexorably putting pressure on existing governmental forms. This bourgeoisie that vaunts individual effort over the collective organization that makes such individual effort possible obscures the real nature of class struggle, according to Marx.

If the dictatorship of the proletariat ends in the bogeyman of Stalin, it begins with the bogeyman of Blanqui. Along the way there are many authoritarian personalities, including but

not limited to Plekhanov himself, who “in all personal-political relations…could function only as absolute dictator.” Indeed, one speaks of the “Marxist-Leninist” tradition only by virtue of substituting a personality for a much more complex, multi-faceted and collective phenomenon. The cult of personality, it would seem, is not a Bolshevik invention.

In a speech that found audience all over Europe, Juan Donoso Cortés glorified the majesty of power from above:

> It is a question of choosing between the dictatorship from below and the dictatorship from above: I choose the dictatorship from above, since it comes from a purer and loftier realm. It is a question of choosing, finally, between the dictatorship of the dagger and the dictatorship of the saber: I choose the dictatorship of the saber, since it is nobler.

What is noteworthy about the sentiments expressed by Cortés is that he holds himself to be in the lofty position of choosing between two available powers: a high and a low. The ultimate power, then, seems to lie in his own will to choose freely to submit to that which is noble, and thereby to reject that which is base. Dictatorship of either the saber or the dagger, it would seem, is consensual. In either case dictatorship is externalized and chosen. While the particular content he gives to these ideas is directly opposite many socialist leaders, at least in their public words, there is nonetheless a certain similarity between the near-megalomania that animates such descriptions and the activity of notorious socialist and anarchist activists. The sentiment here is remarkably similar to that of Bakunin and Lasalle, both of whom Marx criticized for their attempts to craft personal dictatorships for themselves.

476. Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 73.

477. Juan Donoso Cortés, Cited in Draper *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 18.

478. For a discussion see Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 20-21. Draper adds Auguste Comte to the list of personalities denounced by Marx on these grounds.
Whither Democracy?
In order to bring to the fore the other pole of the apparent dichotomy between dictatorship and democracy, we can turn to England. We can recall Lord J. Russell’s words, conveyed by Marx in 1852:

> The people of this country are, in other words, the Democracy of the country. Democracy has as fair a right to the enjoyment of its rights as monarchy or nobility. Democracy does not mean to diminish any of the prerogatives of the Crown. Democracy does not attempt to take away any of the lawful privileges of the House of Lords. What, then, is this Democracy? The growth of wealth, the growth of intellect, the forming of opinions more enlightened and more calculated to carry on in an enlightened manner the Government of the world.  

Here, we can see the separate spheres of democracy, monarchy, and nobility arranged in a formation that does not call into question the prerogative of any sphere. This ideal of democracy, as the simultaneous growth of wealth, intellect, and enlightenment that allows the best governance of the world, sounds remarkably similar to the ideals that animated the discourse of Lenin and Stalin. As we saw above, Lenin invokes a similar image of the neediness of the peasants in describing the goals of the dictatorship of the proletariat—what the peasants need is to understand the world better, to have a little practical experience, and to be a bit more enlightened so as not to lapse back into their archaic modes of thought. While Marx is quick to point out that Russell’s characterization of democracy is “nothing but the claims of the Bourgeoisie, the industrious and commercial middle class” he sees that the attempt is being made to draw power from the mass base, even while cloaking it in values specific to the bourgeoisie.  

There is, perhaps, not much of a distinction in the attempt of the Bolsheviks to draw power from the peasantry even while adopting a pedagogical stance toward them. If this is so, then the relationship between dictatorship and democracy comes under question from a different angle.

Marx’s often-quoted letter to J. Weydeymer of 5 March 1852 expressly takes up the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Here, Marx situates his “contribution” to political economy relative to Ricardo and the non-existence of class consciousness in the United States. Marx states that he has:

1. to show that the existence of classes is merely bound up with certain historical phases in the development of production; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.481

This is the only mention of the phrase in the entirety of the letters of either Marx or Engels from the period of 1852 to 1855.482 It is certainly worthwhile to ask why it appears here, in this letter, at this time. Weydeymer had published an article in New York’s Turn-Zeitung on January 1, 1852 under the title of “Die Diktatur des Proletariats.”483 In writing to Weydemeyer, then, Marx is using Weydeymeyer’s own words and concepts, approaching him on his ground. Marx is quick to give his concept a scientific basis in political economy and his analysis of the development of production. But the dictatorship of the proletariat is remarkably vague in this passage. Unlike Kautsky, who felt compelled to write a whole book on the subject in 1918, Marx does not further elaborate this idea or its meaning. Indeed, searching for a full-blown exposition of this transitionary period of dictatorship in the writings of Marx and Engels proves to be a difficult undertaking. It all but disappears from his writings until the 1870s: Marx drops


482. These are assembled in Volume 39 of the Collected Works, in which the March 55, 1852 letter is the only one where the phrase appears. As Draper points out, discussing the exchange between Marx and the socialist Otto Lüning over the nature of class conflict, “what stands out, in Marx’s letter as in Lüning’s attack, was that the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was not specially involved—for either of them. Both assumed that it had no special content other than ‘rule of the proletariat.’” (Draper, The Dictatorship of the Proletariat, 27).

483. Draper cites this as evidence of the fact that Marx was attempting to persuade Weydeymer of the necessity of the class dimension of the dictatorship, a fact which Weydeymer’s article does not make evident.
the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat until encountering the followers of Blanqui again, after the fall of the Paris Commune.

There are thus two specific moments when this idea becomes important in the international arena: in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848 and in the wake of the carnage of the Commune of 1871. It is in this context, and that of the birth of German social democracy, that Marx writes his “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” which contains a single elliptical reference to the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the transition between capitalism and socialism. In the section of Marx’s critique dedicated to the discussion of democracy, Marx inveighs against the vague notion of the goal of the “free state.” Marx criticizes the German worker’s party for forgetting that the state is not possessing of its own basis; Marx points out that the state arises on the foundation of the capitalist society, which accounts for the similarity in state form between “civilised countries.” But if bourgeois society changes, or “dies off” then the state may very well undergo a serious realignment. The question that follows is of vital importance to the socialist movement:

The question then arises: what transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousandfold combination of the word people with the word state.484

This statement, the immediate prelude to the one mention of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat in this whole document, points toward the relationship between science, state power, and social functions. In this context, Marx mentions, almost as if in passing but with italicized emphasis, the idea that would prove to be so troublesome:

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. Now the programme deals neither with this nor with the future

state of communist society. Its political demands contain nothing beyond the old democratic litany familiar to all: universal suffrage, direct legislation, popular rights, a people’s militia, etc. 485

In the pages that follow, Marx continues on the theme of attacking the typically bourgeois ideas that present themselves as revolutionary socialism. He nonetheless employs the specifically bourgeois distinction between society and politics, and postulates a necessary correspondence between these two levels. Universal education comes under particular scrutiny, as Marx wonders how equal education can be conducted when social classes are, by definition, unequal. On this point, he locates the language of the programme, “equal education of the people by the state” within a worldview that takes as its reference point state power and the hopeful anticipation of miracles. 486

Engels took up similar themes in his letter to August Bebel of March, 1875. Here, Engels is highly critical of the programme of the party because of the absence of “the first prerequisite of all liberty—that all officials be responsible for all their official actions to every citizen before the ordinary courts and in accordance with common law.” 487 This basis of freedom, by which the people administer the state, and thus themselves, remains foreign to the demands put forth by the socialists. Engels lambasts the language of the “free state” that had also irked Marx, commenting that:

The free people’s state is transformed into the free state. Grammatically speaking, a free state is one in which the state is free vis-à-vis its citizens, a state, that is, with a despotic government. All the palaver about the state ought to be dropped, especially after the Commune, which had ceased to be a state in the true sense of the term. The people’s state has been flung in our teeth ad nauseam by the anarchists, although Marx’s anti-Proudhon piece and after it the Communist Manifesto declare outright that, with the introduction of the socialist order of society, the state will dissolve of itself and disappear. Now, since the state is merely a transitional institution of which use is made in the struggle, in the revolution, to keep down one’s enemies by force, it is utter nonsense to speak of a free people’s state; so long as the proletariat still makes use of the state, it makes use of it, not for the purpose of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies.

and, as soon as there can be any question of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist. We would therefore suggest that *Gemeinwesen* be universally substituted for *state*; it is a good old German word that can very well do service for the French ‘Commune.’

What both Marx and Engels make clear, in 1875, is that the goal of any socialist revolutionary should be the creation of socialist relations—not the pursuit of state power *in and of itself*. Marx writes against a conception of politics as pursuit of state power; he sees the existing state apparatus as a “government machine or the state insofar as it forms a special organism separated from society through division of labour.” If the state has a certain set of characteristics, and if it fulfills certain functions, it does so only in reference to a society that gives it a base. As Engels puts it, liberty must entail a constant participation in courts and administration—these functions are not intrinsically devoid of purpose in a socialist society. But it must be the society that imposes form upon the state, not the other way around. Engels (and, by extension, Marx) is so dismayed by the theoretical position of the emergent social democratic party that he specifies that “this programme marks a turning-point which may very well force us to renounce any kind of responsibility in regard to the party that adopts it.”

This remark is uncanny in its anticipation of the profound split in the international socialist movement that would come on the heels of the SDP and its critical stance toward the Bolshevik revolution. Indeed, the interpretations of Marxism that were held by Lenin and Kautsky can find their common source in this particular moment in the writings by Marx and Engels.

In his essay “On Authority” of 1872, Engels immediately takes up the issue of the collective division of labor and its relationship to authority. “ Everywhere, combined action, the

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complication of processes dependent upon each other, displaces independent action by individuals.”

In a phrase that would echo in the work of Robert Michels, Engels asks “whoever mentions combined action speaks of organisation; now, is it possible to have organisation without authority?”

In this tract, aimed at Bakunin and the anarchists who threatened the International, Engels returns to the question of revolution:

> A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannon—authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?

Here, though, we should pause to note that Engels, despite the fact that he endorses the idea that authority of some kind will exist in any imaginable human community, does not locate this authority in the hands of a person or a party. He does not make the claim that the vanguard party will necessarily lead the proletariat to victory, demanding submission. He states that the workplace is dominated by the authority of the machines—the available technology that organizes the workplace according to its needs. The “authority of the steam” eclipses individual autonomy.

And in a comment that presages Lenin’s use of the phrase dictatorship of the proletariat to include repressive measures against counter-revolutionary elements, Engels is clear that he believes that violence will be necessary in order to keep any revolutionary government afloat. Like Marx, Engels claims that the Communards did not seize power promptly or

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492. Engels, “On Authority,” 423. The phrase from Michels is “he who says organization says oligarchy.” This study, which was based on the German Social Democratic party of the early twentieth century, has been foundational in political science. See Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1966).


494. This anonymous authority is distinctly impersonal. Riffing off of Dante, he goes so far as to declare that the machinery of modern factories should dictate a warning sign above the door: “Lasciate ogni autonomia, voi che entrate!” which he translates as “Leave, ye that enter in, all autonomy behind!”, “On Authority,” 423.
authoritatively enough to bring about victory for the revolution (presumably he means that they should have marched on Versailles with haste). He also maintains that “authoritarian political state” cannot be abolished in a single stroke, not before the “social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed.” Political power, in this conception, can be utilized to deliberately dismantle the social conditions that give rise to authoritarian political institutions. This, in essence, is the notion of the “withering away” of the state that plagued so many discussions of Marxism.

Thus, for Marx and Engels, it would appear that the dictatorship of the proletariat was an uncomfortable locution developed in the face of specific political contingencies, but that it nonetheless was an important element of their theory of social revolution, their theory of the state, and the effective possibilities of political action. Unsurprisingly, it was subordinated to and meant to draw attention to the conception of class struggle that underpinned all of Marx’s work. Marx says as much in his 1852 letter to Weydemeyer, since the first point is that classes exist relative to historical stages, and the second point is that this class struggle leads to a “necessary” dictatorship of the proletariat, which itself is the harbinger of the end of all classes. The prophetic vision of Marxism is undoubtedly an important element of its success amongst the working classes of Europe, and later the emerging post-colonial world.

In coining the term the dictatorship of the proletariat, Marx made use of his characteristic wit and indelible talent with language. If it is a dictatorship we need, Marx seems to say, then we shall have it: but the revolution can only be had through a dictatorship of a class. What does that mean? How can a class exercise dictatorship? What it most assuredly does not mean, and what

it was specifically crafted in order to combat, is the idea that dictatorship as opposed to
democracy is a necessary step on the path to socialism. I contend that this genealogy also
problematicizes the idea that the rule of the Bolsheviks could constitute such a dictatorship of a
class, since the Bolsheviks are clearly a party and not a class as such. Lenin, like Marx, always
referred to class struggle and the forces of history before making any pronouncements or policies
on politics. Like Marx, he constantly felt the need to stress that it was the masses who were
making history, not an elite cadre of politicians. Yet, when in power, it was Lenin who advocated
the deliberate creation of the conditions under which the dictatorship of the proletariat could
broaden its base of support. Political leadership, in this, its most “vanguardist” conception,
entails the purposive crafting of social relations. But at the same time Lenin insists that it is the
masses who make history, that it is the development of capitalism that paves the way for
socialism. There is a very good reason that this point deserves constant reiteration: from the very
beginning, the notion that has been deeply troublesome to revolutionary politics has been
personal, charismatic leadership. The cult of personality, as a political phenomenon, was the
target of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. And yet, a century later, the cult of
personality is mustered as an explanation for the dictatorship of Stalin. In this conceptual tension
we can see the fractured images of two competing yet intertwined modes of political leadership.
The discourse of political leadership remains as irredeemably pulled between the real leadership
of Kautsky and Lenin as between the conceptual waypoints of politics and technology,
determinism and voluntarism. The story of the PCFs attempt to de-Stalinize, and its persistent
failure to live out its revolutionary platform, points toward this conceptual tension.
If the cult of personality is something Marx was already writing against in 1850, what are we to make of Stalin and Khrushchev? Is it a mere coincidence that Marx develops the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat *in response to the cult of personality surrounding other noted socialist leaders*? It seems reasonable to hypothesize that the cult of personality, when invoked by Khrushchev as an “explanation” of Stalinism, is nothing more than a retroactive attempt to explain an otherwise complex phenomenon, and thus absolve responsibility for further inquiry. It is pure ideology, explaining nothing of the real historical forces that are at work. Thus, the various attempts to work against this “cult” in the international context are directed at a mirror image. Moreover, it was already seen as such by Marx in the middle of the nineteenth century! Think of Marx’s writing on the death penalty:

> Is it not a delusion to substitute for the individual with his real motives, with multifarious social circumstances pressing upon him, the abstraction of ‘free will’—one among the many qualities of man for man himself! This theory, considering punishment as the result of the criminal’s own will is only a metaphysical expression for the old ‘jus talionis’: eye against eye, tooth against tooth, blood against blood. Plainly speaking, and dispensing with all paraphrases, punishment is nothing but a means of society to defend itself against the infraction of its vital conditions, whatever may be their character. Now, what a state of society is that, which knows of no better instrument for its own defense than the hangman, and which proclaims through the ‘leading journal of the world’ its own brutality as eternal law?\(^{496}\)

This quote, which follows on the heels of an exploration of the remarkable predictability of criminal activity in both France and England, shows Marx inveighing against “explanations” that serve as covers for metaphysical propositions. What is at stake in these discussions, which covers a range of topics that is wide enough to include crime and punishment and leadership of the socialist revolution, is nothing short of the fiction of the individual, the rational (or not) self that is alleged to be the author of a given set of actions. For Marx, political leadership must pass through this distorting lens of the individual in order to arrive at a notion of leadership that is collective. In a very real sense, this sets up the problematic of ideology that would come to

provoke much debate in the coming century. What is at stake in this debate is the nature of ideology and its mechanism of enactment. Marx could only see the glimmer of the outline of the problem of the subject that would become an academic debate in France simultaneous with the political process of de-Stalinization. For Marx, the individualistic attitude was a fiction that served the class interests of the bourgeoisie. This individualistic attitude was the limit of Lenin’s agrarian reform policies and the target of the pedagogical lessons of the Bolsheviks. And it was the limit of structuralism’s attempt to think of history as a “process without a subject.”

Khrushchev’s intonation of the phrase “collective leadership” as he seeks to draw a contrast to the personality cult shows how deeply intractable this problem remained a full century after Marx was writing. From 1850 to 1956, the discourse of political leadership remains pulled between these two possibilities: charismatic leadership and anonymous collective action. The dichotomy of dictatorship and democracy, especially when conceived as two methods of attaining a similar purpose (or as two forms of government) distracts from the real issues at stake. Under democracy, the problem of leadership does not disappear. Just as the dictatorship of the proletariat highlights the possibility of a non-individual form of leadership, so too does Khrushchev’s intonation of collective leadership. But whereas the origins of the Bolshevik revolution were in the worker’s councils—the soviets—Khrushchev’s collective leadership is isolated to the top tiers of a vast bureaucratic apparatus. What the tradition of Marxism offers an analysis of political leadership is that it focuses our attention on the institutional basis of leadership, on its material and collective aspects. It also forces us to

497. Some would argue that procedure can take the place of leadership, that processes achieve an autonomy of their own that somehow replace the need for leadership of the polity. Yet, in this discourse of procedure and constitutionality, the problem is only displaced to the formation of the procedures or the writing of a constitution: who does the writing? Who chooses what procedures will work best “for all?” Democratic theory, and its paradox of the founding, is, in my view, is in need of a supplement—that of democratic leadership.
acknowledge that certain forms of political leadership are possible only at certain times—that the historical forces that enact our present discourse are *themselves* a possible site of political leadership. When you change the discourse you change the past, the present, and the future all at once.

Upon taking up this problem of de-Stalinization, the PCF inherited the discourse of political leadership that had been in effect for so long. But while it had the good sense to know that blindly following Khrushchev was not a good plan, it remained unable to develop its own path of de-Stalinization. The problem of ideology that Marx had opened up with his analysis of capitalist society would occupy the minds and writings of many astute theorists. With strong currents of spontaneity and evolutionism pulling in the opposite direction of voluntarism and scientific expertise, the discourse of political leadership hovered in an ambivalent space. Locating political leadership in the topography of the Marxist conception of history remained an open task. Into this cauldron came Louis Althusser.
CHAPTER FIVE:

Hearing the Call: Machiavelli, Althusser, and Us
(or, “To Change the World is Not to Explore the Moon”)

Such is the reality that dominates everything in this domain: the existence of a mass religious and moral ideology. The implication is obvious: to achieve his national and popular goals, the Prince must start out by respecting the people’s ideology, even—especially—if he wants to transform it. He must take care that every political act, each form of political practice, intervenes and resonates as a matter of fact in the element of this ideology. He must therefore take charge of it, accept responsibility for the ideological effects of his own political practice, anticipate them, and inscribe them in it. And since the Prince is literally the public face of the state, he must take care that the people’s representation of his figure is inscribed in popular ideology, so as to produce effects beneficial to his politics. For this representation plays a key role in the state’s constitution, in the association of subjects and their education.

—Louis Althusser

The whole secret of The Prince lies in the way it is organized.

—Louis Althusser

What makes an argument persuasive? What makes a writer “grip” us? Why are some texts “timeless” while others become artifacts of a bygone era? What makes an author who writes in a distant past seem like a contemporary? These questions are the focal point of Althusser’s introduction to Machiavelli, a treatment that takes seriously the mode of exposition and its relation to the content of the writing. As quickly becomes clear, however, these questions are also analogs for other questions: what makes individuals respect the legitimacy of a government? What makes the law “grip” us? What makes some states last, while others crumble or burn? What makes some leaders inspire followers, while others sink into obscurity?


499. Machiavelli & Us, 68.
From the very first opening salvos, Althusser establishes a perimeter against various foes, ideological, political, and philosophical. Wandering through this “battlefield” is a dangerous prospect for anyone who is unprepared for the ongoing struggle: *Machiavelli & Us* is dense and relies heavily on a theoretical position more fully elaborated in various other works, some unpublished during Althusser’s life. Perhaps for these reasons, and despite of its importance within the expanding corpus centered on Althusser, this text remains a relatively unexplored avenue. In this chapter, I argue that *Machiavelli & Us* is of singular importance toward understanding Althusser’s work in general. This text is located at a crucial location in Althusser’s larger theoretical construction, a place where theory and practice meet, where art and science collide, and where ideology encounters its limits. It is a text that enacts the theoretical turn of political leadership by taking up the problematic of vanguardism and attempting to steer the direction of the conversation. It also represents a specific intervention into the trajectory of Althusser’s work itself, a work that was not under its author’s control. While *Machiavelli & Us* never attained the influence of *Reading Capital* or *For Marx*, it nonetheless exists in relation to those works, their place in the development of French theory, the history of international

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500. *Machiavelli & Us* represents the lecture notes for a course that Althusser gave on Machiavelli in the 1960s and that he consistently returned to throughout the “late” period of his work.

501. For example, Luke Ferretter’s *Louis Althusser* (New York: Routledge, 2006) does not mention Machiavelli at all. It also contains only a brief discussion of Gramsci. There are a handful of article-length treatments of Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli available, for instance Nick Hardy, “Theory From the Conjuncture: Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism and Machiavelli’s dispositif,” *Décalages* 1, no. 3 (2013) and Adam Holden and Stuart Elden, “‘It cannot be a Real Person, a Concrete Individual’: Althusser and Foucault on Machiavelli’s Political Technique,” *Borderlands eJournal* 4, no. 2 (2005). The only monograph of which I am aware that deals exclusively with the relationship between Machiavelli and Althusser is Mikko Lahtinen’s *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009). While expansive and persuasive, Lahtinen does not interrogate this claim that Althusser attributes to Gramsci, instead taking it at face value (137). Furthermore, Lahtinen does not take account of the displacement that occurs throughout the text of *Machiavelli & Us*; by the end of this text the category of utopia itself has undergone a metamorphosis, as will be explained in the following sections. It is perhaps because the dispositif of the utopian is not properly grasped that Lahtinen pulls too far in the direction of the contingent and accidental: “Preliminarily, one can say that accidental and contingent factors are the reason (my emphasis) why particular cases are characteristically unique, non-transparent and unpredictable” (140-1). This tautology, wherein the accidental or contingent is forced to stand in as “the reason” for singularity itself, strains the mind.
communism, and the student movement of the 1960s as well. As Althusser’s most vocal critic, Jacques Rancière, put it, Althusser’s influence became “Althusserianism” which was “a form of theoretico-political intervention, as the creator of a specific scene for the effectivity of thought.”

In order to approach these topics, we will have to do some preliminary ground work on the topics of foundation and science, philosophy and art. We will need to investigate Althusser’s understanding of Freud and place this investigation in the context of *Machiavelli & Us* in order to appreciate how essential it is toward understanding this text.

As a philosopher who is concerned with political matters, Althusser deserves to be considered under the larger heading of the post-war return to political philosophy. Reading *Machiavelli & Us* with an eye toward the larger political situation that confronted Althusser, as well as his expansive corpus, provides important philosophical insight into politics and political leadership. But this is not a systematic treatise on politics, laid out in formulas and logical deduction. Because of its status as a painstakingly crafted document (that Althusser tinkered with throughout the last two decades of his life) it demands to be scrutinized with the utmost care. And the labor is worth it: a vantage point opens up on Althusser’s other work that is of urgent importance to those of us who still grapple with the essential questions of political philosophy. It challenges many of the commonly held beliefs about the nature of Althusser’s work, his “structuralism,” and his orthodoxy.

Relying on the discussion of the previous chapter to set the stage, I will begin by examining this remarkable text in order to situate it within the larger context of Althusser’s work.

502. Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson* (New York: Continuum, 2011), xiv. I will not engage with Rancière’s work any further in this chapter, though a close analysis of the relationship between his critique and developments in Althusser’s thought, in particular on the topic of ideology, would undoubtedly be fruitful.
In a concise one hundred pages, Althusser manages to provide a remarkable analysis of Machiavelli (both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*) that also brings him into conversation with contemporary political issues. If it were to be considered solely from the vantage point of its contribution to scholarship on Machiavelli, this text would deserve more attention. As a contribution to debates about political leadership conducted within the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF) it is likewise noteworthy. But viewed within the context of the philosophical developments of the post-WWII landscape, in connection with these other domains, *Machiavelli & Us* becomes a unique window on our relationship with history.

In this chapter I take up this text in relation to Althusser’s larger corpus, linking it up with the infamous essay on Ideology, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA essay hereafter) as well as another posthumously published text, “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourse.” I will also be interspersing references to the essay “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” an important and related text that appears alongside *Machiavelli & Us* in the English edition. The rest of Althusser’s published work provides a background against which one can trace the outline of a theory of political leadership. While this theory draws on Machiavelli, it is equally dependent on Freud. As we will see, Althusser’s writings on Freud and, in a related fashion,
those on the topic of art are a necessary background for a full appreciation of the arguments of the text.503

But despite these contexts that provide historical depth to the work, it is just as important that Machiavelli is the hinge that makes possible this shift; Machiavelli provides Althusser with a means of thinking in new ways about ideology and subjectivity, as well as of grounding his own theoretical work in politics. Althusser reads Machiavelli and Marx together, toward developing a scientific understanding of history. This is a curious form of science, however, and it resists easy categorization. Against those who have argued that Althusser’s turn to Machiavelli represents a turn away from Marx and Marxism, I argue that Machiavelli provides a much-needed political supplement to Althusser’s renewal of Marxism. What emerges is a theory of politics and a politicized theory, one that is neither immanent nor transcendent, but both. Althusser summons his reader to a place that is made possible and real by the situation, in all its particularity, and that is simultaneously “elsewhere,” a new place of transcendent properties that allows a fresh vantage point from which to judge the scene below.

503. I take this opportunity to note that Althusser’s admission that he learned philosophy by way of “hearsay” (The Future Lasts Forever (New York: The New Press, 1993), 166), which was leapt upon by his critics as an admission of his incapacity to teach the youth about philosophy, points me instead toward Freud’s Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966): “Thus you cannot be present as an audience at a psychoanalytic treatment. You can only be told about it; and, in the strictest sense of the word, it is only by hearsay that you will get to know psycho-analysis” (21). This Nietzschean sentiment of the personal nature of philosophy resonates with Althusser’s memoirs. Philosophy, in this view, is more of a “way of life” than a set of ideas or a list of facts that must be memorized or mastered. The intensely personal nature of Althusser’s philosophical disposition is the theme of the whole of The Future Lasts Forever, and it deserves its own, more full, treatment. But, since Freud will be a central figure in our discussion of Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli, this single, suggestive quote may be helpful: “To what did I owe my acute awareness of the ‘conjuncture’, if not to my extreme sensitivity to ‘situations’ of irreconcilable conflict which I had experienced in childhood?” (Future, 166). Despite this profoundly Freudian insight, however, Althusser maintains a page later that “I was never able to penetrate a single text by Freud or his commentators (which is doubtless highly significant, though the significance escapes me and perhaps always will), despite all my psychoanalytical samples and personal experience (as analysand)! He remains a closed book to me” (Future, 167-8). Needless to say, this undermining of the credibility of the narrator to relate the “facts” is also a distinctly Freudian theme.
This claim arises from a consideration of the nature of “us.” As Althusser informs us immediately, this text is a book about both Machiavelli and us. Who is Althusser interpelling in this use of the word “us?” Althusser’s positing (and answering) of this question carves out a position on the terrain of Marxist politics that has not—yet—been filled by a political agent. This theoretical clearing invites the willing and capable reader to step within its bounds. What is at stake is the nexus between theory and practice, the role of intellectuals in political organization, the kind of leadership that is possible in a complex society situated in an even more complex international milieu. These factors encourage us to conduct a reappraisal of our understanding of history and our relation to historical events and writings. Althusser encourages us to step into the clearing that Machiavelli has opened for us, that Marx and Engels pointed out, and that Althusser has made visible. He encourages us to see ourselves historically, and to take up the tasks of history. The goal of Machiavelli & Us, when seen from these multifarious vantage points, is nothing short of radical transformation in both discourse and subject, party and state. But this theoretical work is not merely theoretical or abstract, untethered from the “real world” of politics and parties. Taking up a position in a theoretical space of its own cultivation, Machiavelli & Us is simultaneously a performance of a certain mode of political leadership.

Before we can adequately judge this effort, though, we must have a more adequate grasp of Althusser’s view of philosophy. Warren Montag encapsulates Althusser’s position on philosophy, saying that the only way to judge a philosophical intervention is by the fruits of its labor: “by a demonstrable change in what is actually said and thought, by a breeching and a freeing up that permits something new to emerge.”

504. Montag, Althusser and his Contemporaries, 5.
is tied to intellectual and political developments of the twentieth century, but it cannot be reduced to a mere expression of the historical moment, precisely because it helps (if successful) to give rise to new ways of thinking, to new modes of speech. Against historicism, Althusser would have us, as collective agents of potential political activity, take up a new theoretical position in a battle over the potentiality of politics itself. Against those who see in Althusser a muzzled view of human agency, this articulation of political leadership opens up a new space for discussions about agency that are divorced from specific notions of subjectivity. It is by looking to Machiavelli, who himself had his eyes on the ancients, that Althusser inaugurated this new “way of inhabiting philosophy.”

In his encounter with Machiavelli, Althusser articulates an imperative of political action from within philosophy. This political stance is needed to help reinvigorate Marxist philosophy, which Althusser sees stymied by Stalinism and its would-be opponent, humanism. As Althusser announced in Reading Capital, the project inaugurated by Marx points in the direction of a new mode of historical understanding. As we will see, Althusser summoned Machiavelli to do battle with his philosophical foes, on a particular field, and with a political intent. But, in a very real way, Althusser sees that Machiavelli himself is responsible for the space of this theoretical activity, that Machiavelli writes, “as it were” from the future. It is this stance, at arm’s reach and beckoning, that puts Machiavelli in a position of leadership for “us.”

505. This phrase is also Warren Montag’s, whose book has exercised a great influence on my reading and appreciation of Althusser. It would be impossible to cite every trace of his thinking in the pages that follow.

506. Ironically, Althusser was often accused of the sin of Stalinism even while he doggedly pursued its excision—for an exhaustive list of the literature on this topic see Michael Sprinker, Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism (New York: Verso, 1987), 178n2.

On one level such mystical sounding claims are unnecessary. Historicism allows us to tell a different kind of story in which things are much more simple: Machiavelli can provide Althusser with the ammunition he is looking for because Machiavelli writes in an analogous moment, in a similar “conjuncture. Deploying (a bit too quickly) Althusser’s concept of “the conjuncture” we might posit that Machiavelli and Althusser live and write “under” the same conjuncture, that they share a certain problematic, or some other hypostasized view of “structure.” In this view, just as Althusser believes that he is witnessing the slow transition between capitalism and socialism, he finds in Machiavelli a theory of the transition between feudalism and capitalism. And both Althusser and Machiavelli share another concern: to see reality “as it really is.” Machiavelli concerns himself with the reality of the situation that confronts Florence. Disavowing himself of any attempt to explicate the origins of political society writ large, Machiavelli proudly declares that he will deal only with the effective truth of the case at hand. Machiavelli and Marxism are in agreement on this claim to see reality for what it actually is, freed of distortions and mystical thinking.

But this ability to “see” the world as it is is only one part of the larger effort. Althusser always insisted that a scientific theory like historical materialism, in order to be considered as science at all, must be able to account for its own origins within history as well as being able to account for other phenomena. Such an origin is radically particular, divorced from theories of

508. Althusser is often accused of “structuralism” and of evacuating agency from the view of history, or of “reducing” agency to the bearer of structure. See, for example, Alex Callinicos, Making History (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), xviii.

509. This was a consistent theme; for an early text (1965) see “On the Young Marx,” in For Marx (New York: Verso, 2005), 63. This claim puts him in line with the fecund thinking of Karl Mannheim as well, in particular the seminal text Ideology and Utopia (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936). This connection will be explored in more detail in the sections below. For a detailed exposition of the “lag” between philosophy and science, see “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy” in The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (New York: Verso, 2003).
“the” singular origin of political society; in other words, those general theories that lean towards universalization have, *themselves*, a historical origin and context, whether acknowledged within that theoretical framework or not. Historical understanding, then, makes possible a new lease on historical action. If history can be freed from its deterministic baggage, from the grim fatalism of Stalin, the radical particularity of Marxism can assume a new posture within history. All of this requires a recasting of essential philosophical concepts and categories. For Althusser, this recognition of its own radical particularity grounds Marxism and makes it capable of achieving scientific status. This capability, though, was not an achieved result but more properly thought of as a constant work in progress; in order to make itself into a science the discourse of Marxism would have to go through a complex process of theoretical production. The “break” that signifies Marx’s radical opening of the continent of history must be constantly *kept open* against the massive encroachment of ideology, which threatens to fill in the rupture. This makes for a very interesting kind of “founding” indeed, one that is more like a door half-way open than a fully-scaffolded construction.

The character of this threatening ideology was another constant theme in Althusser’s work, as was his intent to discover *how* it might be possible to get *outside* of ideology and into a legitimately scientific understanding of politics. While it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Althusser remained obsessed with the idea of “the break,” with the birth of a science

510. This concept of the “epistemological break” was not without its vicissitudes. For an excellent discussion of some of these, see Étienne Balibar’s “From Bachelard to Althusser: the Concept of the ‘Epistemological Break,” *Economy and Society* 7, no. 3 (1978). As Althusser himself wrote in his notorious memoir, “this is one of the most objectively equivocal themes that has always obsessed me” (*The Future Lasts Forever* (New York: The New Press, 1993)), 174. For an excellent discussion of the epistemological issues at stake, from a different vantage point, see Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

511. I would like to thank Étienne Balibar for the insight that *Machiavelli & Us* takes up the problem of ideology where the ISA essay leaves off.
out of its pre-history (or ideology), it is this insistence on the possibility of a scientific understanding of history that, somewhat ironically, demands that we read Althusser as a political philosopher.

Humanism, as the looming manifest form of this ideology during his period of philosophizing, represented the constant *gravitas* of an ideology that constantly threatened to backfill the exploratory excavations of Marx. In this way of conceiving of science and ideology, despite the noted and various difficulties in defining this relationship in propositional form, Althusser offered a unique vision of social science that maintained a tentative historical connection with the natural sciences even while acknowledging the radical difference between the natural and social sciences. This vision highlights the violence that results from questioning deeply held beliefs, themselves embodied in traditions and practices. According to Althusser, this violence that lies at the heart of the scientific revolution can be seen in the reception of the work of figures like Copernicus and Galileo, Darwin and Freud. In Machiavelli, Althusser found the voice of the foremost theorist of *new beginnings* because Machiavelli recognized the link between violence and knowledge, embarking as he did upon a path as of yet untrodden.

But the nature of this postulated link between violence and knowledge has yet to be elaborated. While at the level of discourse or theory, Althusser is often recognized as the theorist of “epistemological rupture” or “the break” because of the polemics in which he engaged with various humanist/revisionist Marxists, it is not often commented upon just how Althusser

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512. Althusser also argues that the pair “humanism/technicism” is the “greatest threat for Marxist theory today” (1967). See “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy,” in The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 183-191. To those of us inculcated with a belief system that holds technology and humanity apart, this pairing should be a provocation to consider Althusser’s larger point, which is that this manner of thinking tends to “put uncritical, mechanistic faith in the development of the sciences and technology, while underestimating the role of politics, ideology, and philosophy” (184).

513. And perhaps it cannot be. What if, like Oedipus, the truth maims us rather than emancipates us?
attempted to think through these developments, or what concept of legitimacy guided his investigations into the production of knowledge. The question for Althusser is how did Marx and Engels manage to break with ideology? Machiavelli provides a clue to this riddle as well, because he was another thinker who managed to shed the prevailing ideas of politics and morality in order to “discover” a different way of looking at the same objects. As Althusser made clear in a letter to the philosopher Franca Madonia, he realized the intensely relevant, and indeed personal, nature of his reading of Machiavelli: “The question I dealt with: how to begin from nothing…was mine!” Unsurprisingly, this question was the same one that he found Marx and Engels addressing. It establishes the deeply personal nature of a political conjuncture, the structural continuity that allows for a dialectical analysis that can effectively intervene in the world. If a philosophy is to be successful, then, it must first resonate with its audience. An encounter of duration must result, one that evinces demonstrable changes in human life.

Part invention, part discovery, innovations such as Marx’s and Engels’ are a rare breed in history, and it is indisputable that, where they indeed occur, they induce architectonic changes in human life. Against historicism, Althusser reads these founding moments as triumphs of human ability rather than mere “recordings” of inevitable cosmological shifts. Against idealists, he sees these radical changes as a product of material forces rather than resulting from the metaphysical power of “ideas themselves.” Against ideologues, he sees these moments as evidence of human agency, rather than taking such agency as an a priori given. Against Hegelians, he sees the break that opens up new possibilities as highly contingent “encounters” rather than fated “becomings.”

The nature of Marx’s discovery was a constant source of preoccupation for Althusser. He

514. A passage of this letter is printed in Gregory Elliot’s introduction to Machiavelli & Us, xv.
remained transfixed on the question of how it was that a person, raised to think in a certain way about things, manages to move beyond the limits of those ways of thinking and inaugurate new paths. He likewise remained attuned to the repressive violence that targets all political action geared toward inventing a new future through collective effort. But he is insistent on remaining concrete, on resisting the pull of cosmological forces that elevate political thinking into abstract and lofty realms of speculation. In the short lecture delivered in 1968, entitled “Marx’s Relation to Hegel” Althusser lays out an analysis of Hegel, Marx and Feuerbach that remains one of the most concise statements of his thinking on this subject. Critical of the teleology “built in” to Hegel’s notion of history as a process, Althusser implicitly problematizes theories of alienation that were philosophically dominant in his intellectual environment. France at that time was awash in humanist interpretations of Marx that focused on his early, more explicitly Hegelian writings. Made possible by the publication of early works by Marx like the Manuscripts of 1844, increased scholarly attention was focused on these early, more humanist writings by Marx. The general tendency of existentialism was to universalize the condition of alienation, to make this condition an essential element of human life rather than a historically conditioned form of consciousness. Althusser’s celebrated (or decried, depending on one’s position) thesis of Marx’s epistemological break was mustered against these forces of humanism which sought to find in Marx a universal theory of Man. In a very real way, in attempting to understand Marx’s discovery, Althusser saw himself as needing to follow him in the path that breaks with inherited thinking.

515 Steven B. Smith shows how Heidegger’s philosophy plays a central role in this process. See Reading Althusser (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), chapter two. For further accounts of this time period see Albert Hirsh, The French New Left (Boston: South End Press, 1981).
This brings him face to face with the same forces that confronted Marx: humanism, idealism, Hegelian-inspired philosophy. Althusser’s thesis that “history is a process without a subject or goals” is aimed at these interpretations of Hegel and of Marx, and at the bearers of those interpretations. According to Althusser, such attempts to push back, retrogressively, beyond the threshold of a major philosophical revolution in thinking, will inevitably result in the inadvertent importation of new problems into old contexts: “For it is not possible to ‘return’ with impunity to a position behind a philosophy while retaining the problems it has brought to light.”

Introducing irreversibility into the narrative of history brings with it the possibility of epochal shifts that present problems for interpretation—in a way this is Althusser’s recasting of the problem of the ancients and the moderns. With this epistemological break, a science of history becomes possible that is motivated by a question: “What are the conditions of the process of history?” Marx’s contribution, that which earns him the mantle of an intrepid explorer, is to recognize that there “is no such thing as a process except in relations (sous des rapports): the relations of production (to which Capital is restricted) and other (political, ideological) relations.” With this concept of the relational nature of knowledge, Marx breaks open the problematic of empiricism, making space for a new mode of scientific understanding of history.

516. On this point it is worth while to note that Althusser does, in the last analysis, maintain a much more ambiguous relation to Hegel than I have sketched out here. Indeed, in the recent republication of his Spectres of Hegel (New York: Verso, 2014) we can get a more nuanced approach to this relationship. This question shall have to remain open for the time being. For our purposes here it suffices to say that Althusser saw the ideology of his time as self-consciously Hegelian—it took up the mantle of Hegel in ways that Althusser saw as problematic. It was toward this ideology of Hegel that Althusser directed his energies, while simultaneously maintaining a great respect for Hegel as a philosopher.


518. Althusser, Politics and History, 185.

519. Althusser, Politics and History, 186.
These two elements, the irreversible nature of history and the relational character of knowledge, are vital pillars of Althusser’s larger project.

The question here, though, is the following: is it possible to think of “what Marx did” in a way that can appreciate the achievement or the “breakthrough” without lapsing into an individualist-voluntarist notion of the “genius” and, simultaneously, without conceding all responsibility to the imperative of “anonymous” structures and the “logic” of discourse? This question motivated Althusser’s return to Machiavelli. It is an entry point into thinking about his “late” philosophy as well. It shapes his inquiry into history in fundamental ways, and it gives rise to his own “breakthrough.” Warren Montag puts it like this:

> It is thus possible to read Althusser’s unfinished but powerful late text on Machiavelli as a commentary on the Italian philosopher that is also and no less powerfully an attempt to come to terms with and even perhaps make sense of his philosophical corpus, a body of writing that violently reflects upon philosophy’s disavowed violence, a violence that has everything to do with the violence outside and all around it. To move things, to shake things up, to shift the balance of power internal to philosophy, to open the possibility of thinking otherwise required a language of force and provocation.  

“To open the possibility of thinking otherwise.” “A language of force and provocation.” These are not the labels one might expect to find applied to Althusser, when he is thought of as blindly dogmatic in his Marxism or as a police agent of Stalinism in theory. To connect violence and philosophy, to remove its pretense of pure speculation but yet keep its commitment to history: this indeed is the way out of ideology, the path already begun by such figures as Machiavelli and Marx, and that which makes them our contemporaries. The path out of ideology leads into solitude, a kind of retreat from social and political life that makes possible a new perspective on these forms of life.

This theme of political philosophy finds expression, almost paradoxically, in Althusser’s consideration of the birth of science. Taking up the thesis that Machiavelli is the “founder” of

political science, Althusser interrogates Machiavelli’s “solitude.” Unsurprisingly, then, we find that in Althusser’s late philosophy “of the encounter” Machiavelli plays a privileged role, one that was announced in the closing lines of Machiavelli & Us. This philosophy of the encounter emphasizes the unpredictable “swerve” that results in the creation of enduring worlds—amidst the random and interaction-less “fall” of atoms in a void. Such talk of isolation of atoms, amidst a plentitude of experience that nonetheless evinces a lack of “encounter” shares a thematic impetus with theories of alienation, to be sure.\footnote{521} It reminds one of the criticism Tocqueville offered of American democracy: a country in which everyone talks past one another without finding common ground.\footnote{522} Writing on this philosophy, Montag points to the key issue of defining the “encounter.”

If Machiavelli sought to evacuate every form of providentialism and teleology from his political thought, Althusser argues, it was to reveal that the apparently teeming world of fifteenth-century Italy was in fact a void, “every atom of which was descending in free fall without encountering its neighbor,” and therefore without the possibility of the ‘
carambolage,’ that is, pile up or crystallization out of which nations, like species or worlds, could be created. In the most important sense, the sense that mattered to Machiavelli, Italy was a non-world of the non-accomplishment of the fact, the empty table awaiting the throw of the dice.\footnote{523}

Thus, the question of the encounter becomes one of philosophy itself, which enables a perspective on politics that was otherwise occluded by the traditional categories of philosophy.

It becomes a question of political possibility: of enabling and enacting an encounter that can crystallize into larger, more durable forms of political organization. Althusser’s development of

\footnote{521}{Indeed, thinking of Althusser as indebted to existentialism, and perhaps unwittingly caught within its orbit, brings into question the dichotomies that help us to make sense of history, dichotomies like existentialism/structuralism or humanism/anti-humanism. For an excellent discussion of Althusser’s \textit{continuity} with existentialism see Mark Poster’s \textit{Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).}

\footnote{522}{Claude Lefort has written an excellent discussion of Tocqueville. See “Tocqueville: Democracy and the Art of Writing,” in \textit{Writing: The Political Test} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). As a glance at nearly any internet forum or stream of commentary will confirm, most of the political “conversation” remains at this level of talking past one another. For those who doubt this, or who consider the intellectual class to be “above” this level of banter, I suggest a brief perusal of the website poliscirumors.com.}

\footnote{523}{Montag, \textit{Althusser and His Contemporaries}, 179.}
aleatory materialism becomes a critique of political philosophy itself, as it has formerly been conceived.

Although Althusser’s political philosophy has a speculative element, it is not a speculative enterprise. The very nature of our thinking about politics becomes conditioned by forces that are deeply historical. Philosophy’s task, in such a world, is to make spaces for thinking:

The void that philosophy makes would not be a contestation of the real, as if it were external to that which it represents, but rather one of its effects, a means by which it frees itself of origins and ends in order to become the infinite diversity that it is, the indissociable simultaneity of thought and action that Althusser once tried to capture in the phrase ‘theoretical practice.’

Thus the void takes on a double character: it is descriptive of fifteenth-century Italy with its infinitely falling atoms that cannot crystallize into a world, and it is also the product of philosophy, an effect of its breaking free of the “origins and ends” that made it possible. This is a curious kind of founding indeed, one that demands a closer look.

The Founding Act

Althusser would repeatedly liken Marx’s act of founding to the journey of a colonial explorer who “discovers” a new continent. Doubtless, this contributed to his appeal to a generation of young students who were increasingly disenchanted with the oppressive nature of their political world. He explicitly attaches this language of exploration to the anti-colonial struggle in the conclusion to his 1968 lecture on Marx:

The continent was opened up a hundred years ago. The only people who have ventured into it are militants of the revolutionary class struggle. To our shame, intellectuals do not even suspect the existence of this continent, except to annex and exploit it as a common colony. We must recognize and explore this continent, to liberate it of its occupiers. To reach it it is enough to follow those who went before us a

524. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 188. The imagery of this philosophy, as fraught as it is with the inflection of “falling” is nonetheless powerful and evocative. As Montag has shown, Althusser “almost exclusively describes atoms as falling” despite having read Lucretius and Epicurus in the original Greek, in which the verb “to move” is the most frequently used to describe these scenarios. The question that Montag asks, the right question, is whether this usage on Althusser’s part is “linked to an entire theological and philosophical history of which Althusser takes no account and therefore determines his text in ways that escape his knowledge and control?” (183).
hundred years ago: the revolutionary militants of the class struggle. We must learn with them what they already know. On this condition we too shall be able to make discoveries in it, of the kind announced by Marx in 1845: discoveries which help not to ‘interpret’ the world but to change it. To change the world is not to explore the moon. It is to make the revolution and build socialism without regressing back to capitalism. The rest, including the moon, will be given to us in addition.  

Given its date of January 1968, this is a remarkable call to arms that predates the explosive events of May 1968 by several months. This metaphor of the unexplored continent is an apt metaphor, despite (or perhaps because of) its colonialist overtones. The metaphor works on several levels. First, because the journey is not determined by the starting place: between Europe and the “New World” is a vast void that must be crossed—but one could start at any shore and it is a completely open question as to whether the journey will be successful at all, never mind the question of where exactly one ends up when the journey finally does conclude. Second, there is a necessary violence inherent in the exploration. Here, though, Althusser is lauding the efforts of a vanguard of revolutionary militants who have already begun this process of exploration. Tapping into the energies of anti-colonial movements to shed oppressive rule, Althusser delivers a summons that, it would appear, reached its audience.

But note as well the fact that there is no intellectual vanguard headed out of the University to enlighten the worker. This vanguard does not include intellectuals, who have thus far failed to even “suspect the existence of this continent.” Quite the opposite: the militant workers are those with the appropriate know-how. Intellectuals, by working toward humanistic ideals that represent “retrogressive” philosophical forces, fail to see the radical movement that is already existing around them, and thus fail to recognize its liberating energies. They fail to contribute to an encounter that might enable the birth of new political structures, precisely because they function as the bearers of ideology, or inherited structures. This brings us to the third level of the

525. Althusser, Politics and History, 186.
metaphor. Althusser takes aim at the fetishization of technology, and particularly the global space race, declaring that “to change the world is not to explore the moon.” This thesis immediately brings to mind the celebrated eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, wherein Marx implores that the goal is to change the world, not merely interpret it.\footnote{See “Theses on Feuerbach” in 
\textit{The German Ideology (Collected Works, Volume 5)}.} The point, we might say, is to change the world—not to continue to philosophize about abstract ideals or extra-terrestrial objects. With the beginning of another round of colonization, one that remains in its infancy today, Althusser intuits that the race to colonize space can easily distract from the situation on earth. This too resonates with the themes of political philosophy: science cannot impart meaning on our lives, or help us to decide how to organize political and social life. Its imperative is to recognize that, when one cedes responsibility for these foundational decisions about human collective life, one succumbs to the forces of necessity. Just as the rush to colonize the “New World” resulted in capitalism, perhaps too the movement toward extraterrestrial human life will result in socialism. But against those who would see this is a pre-determined result, Althusser encourages us to see the development of technology as having the \textit{added benefit} of bringing us the moon \textit{as well} as solving our social problems on earth: provided that we recognize the imperative to act within this world. Once again, perhaps one can even detect a kind of latent existentialism at work: better to explore ourselves rather than a barren, lifeless rock so distant from our daily concerns. But it is also a clear warning against the lofty speculative abstractions that often haunt thinking about politics.

Today, at a time when technical mastery and rational administration still threaten to remove adventure and risk from life itself, what Weber referred to as the “disenchantment of the world,”
Althusser’s invigorating vision of the necessarily experimental nature of social science is needed—perhaps more than ever. The call for “revolutionary class struggle” is still echoed in some corners, but it is no longer verbalized with quite such intensity as was evinced during the 1960s. Despite this fact, it is still widely recognized that impending ecological and geopolitical forces dictate massive changes to human modes of life. The problems of collective action and radical transformation of existing modes of organization is still, so to say, “on the agenda.” The role science will play in helping to steer humanity from the brink of untold disaster is an open question. What seems certain is that, if social science is to remain a relevant and vital force in human life, new modes of relating to the world and ourselves need to be brought into alignment with our modes of political organization. This insight works against a long tradition of scientific objectivity. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century in the United States a good social scientist was expected to maintain an appropriate detachment from political events in order to foster a sense of objectivity. Increasingly, this notion of objectivity has come under attack on many fronts. The specter of relativism has sometimes filled in the gap left by the pursuit of absolute knowledge of pure objectivity, but Althusser resists this bogeyman as well. At the level of theory, there were many such attempts to navigate a course out of the dichotomy objectivity/subjectivity during the later half of the twentieth century. And while there has been no single winner in this race to chart a foundation for social science, Althusser’s place in these developments is as of yet unclear. Should we consider him to be a “founder” of a new way of thinking? Of a science? Of a philosophy? Where can we find the schematics of his foundation,

527. An exhaustive list would be impossible. The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu undoubtedly deserves special mention. But these problems were already on the radar of social science from the very beginning, even if they were covered up. See the discussion of Max Weber in Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision* for a particularly good example. In addition, historians of science have problematized the notion of objectivity, exploring the implications of the kind of self that results from the pursuit of objectivity. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).
see the archways and underpasses, the overhangs and terraces? Even if there is no ready-made roadmap of the new continent at hand, to be gleaned from a systematic reading of Althusser’s work, there remains nonetheless a distinct imperative that his work impels in his audience. Transformation is, as it were, on the agenda. Despite the change in terrain that inevitably follows historical fluctuations, there is still much of Althusser’s writing that remains not only pertinent but exceedingly necessary. At a time when there is a palpable need for innovation and the active making of history—through this process of experimentation—Althusser’s work remains invigorating: just as in the 1960s, one “reads him with attention, even with excitement. There is no mystery about his capacity to inspire the intelligent young….″

Despite his apparent relevance for our present, his potential grip upon our imaginations, Althusser’s idea of social science is nonetheless not very familiar. In fact, Althusser is often seen as embarking upon a road that lacks any scientificity, despite his repeated insistence to the contrary. This position is somewhat ironic in that Althusser, within the orbit of Marxist social science, consistently towed a line that brought him in conflict with the now discredited ideas of the party. In the early period of his career, at a time when the party demanded that there be “two sciences”, one for each social class, Althusser could not bring himself to submit to such a notion. Even when sympathetic readers encountered Althusser, especially in the period prior to the release of the various posthumous materials, they often spoke of his “project” in terms that

528. This was Eric Hobsbawm’s assessment in his highly influential review of For Marx and Reading Capital, published in 1966 in the Times Literary Supplement. While appreciative of many aspects of Althusser’s work, he nonetheless offers pointed criticism of Althusser’s limits. It is republished in Gregory Elliott (ed.), Althusser: A Critical Reader (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

elided or downplayed the question of Althusser’s scientificity. Hirsh claims, for example, before
Althusser’s death and before any of his “late” writings were known, that:

...[Althusser’s] lifelong project has been to preserve what he judged to be the revolutionary integrity of
marxism, to prevent marxism from being ‘contaminated’ with bourgeois ideologies that inevitably deflect it
from its revolutionary goals, and to save marxism from the twin evils of reformism and revisionism.\(^{530}\)

Without going so far as to claim that Marxism is a science, Hirsh ends up treating it like an
ideology: one that is revolutionary and thus in danger of being overly “tempered” by various
ideological influences. In such a view, Althusser’s attempt to remain a committed Communist
without giving up his status as a philosopher begins to resemble a dogmatic claim to truth rather
than a self-imposed challenge to think the limits of the possible. The failures of dogmatic
“proletarian science” are well documented, and have undoubtedly contributed to this conflation
of Althusser’s position with a dogmatic scientism. Our preconceived notions of the PCF and its
relationship to the masses easily fill in the rest of the picture: Althusser must have been operating
as a kind of intellectual vanguard priest. In this neat picture, which allows us to safely consign
Althusser to the dustbin of history, the politics trump the “science.”

But this neat theory too has problems. In fact, his attention to science is what makes his
reflections on political practice so vitally important. By focusing on these two figures, Althusser
engages in a debate about social science and its relationship to political practice. As a committed
communist *and* a philosopher, dual roles that were never subordinate or dominant to one another
(if we are to believe his collaborator, and friend, Étienne Balibar), Althusser certainly seems like

\(^{530}\) Hirsh *The French New Left*, 161. The question of Althusser’s science must not be completely conflated with
the question of his *structuralism*: while structuralism represented an ambitious scientific enterprise that certainly had
its effects on Althusser’s thinking, it was often his attempt to think *against* structuralism that can be seen as defining
his method of doing science. This thread, too, will have to be picked up in later pages.
an unlikely scientist.\textsuperscript{531} Despite writing at a time that marked a veritable eruption in the history of science, Althusser is not often considered to have contributed much to the conversation about philosophy of science.\textsuperscript{532} Where he is seen as engaging in work of interest to epistemology or the history of science, he is often conflated with his teachers, Bachelard and Canguilhem.\textsuperscript{533} Part of this problem is political: when he persistently demanded that Marxism be seen as a science many could not help but hear the foreboding echoes of “proletarian science” and dogmatic claims to have discovered the “laws of history.”\textsuperscript{534} And part of the problem may just as likely lie in the fate of Freud, a thinker in whom Althusser identified a scientific discovery of dramatic importance—the unconscious— and who, for our purposes, will be of great importance. In order to relocate Althusser within a discourse of political “science,” it is essential that we

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\item These comments were given by Balibar at Althusser’s funeral: “To be at once totally a philosopher and totally a Communist, without sacrificing, subordinating, or subjecting the one to the other: such is the intellectual singularity of Althusser, such was his wager and the risk he took….” (quoted in Elliot, “Preface” to \textit{Althusser: A Critical Reader}).
\item Althusser’s notorious works, those that made a name for himself and that inspired his students, were published in 1963 and 1965. This decade is a watershed for the critique of positivism and naturalism. The Popper-Adorno debate in German sociology began in 1961 and lasted the decade; see Theodor W. Adorno, et al., \textit{The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology} (New York: Harper \& Row, 1976). Thomas Kuhn published the landmark text \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions} in 1962 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Peter Winch, drawing on Wittgenstein, published his \textit{Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy} (New York: Routledge, 1970) slightly ahead of the curve in 1958. There seems little doubt that these kinds of movements in philosophy of science were correlated with tectonic shifts in the landscape of politics as well—especially since such eruptions as occurred in France in May of 1968 placed the University in the center of the political disruption of the status quo.
\item Ironically, Althusser has sometimes been read as a relativist and an anti-foundationalist despite his close affiliation with this rationalist tradition and his own repeated attempts to claim the mantle of objectivity for Marxist science. See Steven B. Smith, “Althusser's Marxism without a Knowing Subject,” \textit{The American Political Science Review} 79, no. 3 (1985): 641-655. For a more recent, and sympathetic, attempt to take up this question of knowledge see William S. Lewis, “Knowledge versus “Knowledge”: Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology,” \textit{Rethinking Marxism} 17 no. 3 (2005).
\item Admittedly, sometimes Althusser willingly traveled down a path that invited such comparisons.
\item While Freud has certainly been an important influence on the development of psychology, his influence on the field of neuroscience or neurobiology is less clear. It would be a fascinating journey to retrace Freud’s intellectual trajectory from the perspective of science, as opposed to its more humanistic interpretations. Althusser, writing on “Marx’s Relation to Hegel” writes of Marx and Freud as “those great damnés de la terre for academic bourgeois philosophy” (in \textit{Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx} (New York: Verso, 2007), 163).
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consider his relationship to these famous founding scientists—and Machiavelli, as he was for Althusser himself, must be viewed as a key figure in our effort.

This seems like a promising path. Machiavelli enjoys quite a different reputation: it is widely argued that Machiavelli is the “founder” of the discipline known as political science, precisely because he endeavored to grasp reality, in all its messiness, rather than subordinate that reality to ideals. Ironically, this celebrated realism is what, as Leo Strauss noted, earned Machiavelli the distinction of being labeled a “teacher of evil.”

Althusser, considering the thesis that Machiavelli is the founder of a positive political science, writes:

But I believe that the attempt to attribute to him this discourse of pure positivity always fails in the face of a disconcerting lack, of the suspended character of his theses, and the interminable character of a thought that remains enigmatic. I believe Machiavelli has to be approached from a different direction, following thereby an intuition of Gramsci’s.

Thus Althusser would deflect us away from this problem of foundations, urging us instead to follow this intuition of Gramsci’s that Machiavelli wrote a political manifesto, rather than a scientific treatise. This puts *The Prince* into a peculiar status:

…a manifesto that is political, and thus wishes to act and subordinate itself entirely to the political practice induced by that conjuncture and the balance of forces that defines it. This might be said to be an utterly banal recommendation, but the question becomes seriously complicated when it is remarked that this inscription in the objective, external political conjuncture also has to be represented inside the very text that practices it, if the intention is to invite the reader of the text of the manifesto to relate to that conjuncture with a full awareness and to assess accurately the place the manifesto occupies in that conjuncture. In other words, for the manifesto to be truly political and realistic—materialistic—the theory that it states must not only be stated by the manifesto, but located by it in the social space into which it is intervening and which it thinks.

Thus, the transformation of the thesis of Machiavelli the scientist results in Machiavelli the agitator.

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Perhaps it is no coincidence that another noted scientist was responsible for a different incendiary manifesto. Karl Marx, despite all the trouble his followers have gotten into, is widely regarded as one of the founders of the modern discipline of sociology.\textsuperscript{539} The question, then, is how could Althusser, by engaging with the works of two noted scientists, end up in such an enigmatic and seemingly \textit{unscientific} place? Did he succumb to irrational political impulses? Did he bow down before a different altar, attempting merely to assuage the gate keepers of the Party? Here it will not suffice to write off his theoretical achievements to his well-documented mental instability, either. If we want to be generous, which I suggest is a helpful posture to take when dealing with such a case, we may even begin to suspect that Althusser’s mental instability was the price he paid for the gamble that he took. At a minimum, it seems a safe bet to say that if, as he desired, Althusser contributed to the foundation of a science then it must have been a peculiar science indeed.

We will have opportunity to return to the questions of theory and writing, of space and utopia that the above-quoted passage opens up. For purposes of situating ourselves relative to Althusser’s self-conception, of his defense of the scientificity of historical materialism, we should consider more closely his stance on the work of Marx. Although Marx called his work a “critique” Althusser argues that Marx has inaugurated a new concept of critique, one that breaks from the rationalist tradition that runs from “Bayle to Kant” (skipping over Hegel, who will need a specific commentary later).\textsuperscript{540} Rather than the “True” critiquing the “false” or erroneous, Marx’s late work represents a critique that takes place within the sphere of reality, a “critique is

\textsuperscript{539} Marx, Durkheim, and Weber typically share this mantle.
\textsuperscript{540} Althusser, \textit{Philosophy of the Encounter}, 17
critique of existing reality by existing reality.”⁵⁴¹ Lest this form of critique float off in some land of agonistic forces and counter-forces, without concrete referent, Marx sought to ground critique in the class struggle. This class struggle, in a nod to the Hegel-inspired theorists who had been condemned for their humanism, is identified with a struggle against “the forms of capitalist exploitation.”⁵⁴² But this argument comes full circle with Althusser’s earlier work, when he goes on to argue that Marx was thus disavowing himself as a “creator” or an “intellectual” responsible for coming up with this critique of existing practice. Marx thus ends up rejecting “the idea, ‘obvious’ to everyone at the time, that he, the individual Marx, the intellectual Marx, could be the intellectual or even political author (as the absolute origin or creator) of such a critique. For it was the real—the workers’ class struggle—which acted as the true author (the agent) of the real’s critique of itself.”⁵⁴³ In terms and language that echo Machiavelli and Us, Althusser sets as his first goal in this text about “limits” the task of abolishing notions of individual genius. Moving immediately into a discussion of the 1852 letter to Weydemeyer (in which Marx argues that his real achievement is to have discovered the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat by linking socialist struggle to the mode of production) Althusser shows how Marx sought to put his “critique” on much different foundations—grounded in the experience of concrete political struggle.⁵⁴⁴ Unlike erudite philosophers, who could study the proper texts with patience and insight and arrive at new philosophical knowledge, Marx’s new way of thinking about the world emerges out of his activity in politics. This insight makes Marxism inherently collective, rather

⁵⁴¹ Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, 17.
⁵⁴² Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, 17.
⁵⁴³ Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, 18.
⁵⁴⁴ Althusser does point to the fact that Marx inherited the phrase of the dictatorship of the proletariat from Blanqui, but that through Marx and Lenin it took on the double meaning of both a political regime above law and as the rulership of a class. See Philosophy of the Encounter, 86-89.
than the legacy of a progenitor father-figure. It troubles the idea of deterministic foundings, and brings up the issue of the reproduction of social relations. The class struggle, which had involved both Marx and Engels in its staged drama and propelled them together in a chance encounter, demanded the kind of theory that they were forced to develop. There was a moment, an one-way break with the past, that conditioned the future and brought forth something new. This swerve is precisely the “epistemological break” around 1845 when Marx and Engels had a singular experience of this, as a:

…’moment’ when there suddenly emerges, in the ‘consciousness’ of Marx and Engels, the need to question, not partially but totally and radically, the theoretical principles that they learnt at university, the need to think in an altogether different way, to ‘shift ground’ or change elements….This moment ‘blossoms’ after the dramatic confrontation with the Feuerbachian philosophy of alienation, that ‘unprecedented theoretical revolution’, and with the concepts of bourgeois Political Economy, which had initially been taken up uncritically…545

It is worthwhile to note that it is through an engagement with the philosophy of alienation and Political Economy that Marx and Engels effected their break. This occurs in their “consciousness,” a term Althusser feels necessary to put in inverted commas. There is also something of an interpellation in this account of this “break,” a call to action that resonated with many of his students. But the next question is naturally “how?” If the question that Althusser poses is “how did Marx and Engels do it?” the answer is by way of an experience that questions the totality of the world. Is this a bedrock experience of the break with ideology? Is this a generality that is constitutive of science as such? Of what, precisely, does such a violent foundation consist? And, on a more collective level, how can such a personal experience come to benefit others, assuming that they so desire to follow?

It is by turning to the work of another “founder,” the intrepid adventurer who discovered the continent of the “unconscious” that we can begin to get our bearings on these questions.

545. Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, 27
Althusser and Freud: Uncanny Reminders

Whoever begins to sense the grandeur of the universe, its cohesion and its laws, easily loses sight of his own insignificant self. Lost in wonder and humility, he too easily forgets that he himself is part of these active forces and that, in accordance with his personal strength, he can make a minute alteration in the destined course of the world, in which, after all, the small is no less wonderful or significant than the great.

—Sigmund Freud.

So writes Freud in an essay about Leonardo da Vinci. In order to frame our discussion of Machiavelli, we must start with Freud. Althusser indicates as much in the enigmatic opening lines of his foreward. Despite this enigmatic character, this fact is not surprising given the subject matter of Althusser’s essay and his close attention to the work of the founder of psychoanalysis. While it is widely acknowledged that Althusser took the concept of “overdetermination” from Freud’s work on the interpretation of dreams, there is more connection between them than a single concept. Indeed, the theory of “symptomatic reading” is seemingly a mere application of the therapeutic mode of psychoanalysis to the interpretation of a text.

But there is a general orientation that both Freud and Althusser share toward the role of rationality in human life. Despite the fact that his conception of humanity was that we are ultimately controlled by the irrationality of the unconscious, Freud sought to bring elements of human behavior within the sphere of rational action. Althusser, coming from a long tradition of French rationalism, shares this impetus. Freud and Althusser share a humble theory of human agency, one that takes seriously the limits that we encounter in our daily experience, but one that also aims at the transformative interpretation of key events. Both skeptical and audacious, Freud encourages us to see reality as it really is while simultaneously beckoning us to step over the line into a new future. I quote his writings on da Vinci here not to relive Freud’s reception in the

early twentieth century, but instead to highlight the thematic similarity between Freud and Althusser on this issue of human agency. Freud takes up da Vinci in the same spirit as Althusser’s treatment of Machiavelli, that is, with a question: “What was it that made Leonardo’s personality incomprehensible to his contemporaries?” While Freud centers his attention on the psychological makeup of an artist, working from very limited data, Althusser brings his philosophical training to bear on the texts written by Machiavelli. The question of Machiavelli’s “grip” upon us is thus a question of our relationship to the meaning of Machiavelli’s text, of our ability for political action, and a willingness to confront unsettling truths.

Thematically, this quotation helps to show the similarity between Freud, Althusser, and even Machiavelli on the capability of the human being to influence the vast and yet small world in which we live. Whereas many see Althusser’s “structuralism” as opposed to any meaningful notion of human agency, I bring in Freud to show how Althusser problematized certain notions of agency but made possible a consideration of other, perhaps more meaningful (because based in reality) notions of this same concept. Moreover, a brief exploration of some of Freud’s writings on art can show Althusser’s debt to Freud while simultaneously helping to give us a background against which to judge Machiavelli’s thought. The departure point on the topic of Machiavelli is not so provocative, and is easily recognized: Machiavelli should be thought in juxtaposition to moral fairytales about politics—fairytales in which good always triumphs, the evil are always punished, and the order of the world is set aright in the end. Fairytales of democracy are likewise called into question. In order to understand the world and ourselves, we must begin with what exists rather than what we wish to exist. So far, we have not departed from

the most common readings of Machiavelli. We are also in keeping with the spirit of our own
scientifically-inspired age.

Yet, we cannot stop there. Holding Machiavelli against these moral, utopian views of
politics, straining for just a bit longer than is necessary to see the obvious, one can begin to make
out the contours of a distinct theoretical object. When we ask what it is about fairytales that are
somehow necessary for our everyday existence, what inner need they fill or what social purpose
they evince, rather than merely dismiss them as “false consciousness” or some otherwise
distorted view of reality, we can begin a process of disentangling ourselves that will open up an
avenue that arrives in a surprising place. Here, the concept of the uncanny (unheimlich) becomes
pivotal. On this terrain, Freud offers insight which we can use to great effect: fairytales do not
evince the uncanny because they are “quite openly committed to the animistic view that thoughts
and wishes are all-powerful.” Tied in with the idea of omnipotence, then, are knee-jerk
theories of human agency—those that assume that freedom exists a priori. Freud’s
understanding of the formative role of the omnipotence of thought in subjectivity opens up a
different set of possibilities. Foremost amongst them is the unsettling possibility that, while we
may wish ourselves to be free, perhaps it is this desire for freedom itself that makes possible
pernicious forms of servitude. This chain of thinking leads onto the terrain of the uncanny.

Unheimliche” in German, was originally published in 1919. One is immediately reminded of the many pop culture
icons who espouse the “power of positive thinking” and the ability of the human mind to literally make reality. In
psychoanalysis this kind of thinking has a specific name: the belief in the omnipotence of thought. It is a step in
infant development and although most of us do move beyond such infantile fantasies there remains, as a result of
this moving beyond, a residue in the unconscious that can easily re-emerge at later points in life. Please note that I
am not critical of the notion that we can make the world—quite the contrary. I merely question the ability to do so
with naked thought.

549. This theme is taken up by Claude Lefort in his essay “The Interposed Body: George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-
Four” in Writing: the Political Test (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). We shall return to Lefort at length
below.
The sensation of the uncanny is a kind of symptom that can be carefully diagnosed, a symptom that points us toward elementary experiences of subject formation. But how? What does this tell us about ourselves? Turning to Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” is a good place to start.

There are a few orienting facts about Freud’s essay on the uncanny that can help us to situate its relation to Althusser. Althusser’s broad theoretical perspective shares three essential characteristics with this essay. First, the interpretive beginning: there is the importance of the structural position of the observer in relation to the whole. Second, there is the relationship between utopian impulses (i.e. wish-fulfillment) as opposed to the uncanny (or not invoking a sense of the uncanny). And last, there is the most important element—that which will pivot our perception of Althusser’s theory of ideology, his reading of Machiavelli, and offer us a new vantage point from which to grasp Machiavelli’s “grip” upon us: the central place of fear in all three of these relations.

Freud’s essay places a high value on narrative and our position within a narrative. As a theory of human behavior, psychoanalysis begins with the splitting of the self into its component parts, showing their inter-relatedness and carefully pinning down the conflicts that arise within our socially-conditioned selves. As Tracy Strong recently put it, “what Freud showed us is that, at present, we are ignorant of our individual pasts, that we have repressed that knowledge, and that, in order to avoid that knowledge, we have erected barriers against it.”550 It is unsurprising then, that our ability to sense the uncanny is dictated by our position within a narrative frame—in

550. Tracy Strong, Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Banister in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 151. I do not think I hallucinate when I say that this book stands out as one of the exemplars of contemporary political theory and I owe it and its author a debt of gratitude. In particular, Strong’s presentation of the challenge latent in Freud’s thought is of particular importance (see 154-159). I see a similar challenge in Althusser’s work, as I intend to make clear.
a given story it is a question of whose viewpoint it is that we occupy.\textsuperscript{551} This understanding of the uncomfortable conflicts at the root of the self has the result of locating morality as a process of subjectivication:

By slow degrees a special authority takes shape within the ego; this authority, which is able to confront the rest of the ego, performs the function of self-observation and self-criticism, exercises a kind of psychical censorship, and so becomes what we know as the ‘conscience.’\textsuperscript{552}

Taking on board a sense of right and wrong from our environment, we construct an internal control mechanism, a “kind of psychical censorship” that we call our conscience.\textsuperscript{553} Freud relates this notion to what he calls “the omnipotence of thoughts”—the idea that we can control reality with our mind. While it has its origins in infancy, this idea encapsulates such phenomenon as thinking about someone just when the phone rings (and it is her!) or believing that harboring negative thoughts about some person can actually bring them harm. For Freud, we have sensations like these (sometimes linked with the feeling that something has already happened to us: \textit{deja vu}) because they remind us, in a slight and ephemeral way, of experiences that are formative of our subjectivity itself. Broadly speaking we can say that the omnipotence of thought is a characteristic of human life that gives rise to certain forms of superstition.

Coming as it did in the beginning of the twentieth century, at the height of imperial conquest, Freud’s psychoanalytic theory subordinates the “primitive” to the civilized, but only in...
a very specific sense. In a broad characterization of “primitive” thinking, Freud argues that this mode of “animistic” thinking is elementary to human infant development. Because all human beings experience the world through the asserted omnipotence of their own thoughts, at this key stage in their development, they find unexpected connections to be strangely familiar. The unsettling side of this familiarity is related to the process of repression. Because “every affect arising from an emotional impulse—of whatever kind—is converted into fear by being repressed” it follows logically that, amongst those things that frighten us, there must be some subset of things that have been formerly repressed but subsequently return. It is this specific subset of things we find frightening that Freud calls the uncanny. Far removed from the fear of the unknown or a fear of a specific, known object or anticipated result, this kind of fear is at the border of our ability to describe it or comprehend it: “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.” This feeling is not merely a kind of intellectual uncertainty or a gap in one’s rational framework: “clear knowledge in no way diminishes the impression of the uncanny.” Increasing our knowledge of the world or ourselves, while valuable in some respects, encounters a hard limit here.

It is worth stressing the point: repression converts affect into fear. Fear is not a primary state of mind, an existential relation to the unknown, or even, strictly speaking, a rational response to a threatening environment. Fear requires a specific kind of thought process in order

554. The nature of Freud’s undertaking, and his discoveries, is only of secondary importance to my work on Althusser. This discussion of the “uncanny” is meant to elucidate how Althusser read Freud, and how Freud made a deep and lasting impression on him that affected Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli.


to emerge. Here Freud reminds us that it is precisely *in its familiarity* that the uncanny is related to fear. When we experience this sense of “strange familiarity” we do not, explicitly, experience fear. The process of repression has converted affect into fear, which is thus a secondary form of emotional response. The sensation of the uncanny, then, points beyond the given manifold set of experiences toward what could be described as the “pre-historical” stages of human life. The problem of pushing beyond the horizon of subjective experience is an analog to the problem of pushing beyond the horizon of modernity, into more ancient forms of thought. In both cases there is presumed to be a prior history that structures the present in a meaningful but unknown manner. Language serves the purpose of helping to make this movement “beyond” possible, by bridging the gap between historical moments: “Words were originally magic and to this day words have retained much of their ancient magical power.”

Freud analyzes linguistic usage to show that there is a certain ambiguity in the way the word was used, in 19th Century usage, that it “belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other—the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden.” Linguistically, this connection between the familiar and the concealed opens up a space where Freud can stand in order to pry loose the sedimented layers of consciousness. In place of a monistic, unified self a new image of human beings becomes possible.

What we get is a sense of “strange familiarity” that Freud argues is a *result* of our disjointed self; this fractured self is the process of subjectification. Helplessness is attached to

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559. Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132. Note that Freud is *not* arguing that there are unknown entities of a *nonconscious* kind that dictate our behavior without our knowing it. This is a common misinterpretation of Freud that mirrors those made against Althusser’s structuralism. Althusser takes up the distinction between nonconscious and unconscious in his “On Marx and Freud” in *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 123-4.

560. It is perhaps too easy to equate subjectification with repression
this sense of the uncanny—when wandering through a landscape and coming across the same scene again and again, for example. To put the point more plainly: we are not responsible for self-genesis as individuals; we wander through life as if amidst a foreign landscape, yet encountering certain scenes of familiarity. Freud calls this the “factor of unintended repetition” that produces the sense of the uncanny out of otherwise mundane circumstances. This persistent feature of human experience has a specific result: situations like this can force us “to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of ‘chance.’”  

Fate, destiny, the inexorable: whatever we want to call it it is nonetheless an imposition our consciousness makes upon the otherwise chaotic or “aleatory,” as a direct result of our previous infantile experiences.

Freud sources this particular instance of the uncanny to its similarity to an infantile compulsion to repeat: because we all experience, very early in life, a powerful instinct to repeat, it is not surprising that we find the recurrence of a given phenomenon to be strangely unsettling. It reminds us, in some vague and never fully speakable way, of a time that we cannot bring to consciousness. But, to complicate things, not every repetition invokes such a feeling of the uncanny—not even if it is a repetition of a repressed drive.  

There is some specific aspect of experience that, when repeated, makes the uncanny become manifest:


an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth. This is at the root of much that is uncanny about magical practices. The infantile element about this, which also dominates the mental life of neurotics, is the excessive stress that is laid on psychical reality, as opposed to material reality—a feature that is close to the omnipotence of thoughts.\textsuperscript{563}

Keeping in mind Freud’s comments from his \textit{Lectures} on the magical nature of words, in combination with his intense linguistic analysis, we can see that Freud is drawing our attention to the relationship between the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic.\textsuperscript{564} While we experience the real and the symbolic as profoundly \textit{external} phenomena, we nonetheless participate in their articulation. The aspect of infantile consciousness that seems connected to the uncanny is thus the omnipotence of thought. This belief in our ability to control the world with mental effort alone is one that becomes repressed through the development into adulthood, as submission to the symbolic order takes place:

Our conclusion could then be stated as follows: the uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been \textit{surmounted} appear to be once again confirmed. Finally, we must not let our preference for tidy solutions and lucid presentation prevent us from acknowledging that in real life it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between the two species of the uncanny that we have posited. As primitive convictions are closely linked with childhood complexes, indeed rooted in them, this blurring of the boundaries will come as no great surprise.\textsuperscript{565}

What we cannot experience as fear, due to the process of subjectification, we instead experience as strangely familiar, fateful, inescapable. Where before stood chance now fate holds sovereign power. Art is thus one way of investigating this sense of the uncanny, and it allows a good

\textsuperscript{563} Freud, “The Uncanny,” 150-1.

\textsuperscript{564} A more detailed discussion of Lacan, and his influence upon Althusser, would be useful here but would take us afield of the central purpose. For an excellent discussion see Warren Montag, \textit{Althusser and his Contemporaries}, chapter seven.

\textsuperscript{565} Freud, “The Uncanny,” 155. While I could have cut this long quote short and edited out the equation of “primitives” with children, since it does take us afield of the present purpose to criticize Freud, I felt it was better to let the ambiguity of Freud’s formulation speak for itself. Despite the lingering notions of development and progress, I don’t find in Freud any sense that history takes on a teleology.
starting point for an analysis of this feeling, its social rootedness, as well as the possibilities of overcoming the limitations it places on human happiness.566

Knowing that Althusser refers to this notion of Freud’s in the opening lines of *Machiavelli & Us* helps us to understand the way Althusser reads this text, and how it relates to his larger theoretical framework on ideology. It also alerts us to the importance, if we remain committed to understanding his reading of Machiavelli, of Althusser’s other writings on Freud, most notably “Freud and Lacan.” The connection between these two strands of Althusser’s thinking is clear: Althusser’s notion of ideology is not a merely contingent set of deceptive ideas about the world, or an utterly incorrect “false consciousness.” These were the very popular ideas about ideology that he was seeking to combat.567 It is far removed from deterministic Marxism and its claim that social relations dictate consciousness. It is not even the merely “prescientific” departure point from which one might inaugurate a new science.568 Ideology, here, is material.569

Just as the deceptions of consciousness reveal an undercurrent of irrationality or unconscious drives, and thus serve as necessary illusions for the mode of life that we see around us, ideology must be explained in its *effects*. Via this detour through Freud we can add a supplement to this thesis on the materiality of ideology: *ideology is, in its material existence, fear*. There is thus a

566. The debate on “intentionality” seems to be settled. See Strong, *Politics Without Vision*, 161 for a concise and definitive statement: “the intention that resulted in the work is in the work.” Freud and Leo Strauss, it would seem, share the same stance.


568. The relationship between ideology and science is one that deserves a much closer critical look than I can offer in this chapter. I posit that this investigation will make possible a reappraisal of this relation and, indeed, of Machiavelli’s new science of politics.

569. I am indebted to Warren Montag’s excellent book on Althusser for my take on the materiality of ideology. See *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). In particular, Chapter 8 opens up the discussion on Althusser’s essay on ideology in a provocative manner.
link between fate, determinism, the iron grip of “law and order” and ideology, which is why Althusser’s philosophy of the encounter, his aleatory materialism, can serve as a kind of antidote to these experienced truths. This is the most important result of this necessary detour through Freud: it is revelatory of the central place of fear in the final chapter of the book, in which Althusser discusses the relation of the people to the prince. In laying bare the relationship between fear and ideology, Althusser makes space for a reconsideration of politics. Because Machiavelli was a thinker perched on the cusp of a major historical development, and because that self-same historical development (the bourgeois national state) comes under scrutiny during the period of its supersession, those who attempt to “think beyond” the limits imposed by that historical development can find an ally in Machiavelli. But also, because thinkers like Marx and Gramsci live under the influence of the national state, they face great difficulty in establishing just why and how Machiavelli can help them. In the end, there must be a resort to the ineffable or perhaps the uncanny, as Althusser intimates in his foreword: “Machiavelli grips us. But if by chance we want to grasp him, he evades us: he is elusive.”

This grip cannot be rationally explained or “proven” through theorems or demonstrations. It cannot even be verbalized. When Althusser attempts, albeit briefly, to “explain” this phenomenon, he resorts to Freud:

I wished to reflect on this enigma, this strangeness, this ‘strange familiarity’ of which Freud once spoke, precisely in connection with works of art. On this paradox. On this enduring actuality despite the passage of centuries, as if from his province, home to men and beasts, Machiavelli had come down among us and spoken to us since time immemorial. I venture these associations. If they are reckoned too personal, no matter, since they still refer to him. If they have the good fortune to interest a few people, who, on issues over which so many adversaries had clashed, recognize in his words the real nature of the battle they were waging, then so much the better. But it is still him we have to thank. And if—as, indeed, chance may have it—I overstep his field of thought, let us say that he opened up this space, among others, to us.

570. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 4.
571. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 4.
Such a cryptic passage demands close scrutiny. First, let us make a few remarks: 1) the ability itself to overstep Machiavelli’s field of thought is ultimately to be attributed to “him” and to “chance.” A combination of virtù and Fortuna. That is to say, if Althusser has managed such a feat then we ought not find in him the spark of genius, but instead look further to the source materials from which he draws his analysis. Any such interrogation would seem to be limited only by our means and our energy, for clearly Machiavelli too had many sources of inspiration; 2) if these “associations” are “reckoned too personal” this does not actually matter either, since they “still refer to him.” To be too personal in this case could mean two things. In the first case, to be too personal might mean “not fit for public consumption.” Which is to say that to be too personal would be “taboo” and thus tied with either shame or guilt—it would be opposed to some definition of “public.” This is plausible from Althusser’s invocation of Freud, wherein that which is “too personal” is precisely that which is repressed, which can never be made public. In the second sense, it might mean too personalized in the sense of too specific to a given person, or not general enough and thus historically insignificant. Thus, in either case of “overstepping” or of being “too personal” (and here the ambiguity is thick but I would venture that Althusser means the adjective “personal” to apply to himself as much as to Machiavelli) the task is still accomplished, because the reader will be engaging with Machiavelli in either case. We cannot help but be reminded of the many voices of “Anti-Machiavellianism” who all take their point of reference as the writings of Machiavelli. Even hatred, especially hatred that compels countless pages of text to be written, is evidence of a serious “grip.” In setting the stage in this way, we expect that Althusser takes on the role of a guide, a kind of Virgil who will show us the true
Machiavelli and how he grips us;\(^572\) 3) the whole paragraph has the aura of a prayer to it. While “him” is not “Him” it is precisely as if Machiavelli had “come down among us” as a god. At a practical level, from the perspective of that which is “lower” than or in thrall of something else, it matters little whether one inserts the name “God” or “Master” into the seat of power. If power is externalized, radically “other” then State and God serve equally well as placeholders of this radical alterity.\(^573\) As we will come to see, Althusser develops a reading of Machiavelli that positions power within representation. This is a necessary step toward undoing the ideological notions of power that situate it outside of human control or understanding. Althusser tells us that we are subjects at the beginning of this journey, beholden to powers that we cannot as of yet understand. He takes on the role of guide in order to show us the nature of our own subjection, via a process of reading; 4) it also has the character of a scientific truth, conceived under a certain banner of science. The verb tense in the sixth sentence (beginning with “If they have…”) is very important. If these associations ventured have the good fortune of interesting a few readers it will be because they find in this reading of Machiavelli the truth or “real nature” of the battles that were being waged at that time. “The battle they were waging” is one that is, apparently, in the past. But the elision here is so palpable because the sentence invokes the past of the subject (the reader) as well—the battles that have been waged in the process of the formation of a subject who can be ready to take Althusser’s hand and walk down this path in the first place. We are immediately situated within the struggle, given a place from which we can start. Class struggle is not something that only goes on outside the self. But even if this truth is

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572. I venture that Dante is an important influence throughout this text, as a kind of theoretical foil to Machiavelli. The key text, in terms of political theory, is Monarchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Althusser does cite The Divine Comedy on page 55 of Machiavelli & Us.

573. Is this not an indication of why Althusser is constantly capitalizing “State?”
realized via Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli, it will still ultimately be attributable to “him” and thus it is “still him we have to thank.” It will not be our genius, our overcoming, our struggle that will be decisive: our thanks (if, indeed, we deign to thank anyone) will be due to those who have come before. We are encouraged to maintain a sense of collective identity, a connection to the past that is otherwise lacking. We are always already historical beings, and our ability to recognize that fact is itself historically situated in the struggle that has come before.

Much like the truth underneath language is that a given “person” undergoes such fundamental changes over the course of a given lifetime that it is scarcely appropriate to refer to oneself at age 15 as the “same person” as oneself at age 75 (and even the legal apparatus will necessitate such distinctions) we should resist the temptation to let ideology reason for us and place the sole source of creative energy in our own minds. Thus, there are two dangers that are being gestured toward: seating power in radical alterity and its equally deceptive opposite. In political terms, these opening pages distance Althusser from any Marxist theory of the “special” position of the proletariat in world history, especially those that announce such messianic visions from the relative safety of parliament or academia.574

The invocation of Freud is also noteworthy. In “Machiavelli’s Solitude” Althusser elaborates on this idea:

Even today, anyone who opens The Prince or the Discourses, texts now 350 years old, is, as it were, struck by what Freud called a strange familiarity, an Unheimlichkeit. Without our understanding why, we find these old texts addressing us as if they were of our own day, gripping us as if, in some sense, they had been written for us, and to tell us something which concerns us directly, without our exactly knowing why.575

574. Such delusions of grandeur are harshly criticized in the opening salvos of one of Althusser’s favorite texts: The German Ideology. This text occupies a key position in Althusser’s development of the theory of the infamous “break” with ideology—it is the hinge point at which the previous philosophical vehicle is broken and unable to continue but Marx and Engels have not yet crafted a new one to take its place.

575. “Machiavelli’s Solitude” in Machiavelli & Us, 117. While this essay deserves a separate analysis, for purposes of brevity I will be treating them as part of the same text. Accordingly, I will cite them both with Machiavelli & Us and a page number. “Machiavelli’s Solitude” runs from pages 114-130.
Machiavelli’s solitude is also described by Althusser as linked with the “unwonted” character of the thought. Part of what makes Machiavelli “grip” us is that it touches upon something strangely familiar. This is a first clue that something deeper, yet also more apparent, is at work. Althusser appears to find an analog in the resistance to the findings of psychoanalysis. In “Three Notes on a Theory of Discourse” he attempts to bring psychoanalysis out of its “isolation” and into the domain of science, noting that the prevailing isolation tends to have the:

effect of an inexplicable strangeness that all those wishing to deny psychoanalysis any claim to scientificity hold against it, consigning analysis to the realm of magic or rejecting it as pure and simple imposture.576

This grip cannot be the result of Machiavelli’s discovery of the positive science of politics, since this is something very familiar to us. In discussing Freud, Althusser hints at the notion of repression but leaves any further association to the labor of the reader.

Returning to the last paragraph of “Machiavelli’s Solitude” one cannot help but remember that Machiavelli “did not believe that intellectuals make history.” The imperative that emerges from this self-effacement, this displacement of the author to a remote past, “since time immemorial” and to a “chance” encounter that may or may not take place, is left open. We will not find an authoritative vision or a series of bullet-points in the form of a political program in the pages to follow. We will not find a ready-made solution to intractable problems, no technique to fix the present in all its chaos and discord. The proletariat will not be the privileged agent of world history, needing merely to step forth and claim its birthright. There are no general laws of politics or history that can absolve us of the need for action. The “classical” problem of

whether Machiavelli was a republican or a monarchist dissolves.\textsuperscript{577} The intended audience of these texts opens up, \textit{for us}. As Lefort puts it, “Both \textit{The Prince} and \textit{The Discourses} seemed to us to be intended for those who have at once a desire to know and to act.”\textsuperscript{578} When we read Machiavelli we find something familiar precisely because Machiavelli toys with our search for authoritative truths, only to subvert that search. While Machiavelli promises to “teach us everything he knows” the content of that teaching remains ineluctable. Perhaps it is the \textit{journey} that matters here, with Machiavelli as the tour guide who leads us through a carefully scripted drama. Althusser’s staging of his reading of Machiavelli, wherein he substitutes himself in position of guide, seems to support this possibility. But where does he lead us? Where are we going? To a space, a vast, open space, “among others.”

The others, here, are the spaces and the people, the spaces made by people and the people made by spaces. Due to our connection with history and with the elementary structures like family and state, we are always in the company of others. Struggle is collective, and it has defined history according to Althusser’s reading of the theory of historical materialism he sees at work in Machiavelli, Marx, and us. Althusser, by turning to Machiavelli as a guide out of the

\textsuperscript{577} Althusser notes that Machiavelli does not accept the typology of governments that is assumed to exist prior to analysis. Machiavelli breaks with the Aristotelian tradition on this front, despite the deceptive use of a kind of typology in \textit{The Prince}. See “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” 118-9. Lefort argues that these concepts “make up a structure so thin and fragile that it is legitimate to ask whether it is not pure and simple trompe de l’oeil. Thus, the security that the image of the continuous demonstration provided at first gives way to insecurity. The solid ground on which we thought we were established has become quicksand” (\textit{Machiavelli}, 100). Lefort argues that Machiavelli encourages his contemporary readers to “learn, and to recognize consequently that there is no deep division between the regime of the republican type and that of the tyrannical type in Florence, that in spite of an undeniable difference—the major effect of which is that in one case certain stakes of the political conflict are visible, spark a general interest for the public thing [\textit{res publica}], sustain both protest against and adhesion to institutions, while in the other they are masked, power draws away to secrecy, ignorance and fear discourage the hope of the vast majority and tend to corrupt morality—it is always a small minority who make the state their property, isolate themselves from the people, and by some artifice or another seek security in holding onto acquired positions” (Lefort, \textit{Machiavelli}, 472).

\textsuperscript{578} Lefort, \textit{Machiavelli}, 475. This coincidence of the desire to know and the desire to act is often contained in the personality of youth, according to Lefort. This reading, in line with Gramsci, rehabilitates Machiavelli as a writer of a revolutionary manifesto. But it strips it of its utopian character, as we will see.
contemporary troubles faced by the world communist movement, attempts to blaze a path that illuminates the limits of our ability to imagine such a journey in the first place.

The problem of ideology, one which Althusser finds explored by Machiavelli’s intrepid thought, looms like a glacier ahead of us. In the coming journey, certain truths must be held in mind, lest the elements overcome us: history is made collectively (that is, politically) and politics exerts a primary influence upon other modes of human collective action. Althusser’s theory is of the primacy of politics. What is political is that which makes history. But this is not a theory of the “autonomy” of politics. Because of the relation between different levels of the social formation, politics can exist in dominance of other levels of the formation but it does not have to do so. In part as an effect of these spatial metaphors of levels and formations, the collective process of overcoming ideology depends on spatialization, a consistent metaphor across Althusser’s writings. We will have opportunity to return to this in the pages that follow.

Writing about his experiences as a prisoner of war during World War II, Althusser reconstructs his engagement with Freud and Machiavelli by telling a story of a man called Robert Daël. The man’s political achievements to the benefit of his fellow prisoners, and despite the lack of power that would be assumed in a situation of imprisonment, imparts upon Althusser an understanding:

I understood then what it was to act in a way that respected principles without applying them simplistically. One had to come to terms with the imponderables of the situation, of the men and the things that mattered to them, and of the enemy. This called for all sorts of human resources other than clear and strict moral principles.

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579. It is noteworthy that Althusser does not use the concept of “autonomy” to discuss politics. This is even more noteworthy when considered against the Marxist language of “relative autonomy” developed in Reading Capital.

This understanding pertains to this discussion of art because Althusser draws certain conclusions about the role of deception in human life:

The first and most important result of all this was that it gave me a completely new approach to my fear of artifice. I began to realise that resorting to artifice, subterfuge, and other such practices was not merely to engage in deception. They could have beneficial effects on the person who used them and on other people, as long as one knew what one wanted and overcame any sense of guilt one might have. In short, one had to be free, which is something I learnt in the course of analysis. Without knowing it at the time and never having perceived the slightest parallel with that obsessive fear of artifice which was part of my nature—and though I only came to realise it much later—I worked my way towards the rules laid down by the only man—and I mean the only man—who thought about the prerequisites and the forms of action—albeit exclusively in the sphere of politics. He was the man who largely anticipated the discoveries of Freud, long before his time, and some day I hope to demonstrate this. His name was Machiavelli. At that time, however, I was a long way from understanding all this.581

This is a clear statement that attributes to Machiavelli a central role in Althusser’s thinking. It would appear that Machiavelli and Freud are the main actors in helping Althusser to understand his personal disgust of artifice, linked with his compulsive fear of being “found out” or of being a “phony.” Reflecting on the role of the family in inculcating “absolute respect for absolute authority” Althusser posits that “It is an irrefutable fact that the Family is the most powerful ideological State apparatus.”582 This deeply personal account of the relationship between Althusser’s theoretical work on ideology and his formative family experiences transforms his understanding of the nature of communism, which becomes emancipatory because linked to “life itself:”

I now feel I know for certain that one is not really alive unless one spends, takes risks, and therefore has surprises, and that surprises and spending (freely rather than for profit, which is the only possible definition of communism) are not simply a part of all life but constitute the ultimate truth of life itself, in its Ereignis, its surging forth, its very happening, as Heidegger has argued so well.\(^{584}\)

Spending freely, which is “the only possible definition of communism,” implies a connection to life as exceeding boundaries and limits, as a “surging forth” that Althusser attributes to Heidegger. These existential themes shape and define Althusser’s theory of art.

In fact, in discussing “real” art Althusser states that “the peculiarity of art is to ‘make us see’ (nous donner à voir), ‘make us perceive’, ‘make us feel’ something which alludes to reality.”\(^{584}\) The way in which art relates to reality is, however, surprising:

What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘seeing’, ‘perceiving’, and ‘feeling’ (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.\(^{585}\)

Thus Althusser sets up a tripartite distinction between art, ideology, and science. A line of demarcation is drawn between perceiving (or seeing, feeling) and knowing. This line makes impossible any metaphysical empiricism that might seek to connect the two, to make all knowledge come from sense data.\(^{586}\) It also problematizes the dichotomy between ideology and science, and the relation between these two concepts in Althusser’s thought. The goal of science cannot be to overcome ideology, to remove deception and accumulate knowledge of the world through more accurately collated sense data. A science thus takes a reflective and comprehensive stance relative to the ideology from which it is born, and it is (perhaps) this reflectivity that alone constitutes a science.

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586. Althusser levels heavy criticism against empiricism in Reading Capital (New York: Verso, 2009), whose problematic is the “twin brother” of “the religious vision of the essence” (39-43).
This appears, at first glance, to produce a problem. Althusser is well known for stating that a given ideology makes possible a given science through an event of “rupture” (*coupure*). He specifically avoids the Hegelian language of reflection and comprehension, precisely in order to define a different understanding of science. When we define this *coupure* as an “epistemological break” we seem firmly on the terrain of knowledge. It is only *after* science has constituted itself that the break can be perceived as a break, that it can be located at the level of epistemology.

This is not what art is doing, though. Art is making possible a “seeing” of ideology that does not constitute knowledge. This is not an epistemological break at all. Perhaps we might hazard to say that it is a necessary supplement, a stop-gap measure that attempts to mediate between the otherwise irreconcilable distinction between thought and reality, science and ideology. Art, unlike knowledge in an empiricist or epistemological sense, merely “alludes” to reality, whereas science defines objects of knowledge in relation to real objects, which are by definition “of different worlds.”

Since it does not produce concepts, but merely feelings, art is seemingly relegated to a lower tier than science. But, if art can have the effect of producing, in the subject, a critical stance relative to formerly assumed presuppositions (even of subjectivity itself) then perhaps it is *more* vital toward scientific understanding than the concepts that follow these artistic intuitive moments. This means that Althusser’s theory of art fits into a prominent, if not still cryptographic, position within Althusser’s larger theoretical effort. He is

587. Mark Poster points out that, with regard to this distinction between objects of knowledge and real objects, Althusser was “strongly neo-Kantian” in that “concepts actively created by thinkers were preconditions for the knowledge of any experience” (“Althusser on History without Man,” *Political Theory* 2, no. 4 (1974), 394).

588. Althusser is also on Marxist ground in approaching the text as a work of art. Marx had spoken of his work on *Das Kapital* in these terms, and had begun his intellectual career by studying and composing poetry. See Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 289.
still trying to think the relation between practice and theory, to practice a philosophy that transforms the world without relapsing into idealism or ideology. In order to explain Machiavelli’s effect on us, art is brought to bear at the limits of knowledge.

In *Reading Capital*, Althusser put the problem as such:

> The fact that just as we are studying this problem we have to think (in a completely novel way) the relation between a science and the ideology which gave rise to it and which continues to accompany it silently more or less throughout its history; the fact that such an investigation confronts us with the observation that every science, in the relationship it has with the ideology it emerged from, can only be thought as ‘science of the ideology’, would disconcert us, were we not forewarned of the nature of the object of knowledge, which can only exist in the form of ideology at the moment of constitution of the science which is going to produce knowledge from it in the specific mode that defines it. If all these examples do give us a first idea of the new conception of the history of knowledge we have to produce, they also suggest the scale of the work of historical investigation and theoretical elaboration which is in store.  

What is striking about this passage in terms of the relationship to the project announced in *Machiavelli & Us* is that the theme of thinking in a radically new way, linked up with the need for an *investigation*, is linked up with the two moments of politics that Althusser discovers in Machiavelli: constitution and duration. The innovation Althusser attributes to Marx (in the 1857 *Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*) is that of the “object of knowledge” and the “real object.” This *theoretical* relationship, established within Marxism, allows for an entirely different mode of production to be conceived—a mode of knowledge production that, self-consciously, takes as its object an ideological material in order to transform it into something else. Marx’s scientific discovery carries a revolution within it, “a revolution which inaugurates an authentically new mode of philosophical thought.”

Like the theory of “real” art cited above, this theory posits science as emergent *from* a particular ideology; but unlike the theory of art, which relies on allusion to “reveal” its detached relation to ideology,


590. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 82.
science stands poised to produce. The realm of making, of poeisis, of production, in terms of knowledge, is peculiar to science. It therefore has a reproductive function as well.

Taking up the issue of who is doing this making, who it is that has understood the thought of Marx, Althusser writes, in a footnote:

> For very profound reasons, it was often in fact political militants and leaders who, without being professional philosophers, were best able to read and understand Capital as philosophers. Lenin is the most extraordinary example: his philosophical understanding of Capital gives his economic and political analysis an incomparable profundity, rigour and acuity. In our image of Lenin, the great political leader all too often masks the man who undertook the patient, detailed and profound study of Marx’s great theoretical works. It is no accident that we owe to the first years of Lenin’s public activity (the years preceding the 1905 Revolution) so many acute texts devoted to the most difficult questions of the theory of Capital. Ten years of study and meditation on Capital gave the man the incomparable theoretical formation which produced the prodigious political understanding of the leader of the Russian and international workers’ movement. And this is also the reason why Lenin’s political and economic works (not only the written works, but also the historical ones) are of such theoretical and philosophical value: we can study Marxist philosophy at work in them, in the ‘practical’ state. Marxist philosophy which has become politics, political action, analysis and decision. Lenin: an incomparable theoretical and philosophical formation turned political.\(^{591}\)

It is important to insert a qualification that may help us to avoid a pitfall: here Althusser is not aimed at “ideology in general” or any given ideology. This is not a problem that can be taken care of through a process of abstraction. This is a quite particular problem, a problem of a specific historical kind, and it demands a specific and concrete solution. It demands continuous labor in order to understand the intricacies of a given political moment, which culminates in a “theoretical formation” that produces political understanding. This is a lived notion of philosophy, a philosophy that is born in the hard labor of reading and writing about complex topics. It only becomes political when it hits the ground, so to speak, when it works in the world and organizes the actions of people. The reason that such acute understanding requires so much effort is that ideology has such a profound effect on the way that we see ourselves and the world.

The ideology that Althusser encounters is “bourgeois ideology,” a historically embedded way of perceiving, amongst other things, history itself. It posits certain “truths” about the world.

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that effectively become true through a process of self-justification. This circular process by way of which ideology retroactively produces the conditions of its own production, a process that is seemingly paradoxical when thought from within the boundaries of itself, demands an analysis of its reproduction. But it likewise demands a “beyond” or perhaps an over-coming, if revolutionary activity is to be effective in the world.

In order to find a way “out” of this ideology Althusser takes up a series of case studies aimed at figures who seem to have achieved a “break” with ideology: Machiavelli and Marx are two of these important historical figures. This method makes impossible a purely willful escape from ideology: there can be no purely speculative leap into new territory. There can be no carefully drawn roadmap, laid out in axiomatic form to be readily communicated to any other rational being. Perhaps, gambling, we might say that what one must do is to listen, to attune oneself to the ability to detect a certain call. The question of how one recognizes the hailing of those who have broken with ideology, while one remains within the circle of ideology, must be related to Althusser’s use of the idea of “strange familiarity.” For even if we are said to be completely within ideology at a given moment, and it seems from our perspective within ideology that this must always have been the case and that it must always be the case, it remains nonetheless true that a process of subjectification takes up, as its raw material, a pre-conscious being in the form of a human infant. The process of subjectification, when perceived through Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, leaves a residue.

One of the results of this line of thinking is that the sovereignty of science comes under question. When Freud describes Leonardo da Vinci’s “dual nature as an artist and a scientist” he

592. Here we may think of the claim that “ideology has no history.”
comments on Leonardo’s reflections on love and knowledge by saying: “So Leonardo can only have meant that the love practised by human beings was not of the true, irreproachable kind: one ought to love in such a way that emotion is held back, subjected to reflection, and not allowed to take its course until it has passed the test of thought.”

Freud’s controversial thesis is that the allegedly “pure” search for knowledge that is said to drive science is, in fact, a sublimated libidinal drive. “He had simply transformed his passion into a thirst for knowledge.” This is the discussion that immediately precedes the quote with which I opened this section, a quote that is itself preceded by the simple declaration that under conditions in which the quest for knowledge has been produced “investigation takes over from action and creativity.”

When we consider these insights of Freud’s from the philosophical position of Althusser, we can set the stage for a discussion of his reading of Machiavelli. Tying science to libidinal drive opens the possibility of a nuanced and complex reading of the relation between art, science, and ideology, conceived in reference to history. The temptation to read Althusser as a complete structuralist, one who removes human beings from the world and leaves only “systems” of signs, should be held at bay for now. A selection from his memoir may suffice to justify the temporary bracketing of these concerns:


594. Freud, “Leonardo,” in *The Uncanny*, 53. Freud also comments that the “example of Leonardo teaches us how many other things connected with these processes must be followed up. Postponing loving until knowledge has been acquired means substituting knowledge for love. Having won through to knowledge, one no longer really loves and hates: one is now beyond love and hate” (54).

Whatever a philosopher’s conscious or rather subconscious inner motivation might be, his published philosophy has an entirely objective reality and its effect on the world, if it has one, is similarly objective and may, thank God, have almost no connection with the inner world I have described.

In this context, in which Althusser seamlessly weaves together personal recollections and philosophical musings, it is hard to take this claim literally. We might be tempted to import a neo-Kantian epistemology onto this quote, to declare that the objective “text-in-itself” is completely separated from the subjective appropriation of reality by the senses. But Althusser resists the reduction of philosophy to the psychological in that he does not conflate ideology and the unconscious. Althusser, it would seem, remains committed to a kind of realism whereby the objects of human creation take on a life of their own. But perhaps this is one of those beneficial deceptions (signaled with the invocation of the deity?) that serves a larger purpose. Likely this has to do with the desire to produce a monument, an object that can exhibit a quality that escapes the human individual as such: duration. The qualifiers “may” and “almost” certainly indicate that such an attempt to craft objective reality that is freed of our inner demons can, at best, be difficult. In fact, Althusser has philosophically committed himself to an embedded notion of subjectivity, which ties our inner desires to objects in the world in a dialectical relationship. By “thanking God” that we can create something enduring, we deceive ourselves and pretend as if the world is permanent, by the grace of a divine insurance policy. As our discussion of Machiavelli will show, the attempt to create an object that endures presents a peculiar kind of problem of its own.

596. As G.M. Goshgarian notes, discussing “Three Notes on a Theory of Discourses,” Althusser’s refusal to conflate the unconscious with ideology results in a certain division of labor whereby psychoanalysis becomes responsible for distancing itself from ideological notions of subjectivity. This division between the unconscious and ideology is “a premiss that makes it possible to think the effects of each on the other: that is, their articulated combination. This might be regarded as Althusser’s posthumous contribution to the ongoing debate about the thesis for which he is best known in the Anglophone world: ‘ideology interpellates individuals as subjects’. Broached in a 1963 discussion of the ‘imputation of forms of behavior’ to the subject, the mechanism of interpellation is here named and sketched in the context of a critique of Lacan that is absent from the canonical text on the topic, although that critique remained central to Althusser’s project” (Humanist Controversy, xlvi).
While Althusser is well known as a Marxist, and the relationship between Marx and Machiavelli is one that he comments on in a few scattered places throughout his work, his relationship to Freud is generally less well documented. But in this foreward we find that Freud is on Althusser’s mind: specifically Freud’s attempt to theorize art. Althusser’s treatment of art is not a retreat from more serious concerns. While Althusser seldom explicitly wrote about art or aesthetic theory, a careful reading of Machiavelli & Us reveals that art plays a privileged role in Althusser’s larger theoretical project, despite the fact that it is not explicitly discussed at length. But certainly there is a necessary connection between art as such and writing, and Althusser developed and deployed the notion of “symptomatic reading” on this very terrain. As we will see, Althusser’s understanding of politics and science undermines the notion that art should exist in its own neatly cordoned-off region, operating on its own rules. Thus, in a certain way, a very large part of Althusser’s writing is tuned to a frequency that resonates with the theme of art, in a general sense. At its most abstract, art is a mode of human activity that has to do with space and composition within that space. In fact, art serves the purpose of revealing ideology through allusion.

Each realm is differentially defined by its relationship to the others. Art works by producing an “internal distance” in the ideology in which it works. This ideology is pervasive: “it is identical with the ‘lived’ experience of human existence itself.” It is not a matter of carving up reality into appropriately shaped domains of sovereign activity: each way of understanding reality (the aesthetic, the ideological, and the scientific) is merely one means of approaching the same object.

It is here, at the edge of knowledge and perched over an abyss of interpretation, that art points toward facts of a very peculiar variety. This theory of art, for which Althusser has received little attention, comes into conflict with major interpretations of Althusser. It is commonly accepted that Althusser was a political Marxist of the structuralist variant; for such a theorist art holds no privileged claim to truth. Althusser’s defense of science seems to elevate concepts and theories above the kinds of experiences that, as subjects, we obtain through an engagement with art. In the Marxist tradition of the early twentieth century, art is generally thought to be “superstructural” and therefore an expression of the material conditions of society. In this line of thinking, art, religion, and culture all belong to the same sphere of “definite forms of human consciousness” or the ideological terrain (the superstructure) that emerges from the material base of social relations. In a word, many Marxists would call such aspects of human life “ideological.” Art, when seen in this way, can be little more than propaganda in an already constituted class war—thus there can be “good” art of the kind that builds a new proletarian ideology and there can be “bad” art of the antiquated, unwittingly ideological kind.

Neither of these is suitable for understanding Machiavelli, however. As the discussion of Althusser’s understanding of art made clear, art necessarily plays a fundamental role in the understanding of ideology as ideology. In introducing *Machiavelli & Us* with a discussion of Freud and “the uncanny,” Althusser states that he sought to understand how it is that Machiavelli’s text achieves the effect of appearing to be both strange and familiar all at once. An understanding of this art is essential precisely because it is that which makes the “break” of science possible. In looking for the “how” of the escape from ideology, Althusser ran headlong

599. This argument is most explicit in the infamous 1859 *Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy.*
into the apparently subjective experience of art and put this experience at the heart of his reading of Machiavelli. What, then, can Machiavelli teach us? Is Althusser attempting to fashion his own work of art? If not, then what exactly is *Machiavelli & Us*? What kind of responsibility is required in order to read and understand Machiavelli? These questions cannot be answered yet. The theme of art necessitates a brief detour into the abstract: the space of theory.

**The Space of Theory**

Assuming that it exists, the space of pure theory contrasts with the space of political practice. To sum up this difficulty, it might very schematically be said, in terms that should be transformed, that the first—theoretical—space has no subject (the truth is valid for any and every subject); whereas the second possesses meaning only via its possible or requisite subject, be it Machiavelli’s New Prince or Gramsci’s Modern Prince. Leaving aside the ambiguous term subject, which it would be advisable to replace by the term agent, let us say that they present space of an analysis of the political conjuncture, in its very texture, comprising opposed and intermingled forces, makes sense only if it arranges or contains a certain place, a certain empty place: empty in order to be filled, empty so as to have inserted in it the action of the individual or group who will come and take a stand there, so as to rally, to constitute the forces capable of accomplishing the political task assigned by history—empty for the future. I say empty, though it is always occupied. I say empty, to mark the vacillation of theory at this point: because it is necessary for this place to be filled—in other word, for the individual or party to have the capacity to become sufficiently strong to count among the forces, and strong enough again to rally the allied forces, to become the principal force and overcome the others. 600

We have therefore not left the circle of one and the same question: if, without leaving it, we have avoided turning round in this circle, it is because this circle is not the closed circle of ideology, but the circle perpetually opened by its closures themselves, the circle of a well-founded knowledge. 601

Althusser’s theory is creative and productive: it builds upon what it finds, rather than remaining content to come up with increasingly accurate descriptions of an empirically-given world. It seeks to be an agent rather than a subject. In military language, it marshals forces to do battle with opposing forces. It distinguishes itself against empiricism, which ideologically “forgets” the distinction between objects of knowledge and real objects. But it recognizes the power of these forgetful ideologies, and it realizes that it cannot dismiss them with a purely rational

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critique. There is more political work to be done. Althusser’s kind of theory builds strength for conflict with its foes upon the Kampflatz. Continuing a militaristic terminology that has been a hallmark of Marxist writings, Althusser brings new metaphors to bear on old problems. Where Gramsci had used the language of trench warfare, Althusser invokes the metaphor of the firebase perched tentatively on a hilltop.

In the foreward, dated September 1976, Althusser remarks that there is an “extreme difficulty” in reflecting on Machiavelli philosophically, one that is the result of our very concepts and categories:

As if a first thought, which we thought we had grasped on a first reading, stayed in the mind in the form of unexpected thoughts; as if the sentences, associated in our memory, combined in new formations yielding novel meanings; as if, from one chapter to the next, like the landscapes of this great walker, new perspectives were disclosed to us: all the more gripping because they had not been made out sooner. The word has been let slip: gripping. Machiavelli grips us. But if by chance we want to grasp him, he evades us: he is elusive.602

The gripping yet elusive nature of Machiavelli’s text propels us into an uncharted space. In order to begin to map out this terrain, we can turn to Althusser’s reading of another of his interlocutors, Claude Lefort.

Althusser was clearly intimately familiar with Lefort’s book on Machiavelli, which appeared in 1972 in French.603 Like Althusser, Lefort saw a different kind of theory at work than would ordinarily be implied by empiricist understandings of the relation between thought and practice. What can we do, once Machiavelli has gripped us? What are the effects of such a grip?

602. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 3-4.

603. It must be noted that, being familiar with Lefort, Althusser was also familiar with Leo Strauss. Is it purely coincidental that Leo Strauss discusses Machiavelli as the discoverer of “new continents”? Since Thoughts on Machiavelli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) appeared well before most of Althusser’s writings that utilized this image of the intrepid explorer of new continents, it is at least possible that Strauss influenced Althusser to think in this manner. Since Claude Lefort’s Machiavelli in the Making did not appear until 1972, however, Althusser would have had to have read Strauss independently of coming to Lefort. Since he was writing and thinking about many of the same figures as Strauss, it seems plausible that he had come across Strauss’s work, though it is unclear how influential these works may have been on Althusser. Althusser never, to my knowledge, references any of the work of Leo Strauss, in either published or unpublished work.
What has Machiavelli’s text *done* to us as a result of our process of reading? Because it does not rely on an image of science as coming up with increasingly accurate pictures of an already-given world, this theoretical text operates in a world of open spaces. In the final paragraph of Lefort’s book on Machiavelli he declares in favor of a central uncertainty:

> Were we to wish to proceed, it would have to forswear all completion, having taught us that the ideology both within us and without calls for the endless labor of interpretation, that ideology eludes our grasp while tightening its own the very moment we think ourselves on the solid ground of certainty, and finally that interpretation is inseparable from interrogation.604

In re-closing the hermeneutic circle whereby interpretation is predicated upon interpretation, where interrogation cannot be severed from interpretation, we are seemingly left unsatisfied. If we had wanted to discover the “truth” or the “teaching” of Machiavelli we have been duped. But Althusser’s understanding departs from Lefort on this point, and the concept and deployment of space in his exegesis points the way out of this impasse. In the essay entitled “Marx’s Relation to Hegel” Althusser makes clear that this metaphorical idea of space is aimed at a specific purpose:

> There are a certain number of sciences. They can be said to occupy a certain site in what can be called a theoretical space. Site, space. Metaphorical notions. But they convey certain facts: the proximity of certain sciences; relations between neighbouring sciences; domination of certain sciences over other sciences; but simultaneously sciences without neighbours, insular sciences (isolated positions in a void: e.g. psychoanalysis, etc.).605

In describing his understanding of the relations between sciences, Althusser acknowledges that the imagery of spaces and proximity is useful in order to *compose* a kind of map of the terrain. This map, to use the explicitly topographical metaphor, is not *merely* another interpretation. Thus, despite it being a metaphor, it approximates objective knowledge. These metaphors are deployed to describe a field of various kinds of knowledge, and their relation to one another. But

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604. Lefort, *Machiavelli*, 504. This is a strange way to end a book, with a sentence that demands there be no effort to conclude.

there is a central kind of experience that holds together all of the domains of knowledge, one that we usually take for granted. His questioning of Machiavelli’s “grip” is thus one that is motivated by the attempt to come up with an answer to a question that we may have forgotten to ask ourselves. As Montag put it:

I have often thought that this description of what it is to read Machiavelli simultaneously captures the experience of reading Althusser himself, the philosopher who shocked a generation of readers by asking a question that had all the hallmarks of sheer sophistry, as if it were designed to divert thought into infinite regression: What is it to read? 606

This is the “dispositive” that provides the necessary insight to allow an accurate interpretation of the “strange status of theory in his writings.” 607 Machiavelli, to put the point simply, is writing a manifesto. Because Gramsci recognized this fact, his interpretation remains of singular importance to Althusser, who is nonetheless eager to expunge the notion of utopia from the formulation. What this means at the level of the text is that it formulates a certain dispositif.

What makes it a manifesto? “I would gladly say: it is, in the sequence of Machiavelli’s reflections, a quite specific dispositif [dispositif] that establishes particular relations between the discourse and its ‘object’, between the discourse and its ‘subject’.” 608 In drawing relations between these things, in situating them in proximity to one another in a theoretically-constructed space, important work is being done. This is the work of art. 609

Like the composition of a painting or perhaps an orchestral performance, the manifesto is a finely-tuned product of an artist’s hand. But whose hand, exactly? As Althusser is keen to discard ideological notions of the “free subject” who reflects upon the world and then offers a

609. In order to help make clear the distinction I am trying to make, one can compare this subject-centered experience of art with Althusser’s understanding of scientific practice, which seeks to remove the subject from science completely, to arrive at truth that is not dependent on any subject whatsoever. See *On Ideology*, 45.
representation of that world, it is not clear who is behind the work of art. In a real way, theory becomes an actor in the world, thus giving it its “strange status.” It is no longer merely descriptive, but becomes an organizing principle that unfolds in relation to the world that it describes.\textsuperscript{610} It interpellates subjects, summoning them to step into a clearing it has created in the undergrowth. But even while Althusser departs from Lefort, he has also gained something along the way; as Lefort put the point, “It is the oeuvre, no doubt, that puts us in the place of the proximate reader. But \textit{we} are the ones it attracts.” As Lefort goes on to argue, the reason that we can find a purchase on ideology while working with Machiavelli’s text is a historical one: we are still in a place where “Rome and its guardians speak to us in other guises, because the image of a truth that has taken place, and faith in a ‘good society,’ still sustain desire, and because we confront the requirement of freeing ourselves from their grip.”\textsuperscript{611} The word has been let slip: grip. Lefort finds it necessary to show a historical continuity between Machiavelli and us, to show that Machiavelli’s world is not removed from our own. For him, this is in large part why Machiavelli can, himself, grip us. This continuity between Machiavelli and us has, typically, been defined as modernity itself.\textsuperscript{612} In this line of thought, Lefort seems to fall back upon historicism in that he seems to need Machiavelli’s thought, as well as our own, to be determined by the historical context in which it emerges. If Machiavelli is to be “familiar” enough that we can read him with any sense of intelligibility, then it is due to historical context. For Althusser, though, there is a different reason, one that does not lend itself to a historicist interpretation.

\textsuperscript{610} Here we are reminded of the “death of the author” and other such debates, debates that resonate in Althusser’s theory of ideology, which will be discussed below.

\textsuperscript{611} Lefort, \textit{Machiavelli}, 504.

\textsuperscript{612} Lefort shares the conviction with Strauss that Machiavelli is the first definitively modern political philosopher. For an excellent discussion of this dimension of Lefort’s thought see Bernard Flynn, \textit{The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political} (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), especially chapter four.
Thus, in coming upon Althusser’s homage to Lefort, we must note that there is an enigma here as well:

And although Lefort denies offering an ‘interpretation’ of them, I am not aware of any commentary on The Prince and the Discourses on Livy that goes so far in understanding Machiavelli’s cast of mind and turn of phrase—and never mind the transcendental philosophy à la Merleau-Ponty in which it is arbitrarily wrapped. Should it ever be discovered—as the outcome of an investigation of unprecedented meticulousness—for whom Machiavelli wrote, we owe it, in the first instance, to Lefort.613

Keeping in mind Althusser’s commentary on Hegel and Gramsci, on the way in which Machiavelli speaks from the future, we can surmise that Althusser is in fact commenting on Lefort’s conflation of interpretation and interrogation. It seems possible that Althusser is making a kind of joke in suggesting that the question of for whom Machiavelli wrote could be answered by an investigation. In putting Machiavelli into the future, rather than a distant but perhaps contiguous past, Althusser disavows any necessary connection between Machiavelli and “us.” A future people might say “Machiavelli wrote for us” and thus establish the readership that Machiavelli hopes to evoke. The “us” that Machiavelli & Us could thus be thought of as a contingent, politically constituted entity that only exists in the tenuous and unpredictable relation established between reader and text. The “objectivity” of the text is a fact of experience, a subjectively inflected approach to an object that seemingly demands interrogation or investigation. The “us” is thus a public, or a people, or a political agent of some kind. There really is no room for a singular, individual agent in this theoretical approach.

Determining for whom Machiavelli wrote thus becomes a personal yet inherently collective question of relationship. Are we those to whom Machiavelli addressed his call? Such a people could only come to be through monumental political action, which in Lefort’s terms would have to be cast as “an investigation of unprecedented meticulousness” since investigation

613. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 3.
is the only road that is truly, though perpetually, left open at the end of his text. As Lefort has explicitly argued, the question of for whom Machiavelli writes must always be left open.

Equally dismissive and laudatory, Althusser recognizes Lefort’s ground-breaking reading of Machiavelli as influencing of his own while pointing to the need to move from the sphere of investigation to that of political action.614 This initial position becomes the clearing from which Althusser will conduct his operations into the countryside, strategically establishing a nexus of allies and attempting to accomplish strategic objectives.615

As the use of military metaphors indicates, the question here is whether Machiavelli really does inhabit our world, whether we need to rethink the connection that we have with Machiavelli. Do we live in the same world, a world in which the invention of artillery was supposed to change warfare? In which Machiavelli had to remind his readers that it was good soldiers, not lots of money, that won wars? Althusser opens Machiavelli & Us with a description of this image of war, pulled from Machiavelli’s The Art of War. It is the only citation from this particular text that appears in Machiavelli & Us. Althusser poses the problem in no uncertain terms: there is a problem that confronts any philosopher who attempts to enroll Machiavelli in

614. I leave open whether Althusser’s understanding of Lefort is helpful, accurate, or otherwise. It is certainly true that Althusser was very much influenced by Lefort, but it is likewise true that he felt constrained by Lefort’s politics. We might put the point like this: to accept that politics is unending because society is fundamentally conflictual is to allow for the permanency of class relations, a prospect that is unhelpful for those who seek to bring about an end to capitalism. It is possible that Lefort moved to a position that would have been more amenable to Althusser as well, since he continued to write long after Althusser’s death. For a description of the exodus from Marxism through Merleau-Ponty, see Lefort’s 1979 essay “The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism” (republished in English in The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986). The status of “the political” in Lefort’s thought has been the subject of many lines of inquiry and it is not possible to do justice to this burgeoning field of research in this space. I point only to two monographs that have helped shape my own thinking on the matter: Bernard Flynn’s The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005) and Eric Herrán’s What is (the) Political? Notes on the Work of Claude Lefort (Shelbyville, KY: Wasteland Press, 2013).

615. It should come as no surprise that the invention of the helicopter, which revolutionized warfare and influenced policy in French-Indochina during both France and the United States’ imperial wars there, was simultaneous with Althusser’s description of philosophy’s war. Just as Gramsci invoked the language of trenches and slow, methodical warfare so Althusser invokes images of guerrilla activity and constant flux, wherein firebases are set up to accomplish specific strategic objectives, but just as quickly they are overtaken by the jungle.
“his own ranks.” This problem is that “Machiavelli ‘marches in the opposite direction to that in which he fires’, or fires in the opposite direction from that in which one wishes to make him march; or, even worse, that if he certainly does not fire in the line of the march, we do not even know where he is firing: he always fires elsewhere.”

Machiavelli, it would seem, is a mischievous ally indeed.

This comical imagery serves the purpose of reminding a reader what any foot soldier of the time would have known immediately: the magnificent achievements of technology have not yet removed the brutality and unpredictability of combat. Artillery cannot occupy foreign lands, nor can it hold positions against disciplined and numerous enemies. What’s more, the hasty enlistment of someone like Machiavelli into the ranks of one’s army is bound to have unintended consequences. This opens up the question of politics and *for whom* Machiavelli wrote. And with this opened up terrain comes a question of where we shall stand—whether in the valleys or upon the mountains or perhaps somewhere in between:

We can measure all the distance that separates the conception of theoretical space, or even the technical conception of politics, on this point by reference to the declaration of Descartes who, following Archimedes, required just one fixed point in order to shift the earth. This point had to be fixed. The point demanded by the New Prince or the Modern Prince precisely cannot be a fixed point. First of all, it is not a point that can be localized in space, for the space of politics has no points and is only figuratively a space; at the very most, it has places where men are grouped under relations. And supposing that this place is a point, it would not be fixed, but mobile—better still, unstable in its very being, since all its effort must tend towards *giving itself existence*: not a transient existence—that of an individual or a sect—but historical existence—that of an absolute monarch or a revolutionary party. From this I conclude that what makes the space of political practice so different from the space of theory is that once it is submitted to the analysis of the conjuncture posing the political problem ‘on the agenda’ (as Lenin put it), it is *recast* in its modality and disposition by the existence of this place which is empty because it is to be filled, occupied by the ‘subject’ (agent) of political practice: Prince or party.

Returning to the status of the text itself, Althusser reminds us of the central ambiguity here:

Machiavelli is speaking of the political practice of someone other than himself. The space of

616. Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 5. Such a weapon does not appear to help the cause!

theory is not conflated with the place of politics. The question then transforms into: “the relationship between this text and the space of political practice it deploys.” Thus there are actually two spaces opened up—the place for the ‘subject’/‘agent’ of political practice and the place of the text itself which “politically deploys or stages this political practice.” But, importantly, these spaces both exist *in and as a result of the text itself*. History, in the sense of meaningful human relationships that must be constantly renewed, exists primarily “for us” in the tomes that are piled on library shelves. We might put the point this way: if a political practice is to be recognized and accepted, if it is to have power to engage in the world at all, it must be, *ahead of time*, considered to be legitimate. It is the boundaries of that legitimacy, of who can speak and be heard, that becomes the frontier of politics. Those who have faulted Althusser with advancing a theory that fails to take into account a substantive notion of human agency are not looking in the right place. Agency, in this model, exists only in a certain fashion and is not to be assumed *a priori* for every living, breathing human being. He has expressly distinguished agency from subjectivity. The ability to engage politically in a meaningful manner is not the product of an abstract right or even of the enfranchisement of various segments of the population. At the level of discourse, Althusser reads Machiavelli as self-reflectively advancing a text-centered agency. What is remarkable about this kind of agency is its “strange familiarity,” which we might also attempt to grasp as its simultaneously transcendent and immanent quality.

On this terrain, Althusser seems to be much closer to Lefort. Bernard Flynn, commenting on how Lefort asks us to read Machiavelli, writes that:

...one must read Machiavelli very closely, viewing it as a work that does something; which is to say, not as a work that pretends simply to mirror or reflect some state of affairs from an objective point of view but rather as a gesture that enters actively, with the aim of transforming, the field of discourse in which it is inscribed.  

In our contemporary lexicon we speak of a text as an “intervention” when we mean this sense in which it is aimed at a particular discourse with the intent of steering that discourse or otherwise altering the existing arrangement of political forces. Such an idea comes readily to our lips, and the status of intellectuals in the larger democracy of which they are presumed to be a part (here in the United States) seems to depend on this ability to “intervene.” In thinking in this way, we approach our relation to the world and our arts on the terrain of a discourse that was opened up in the middle of the previous century, one that broke with the previous conceptions of political leadership that were dominant in previous decades.

This point might be made more clear by showing Althusser’s criticism of Gramsci, who was thinking in terms of the previous conceptions of political leadership. If we were to follow Gramsci then Machiavelli’s text would be an attempt to persuade a specific set of readers, which would be its political action. As a revolutionary-utopian manifesto, it would be one tactic amongst others for the achievement of hegemony by the communists. It would be a kind of steering attempt of the Communist Party, but it would not in and of itself be political. Lacking a robust understanding of ideology as interpellation, Gramsci is unable to distinguish the kind of text that Machiavelli is writing. For Althusser, these kinds of texts are supremely important beyond the limited sphere of a given party or state, whilst simultaneously acting upon those limited spheres as well. This combination of immanence/transcendence is what Althusser is driving at with his insistence of the “primacy” of politics. We should add that politics is clearly

occupying two spaces here as well: the stage itself as well as the action on that stage are both marked as political.

Althusser moves on to describe “temptations” that we might encounter as we attempt to make sense of all of this. First, we should not fall prey to the de-location of the text, to a process of abstraction that would free truth of any location whatsoever. We must fall back on Machiavelli himself against forces that work through his text:

Machiavelli knows that there is no truth—or rather, nothing true—other than what is actual, that is to say, borne by its effects, nonexistent outside them; and that the effectivity of the true is always merged with the activity of men; and that, politically speaking, it exists only in the confrontation between forces, the struggle between parties.621

Thus we must remember that we are talking about a text—not Machiavelli’s “teaching” or some other abstract object. As a text, it is within the world and thus a part of this struggle of forces: it simply must take sides. “His writing is new; it is a political act.”622 As such, it is strategically aimed at a certain audience, a certain reader.

In bringing up these issues, in pointing toward this text, I am attempting to continue the process of the investigation that must transform itself into a productive endeavor. The extent to which this effort will be successful is not guaranteed by any inner logic of the “text itself” because it can only have such effects by resonating with those who read it, with gripping them and constituting an “us” in the process. These insights circle back to Althusser’s original question: why is Machiavelli “gripping” and “elusive” at the same time?

It is precisely because he is gripping that he cannot be grasped by traditional philosophical thought. He is gripping because—as much as any writing can—his text practically, politically, implicates and involves us. He hails us from a place that he summons us to occupy as potential ‘subjects’ (agents) of a potential political practice. This effect of captivation and interpellation is produced by the shattering of the traditional theoretical text, by the sudden appearance of the political problem as a problem and of the


When compared to the ISA essay, this passage is remarkable. First, let us note that Machiavelli is “hailing us” in the manner in which ideology hails the subject in the ISA essay. In that essay, it is the call of the policeman on the street that is held up as the “classic” example of hailing.

Of particular importance is the notion of the double reflection. The ability of the text to “summon” its reader to a position of action is predicated upon its ability to produce a relationship between itself and the world; within the text this relationship appears as that between a subject and an object. The text objectifies practice and thereby generalizes it, creating a space of potential interaction with the reader. It also operates as an object in the world, operating at the level of political practice itself to produce changes in that world. The text has taken a position as a subject in that it performs the two-fold task of any subject: it both operates within the world and objectifies and generalizes that world.

However, I am not convinced that, within the context of the argument developed in the ISA essay, the “perfect” example of the hailing of the policeman is supposed to be taken in an uncritical manner. Althusser has constructed this text in such a way that the exposition of the concept of ideology calls into question the effectiveness of the hailing. If ideology could “fully” interpellate all individuals seamlessly, there would be no politics and no history, no class struggle and no social change. Thus, when Althusser argues that the call of the police reaches its intended target, the example is not described in terms of a perfect match between ideology and subject. While the individual who “turns around” and thus becomes a subject recognizes that the address was directed, Althusser relies on a suspiciously vague defense of this claim:

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Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by ‘guilt feelings’, despite the large numbers who ‘have something on their consciences’. 625

A strange feeling indeed, one that invokes the imagery that opens Machiavelli & Us. We rely upon “experience” to show us that hailings “hardly ever miss their man.” The subject of the clause after the colon is “the one hailed” and it is, in the context of a hailing, tautological to say that he “always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed.” The tautology is meant to draw contrast with the preceding sentence, which left open (somewhat teasingly) the idea that sometimes a hailing could miss its mark. As a hailed subject, we always see ourselves in a hailing. Be it verbal or otherwise (e.g. the “whistle”) the hailing is always successful because, in order to be a hailing, it must be directed at a subject who can recognize it as such. Or, to put the point another way, to “see” a hailing is already to presuppose subjectivity.

Our experience tells us that this is the case precisely because experience as such, that is, from within the horizon of subjectivity, is constituted by interpellation. Here, Althusser points to the fact that many readers of Machiavelli feel like he is speaking to them in way that has, historically, never before been recognized. As countless treatises argue, Machiavelli had never been understood: until now. Althusser highlights this mysterious fact of always feeling ourselves to be Machiavelli’s contemporaries by labeling it as a “miracle that requires elucidation.” 626 The uncanny way in which we recognize the hailing, and step forth into subjectivity always already, seems akin to the way in which we feel Machiavelli grip us, elusively. If this theoretical

626. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 3.
enterprise opens up a space of “no place,” a clearing that yawns forth in an otherwise dark landscape, how can we not step into it?
CHAPTER SIX:

Out of Utopia: Althusser’s Solitude

Marx states what he regards as the law, if not of every revolution, at least of bourgeois revolution: bourgeois revolution always advances backwards, breaking into the future with its eyes turned to the past. —Louis Althusser. 627

As we saw in the previous chapter, Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli was heavily influenced by Freud and Lefort. In showing the threads of these influences, we have set up the conditions that are necessary for an understanding of for whom Machiavelli and Althusser wrote. Writing and interpellation are similar kinds of activities in that they “summon” a reader ahead of time, placing themselves in front of the target so as to make a collision seemingly inevitable. They seek to remove chance and contingency from this process, to make the seamless transition between themselves and their targets “natural.” They desire to create encounters that endure, to craft new relations by intervening in the theoretical space that they construct. In taking up Machiavelli for this purpose, Althusser is making both a strategic and a theoretical choice. Strategically, Machiavelli is a figure who taps into many of the themes that have occupied us so far: political foundings, the nature of political science, the relationship between violence and knowledge. Theoretically, it is because Machiavelli’s text operates in a certain fashion that Althusser can utilize it for his purpose. The target of that purpose is the utopianism of the international socialist movement, and its humanist ideologues. It is likewise the utopianism of the Soviet Union, with its declaration that it is the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” that it has established “socialism in one country.” These questions of utopianism bring up the topic of Althusser’s relation to Marx and to Marxism, as well as his political views and his discussion of Machiavelli’s “New Prince.” Each of these topics will be considered in turn.

627. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 49-50.
Utopia Reconsidered: Fear and Ideology and the Nature of Politics

Althusser’s treatment of Machiavelli brings him on to the terrain of history—a well-trodden path that nonetheless may yet evince new horizons. In describing the bourgeois revolutions of the modern era, Althusser draws on Marx to buttress his reading of Machiavelli. Althusser goes on to talk about the “necessary illusion” that is produced by this backward looking glance, the narrative that ties the revolution in the present to a progress begun in the past. This narrative serves as a powerful motive force for the “leaders and protagonists of the bourgeois revolution” who “would not have been able to mobilize the masses, would not have been able to mobilize themselves, to carry out the revolution and bring it to completion.”628 But the bourgeois use of Roman myths and ideology, the Roman political virtue that founds such hallowed principles as liberty, equality, and fraternity, was not the same use that Machiavelli has for Rome. What Machiavelli finds in his Roman examples is the “proof, among other things, of the need to subordinate morality to politics.”629 In this assertion of the primacy of politics, Machiavelli appears to be the penultimate realist. How are we to square this with his utopianism? It is specifically this discussion of Rome that brings Althusser to the topic of Machiavelli’s specific utopianism:

Machiavelli’s utopianism does not consist in resort to Rome as the prop for a moral ideology that is required in the present. It consists in recourse to Rome as guarantee or rehearsal for a necessary task, whose concrete conditions of possibility are, however, impossible to define. Rome ensures and guarantees the link between this necessity and this impossibility. Accordingly, the discrepancy that makes it a utopia is a discrepancy not between the narrowness of the current sociopolitical content 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, because aleatory.630

628. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 50.
629. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 51.
630. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 51-2.
This utopia is of a peculiar kind. It is not an ideological nor a political utopia. The utopia that Althusser sees in Machiavelli is one of certainty and guarantee. It is a utopia that promises to remove doubt from the realm of human activity. It is a utopia of “discrepancy” [l’écart] between the task at hand and the conditions of the realization of this task. Althusser defines it as a “theoretical utopia” meaning that “it occurs, and produces its effects, in theory.” In trying to “think” the impossible, without backing down, Machiavelli “found himself engaged in forms of thought without any precedent.” The first insight to come from this reading is that, in theory, the goal is not to produce certainty or “iron like laws” by which we might chart a course for a given political entity. But what is the nature of this “thought without precedent?” Can it be laid out in systematic, easily synthesized form?

It is tempting to schematize or synopsize this “thought without any precedent,” to give it a form that would be easily digested. But we should pause to consider whether this would be possible or desirable. Indeed, would Machiavelli be so strangely “gripping” of us if we could neatly summarize his thought? In considering this problem, which is ultimately a problem of the posture that the reader takes when approaching a text, we might do well to consider an example taken from a slightly different venue. Writing about Nietzsche, a thinker who deserves a cautious yet bold reader, Michael Sprinker notes the situation that the reader of The Birth of Tragedy is faced with:

631. The use of “discrepancy” for “l’écart” seems to me a good translation, but it can be misleading. It seems likely that Althusser meant to emphasize the “stepping aside, swerving” possibility, which would render more consistency with his philosophy of the encounter. Emphasizing the “swerve” of this theoretical effort helps to show the point at which theory and practice collide, almost as if in a cloud-chamber: we cannot detect the collision itself, instead relying on the effects of the collision and working backward from those effects. In this way, we always have our eyes turned toward the past, at the level of theory. This theorizing can serve the purpose of a theoretical foundation with which one can then approach the domain of politics.

632. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 52.

633. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 52.
Because the text must present its truth in the form of illusion, the reader can never know what the text really means or if she does, could not prove it, since the knowledge she has acquired would lack reliable means of communication. The text declares this to be the case, but in so doing deprives its own utterance of the performative power to which it has ostensibly laid claim.  

Stated in a different way, the problem is that in undermining the traditional categories of philosophical thought (or, in like fashion, the ideological categories by way of which we apprehend what counts as truth) Althusser seems to be in the position where he needs, nonetheless, to make a truth claim. If we approach his text in the posture of seeking the authoritative answer to our questions (which may or may not be his questions) we will necessarily encounter this paradox. In its most simple form, we could say that Nietzsche seems caught in a performative contradiction when he declares “there is no truth, and that is the truth.” As was noted earlier, there is a similar problem with declaring that one is “outside” of ideology—this is often the most ideological claim that one could make!

We demarcate these potential pitfalls now in order to approach the text from a different, hopefully less perilous, angle—not to resolve them with an authoritative solution. This position is related to the purpose that Althusser has for Machiavelli, when he sees Machiavelli as a witness that can serve to debunk ideological tales of origins and nature, a witness to what Althusser calls “primitive political accumulation.”  

We must resist the urge to read history as a fated becoming, as an unfolding of immanent logic or as the necessary arrival at the ordained conclusion. Machiavelli serves as a witness to the violent processes whereby the modern nation-state system emerged. It is this stance, this historical position that can witness the impending

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change of epochal proportions without resorting to ideological means of coming to grips with them, that Althusser finds novel in Machiavelli.

In order to help elucidate the thought processes at work here, it is helpful to turn toward Althusser’s writings on Rousseau. In this text, a similar concept of “discrepancy” serves the purpose of helping to constitute a kind of reality:

Here the theoretical Discrepancy begins to reveal a quite different Discrepancy: the Discrepancy which installs this philosophy in the Discrepancy between it and the real which its birth required from the beginning.

This enigmatic language may seem overwrought, but the entirety of Althusser’s text on Rousseau reveals an interesting internal movement. Althusser’s careful reading of Rousseau brings out a kind of theoretical groping towards the reality of class struggle. The theory “encounters” “social groups in existence” in reality, a reality that put certain demands on the theoretical endeavor from the beginning but which were not consciously realized in the initiation of that theoretical activity. Althusser’s “symptomatic” reading reveals that the straining of Rousseau’s thought toward something was of a very specific kind. And he does a similar reading of Machiavelli. In Machiavelli, the discrepancy that arrests Althusser’s attention is between the task and the conditions of realization of that task, and it is out of this discrepancy that the theoretical utopia emerges, as an effort of thinking. Althusser specifically avoids other verbs and emphasizes that “thinking” is what is going on here. Were we engaged in a fatalistic notion of either history or structure (which, in this sense, merge into the same notion) then there would be absolutely

637. Althusser, Politics and History, 152.
638. Althusser, Politics and History, 153. We shall have occasion to return to this text below.
639. Althusser says specifically “I deliberately say to think [penser], and not to imagine [imaginer], dream [rêver], or hit upon [trouver] ideal solutions.” (Machiavelli & Us, 52).
nothing impossible about what Machiavelli was “thinking.” Machiavelli, in a historicist interpretation, would be a mere “mouth piece” of his times, a witness to the glacial changes of history, a recorder of events. An over-emphasis in the other direction, wherein singularity and contingency become foundations of their own, is just as problematic. In the typical fantasy of political leadership, the statesman would be appraising the unfolding situation, seeing the “logical” or “imposed” solution of the overbearing movement of the “tide” of ultimately contingent events that comprise history—and charting a course like a captain of a ship who keeps a close eye on both sea and wind. But Machiavelli is no mere weatherman, no mere statesman. His utopia is theoretical and this leap deserves careful attention. The next chapter is entitled “The Theory of the ‘New Prince’” and thus Althusser has set himself a task that he has cultivated the means to solve. We know that Machiavelli is trying to deal with the necessary yet impossible constitution of Italian national unity. It would seem that the “New Prince” is the agent of that change. As Althusser cites, the infamous Chapter XXVI of the Prince poses the question of Italian unity as an “exhortation.” It is framed as a call to action. This exhortation is to seize hold of a given opportunity, what Althusser would call the “conjuncture.” This conjuncture has three dominant characteristics: 1) Italy’s “extreme misery”; 2) an “immense aspiration to political being”; and 3) the available raw material—the “virtú of individual Italians” who lack only the leadership of the Prince.640

Here Althusser seems to come very close to endorsing the view that The Prince was written as a kind of job application for Lorenzo de’ Medici, or that it was at any rate actually aimed at him and expected him to become the great unifier that Italy required. But Althusser does not

support this reading, pointing out that “Machiavelli never stops insisting on the twin theme of the New Prince and the New Principality—not only on each of the individual terms, but on the pair of them, as if he intended to signal something essential, an essential difficulty that resonates like a leitmotiv.”  

He goes on to make the (perhaps) startling claim that “for Machiavelli there is no solution other than this very difficulty.”  

Lorenzo, it would seem, will be no help. Unlike a statesman who steers a state successfully out of a storm (or crashes it on submerged or perhaps even prominent rocks), the role that Machiavelli envisions has, as its start and end point, an intractable difficulty. The storm does not end, and the state is no place. There will, it seems, be no transcendence here. Embarking on a synoptic analysis of the relation between the Discourses and The Prince, Althusser arrives at the conclusion that there are two “moments” that are equally necessary for the task at hand: 1) “the absolute beginning” which must be the deed of one man alone; and 2) the moment of “duration” which can only be ensured by establishing laws and the “emergence from solitude—that is to say, the end of the absolute power of a single individual.”  

To these two moments correspond two metaphors, the “laying of foundation” and the “taking root”: “This rooting of the Prince’s power in the people by the mechanism of laws is the absolute condition for the state’s duration and power—that is to say, its capacity to expand.”  

We have already discussed somewhat broadly the idea of “laying of foundation” and how that gets taken up in Althusser’s broader work. But it is necessary to comment on this idea of foundation as it was presented to Althusser, from within the context of the Marxist vocabulary.

641. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 55.
642. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 55.
643. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 64-5.
644. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 65.
When we think about this process in the larger context of Marxism and the transition to socialism, the idea of foundation becomes central to the theoretical debates that set the stage for Althusser’s political work. Remembering the notorious imagery of the “base” and “superstructure”, wherein the base is the “foundation” upon which the superstructure “arises,” what is interesting here is the apparently complete reversal of the causality at work. Whereas Marx and Engels had been charged with a “deterministic” theory precisely because the direction of causality (allegedly) worked in one direction (from economy to politics and ideology), Althusser sees in Machiavelli a downward action from the level of politics into the people—the foundation is but a moment in this process of embedding what Machiavelli would have called “new modes and orders” (a phrase that is, tellingly, absent from Althusser’s analysis). Such an embedding, though, must begin with the people themselves and the reality of their social existence—it must begin with the available raw materials rather than an idealized, imaginary formulation. This analysis has the added benefit of removing the interpretive difficulty that some have found in trying to read the apparently disparate texts by Machiavelli; here we can see that *The Prince* and the *Discourses* are both written by the same author, and with a certain consistency. Under Althusser’s close reading the former is concerned with the moment of founding and the latter is concerned with the moment of duration, but they are both oriented toward the same problem and bring to bear the same theoretical resources.645

But we do have a problem here as well. Keeping in mind Althusser’s constant attempt to resist the inversion of the dichotomy between politics and economy, of his supreme reluctance to

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645. Thus, the “debate” over whether Machiavelli was “really” a “monarchist” or a “republican” loses its urgency. While Althusser does provide a framework for considering the two key texts by Machiavelli together he does certainly privilege the position of *The Prince* in a manner that seems consistent with the theme of “new beginnings” and “breaks” or “ruptures.” This brings his theoretical position into conflict with those who emphasize the *Discourses*, like Antonio Negri. See Étienne Balibar’s “Une Recontre en Romagne,” in *Machiavel et nous* (1999: Texto), 12.
place one term of the dichotomy in a position of permanent dominance over the other, we cannot stop here. As the last chapter argued, knowing that one of the key debates of Althusser’s time period is the “transition to socialism” from capitalism, it is evident that Althusser invokes Gramsci and the “Modern Prince” as well as Lenin and the “Vanguard Party.” Not only does this show a real connection between Gramsci and Lenin, two Marxist thinkers who have sometimes been hastily contrasted, but it invites a larger reflection on the mode of transition between the “old” and the “not yet.” Within the PCF, the debate about the goal of “dictatorship of the proletariat” was the analog. With this in mind we can hear echoes of Lenin circa 1922 in this passage, as well as a veiled criticism of Stalin’s lapse into “hatred” whilst nonetheless appreciating the precarious position of a fledgling Bolshevik state:

We then appreciate the political nature of the strange relation of people to Prince: fear without hatred. It is indispensable to the constitution of the New Principality, which has to be be popular if it is to resist assaults from without and wrest the means of building the national state from the old states; it is indispensable to the education of the populations of conquered principalities and republics. If the Prince knows how to inspire fear without hatred in his subjects, he guarantees himself the time required for his grand design, and will be able to win over populations acquired by war or guile. But there again, this is only a beginning. For fear without hatred is simply the means to an end that surpasses it: the ideological base from which ‘popular good will’ will, little by little, be won.646

If we consider who Althusser’s audience is for this text, it seems evident that the PCF and its cadre of intellectual leadership would have to be top contenders. But it seems equally unlikely that Althusser expected to persuade this leadership to behave differently. He writes, instead, for a no-one, a person who does not yet exist as a concrete individual, but who can be summoned into existence as the focal point of the text. Like Machiavelli writes for a New Prince who is both impossible and necessary, Althusser, writes for a new leadership who shares this same strange status. Thus, although on the surface *Machiavelli & Us* represents a much different use of Machiavelli than we find in the manifesto of 1978, there is nonetheless a real continuity in

purpose and posited readership. There is a cryptic, self-professed enigma at work. If this is true then there appears a thinly veiled criticism of the path of social democracy and Eurocommunism, which seeks to create mass support as a means of taking state power.\textsuperscript{647} Althusser is arguing precisely the opposite, saying that it is only through the exercise of power that consent and “popular good will” can be “won.” As we know that Althusser draws a line of demarcation between state power and the state apparatus in the ISA essay, this exhortation to seize power does not mean to seize the instruments of power and attempt to wield them for a different purpose.\textsuperscript{648} Thus power can be used to condition an ideological base, from without the apparatus of the state. This ideological base is what is necessary in order for a new state to take root in the people. By retrieving the “personal” stato of Machiavelli, Althusser makes room for a new conception of the political practice of communism. We must not lose track of the idea of “fear without hatred” in order to understand how antithetical this line of thinking really is to the line of the PCF through this time period and into the phase of Eurocommunism. In this stance there is likewise a response to the “revisionism” of Stalinism and economism. By bending the stick in the other direction, emphasizing the politics that are necessary rather than more economic themes, Althusser intervenes with a strategic purpose. But without conceiving of this political imperative within the larger context of the text we would be tempted to resolve the contradiction

\textsuperscript{647} This strategy was taken up at key moments in the history of the twentieth century, for example the case of the German SDP in the years prior to World War I. Its main theoreticians were Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky. See in particular Bernstein’s \textit{Evolutionary Socialism} (1961: Schocken Books). Social Democracy underwent a transformation in the immediate aftermath of World War II, as explained by Gerassimos Moschonas in \textit{In the Name of Social Democracy, The Great Transformation: 1945 to the Present} (trans. Gregory Elliott, 2002: Verso). What this account is lacking is a closer attention to the more theoretical aspects of work on this period. One result is that, in discussing the new “managerial” style of social democracy there emerge such uncomfortable claims as “More so than in the past, politics is increasingly about nothing more than politics”\textsuperscript{331} (page 240). For a collection of wide-ranging analysis on the phenomenon of Eurocommunism see \textit{The Politics of Eurocommunism: Socialism in Transition} (ed. Carl Boggs and David Plotke, 1980: South End Press).

\textsuperscript{648} This is likewise consistent with Althusser’s discussion of the nature of the state as “machine.” See “Marx in his Limits,” \textit{Philosophy of the Encounter}.
in one direction or the other, to take this is a signal of Althusser’s post-Marxism and/or self-overcoming. If we resist this temptation, perhaps there is a different way of looking at the result.

Fear is a key instrument of any potential success for the Prince. But the Prince must take care lest this fear go too far, morphing into hatred. As a policy goal, Machiavelli calls for a “fear without hatred”, which Althusser qualifies as “an ideological politics, politics in ideology.”649

This secondary component of state power is subordinate to the primary means of the army. The political practice of the New Prince is thereby based on the army and violence, not politics as such. Or, to phrase things differently, there is no clear line of distinction between politics and violence, between force and consent. Both rely on a common denominator: fear. With this insight in mind we can approach the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat again, perhaps seeing it from a different perspective.

The problem of the dictatorship of the proletariat is posed:

Machiavelli’s political objective is not to reform the constitution of a state, or even to take power in the formal framework of an existing state, but to constitute a radically new political base. This base must be imposed by force for it to be capable of existing; it must be expanded by force to be capable of enduring; it must fell all the wretched Italian states one after the other, and be defended by force against foreign states.650

In all of this, it is the army that emerges as the primary locus of state power, as a means of uniting the people since “it is the crucible of the people’s political and ideological unity, the training school of the people, the becoming-people of the people.”651 A New Prince, it would seem, demands a New Army.

650. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 102.
651. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 102.
Thus, although the “mass” exists prior to the Prince’s action, and although a previous kind of political situation is an obstacle to his achieving of power, the goal is to unify that which is not yet unified, to literally create a people and the conditions under which that people can endure through time. Althusser’s argument regarding the “unity” of The Prince and the Discourses pushes along this same path. Machiavelli is not the “theoretician of absolute monarchy” but instead the:

*theoretician of the political preconditions of the constitution of a national state, the theoretician of the durability of this state; the theoretician of the strengthening and expansion of this state. This is a quite original position, since he does not think the accomplished fact of absolute monarchies or their mechanisms, but rather thinks the fact to be accomplished.*

This position of the theoretician is also to be found in Lefort’s writing. Lefort encapsulates this position in the phrase “the self-interpreter of the discourse that society holds about itself,” with the understanding that this society is not cohesive, but is in fact riven with conflict. The nature of this conflict dictates that the theoretician occupies a position within that conflict, that he/she must pick sides. But this partisanship that comes with giving up absolute objectivity does not condemn the theoretician to polemic:

He is condemned, therefore, and condemns himself, to an indirect communication, tied to the awakening of a consciousness that imitates his own, at a distance. But in doing so he wins the evidence, the only one that has been promised him, of a relation of society to itself. For in the experience of a language in which the possibility of interpretation emerges from the work of occultation, there is given *in it* that of a social space sensitive to itself, in which classes, institutions, the individual actors are not external to one another, assignable to the function that would define their place in a network of oppositions, closed up in the conduct of dissimulation; they are open to one another—and each one open to himself by all the distance that the presence of the others unfolds within him—engaged in the process of a mutual deciphering that is at the same time the adventure of their common differentiation and their common modification….The assurance that collective life bears the ongoing occultation of the work of desire and the continuous possibility of a dis-occultation is interrelated with the assurance that there is, in the spoken word, with the

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652. We must keep in mind Machiavelli’s use of *stato* as a distinctly personal form of government, distinct from the impersonal and amorphous “state” of contemporary usage. This also brings to mind Althusser’s discussion of Rousseau, in which “the people” is constantly renewed: see Politics and History, 148.


subjection of the collective language, implicated in the work of occlusion of thought, the resource for an opening to truth.655

Machiavelli the theoretician must see the impending historical tasks at hand, devoid of ideology or mystification, in order to think that which is not yet thought. This is not pure speculative prediction, nor is it willful self-constitution of reality. This prognostication is not an act of will or consciousness, but a product of virtú, a possession which grips its bearer and propels itself toward a new world. Machiavelli’s grip, it would seem, has a mind of its own. We cannot attribute this grip to sheer surprise or discovery: “There must be some reason other than the surprise [surprise] of a theoretical discovery: a purchase [prise] on politics, on its practice.”656

Althusser points to two examples of how Machiavelli has been read to support this argument, Hegel and Gramsci. In both cases it is the ability of Machiavelli, seemingly at a great distance to contemporary events, to somehow speak to the present historical moment that confronts the reader as the peculiar fact that must be explained. Somehow Machiavelli remains in the present, or perhaps even in the future. It is on this point that Althusser gestures toward a break with Lefort, saying that Lefort failed to spot Gramsci’s “master theme.”657

While Machiavelli is not, himself, the Prince, the position that he creates for that Prince to begin anew, a position cleared of undergrowth and located in no particular place at all, is an analog for the position of the theorist. “Machiavelli had to be alone to write The Prince and the Discourses.”658 In order to prepare himself for this task, Machiavelli had to be in “solitude,” he

655. Lefort, Machiavelli, 464.
656. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 8-9.
657. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 11. Althusser’s relationship to Gramsci, it must be admitted, is incredibly complex. At times effusive and at others dismissive or hostile, Althusser’s opinion seems to have varied considerably over the course of his career.
658. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 122.
had to be withdrawn from the “self-evident” world that surrounded him and “detached from its ideology.” The nature of this solitude has to do, as well, with the division that Machiavelli has evinced in his readership. This invokes the opening passage of *Machiavelli & Us*, in the discussion of artillery. Indeed, one can read the text of “Machiavelli’s Solitude” as a commentary on the larger text of *Machiavelli & Us*, which is undoubtedly why they have been published together in English. We will return to the question of solitude below; first it is necessary to describe how one can be expected to achieve this solitude, or this break with ideology, that is seemingly a necessary process of the preparation for political action. Turning to the infamous ISA Essay can help to elucidate the stakes of this claim, for the problem of getting “out” of ideology is acute:

what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside of ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says ‘I am ideological’. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality).

We can counterpose this to the claim that what makes Machiavelli so gripping is his relation to ideology: “That he is original, that he is a founder, that he conquered his thought against the whole dominant ideology--that is what already makes Machiavelli gripping for us.” But since we cannot take Machiavelli at his word, but must instead take him at his work, we cannot rest


660. In French, “Machiavelli’s Solitude” was published in a collection bearing its name, *Solitude de Machiavel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998) and which contained a great many essays of varied topics, from Locke and the social contract to “Lenin and Philosophy.”


our analysis on this ledge. Indeed, it is perhaps not that surprising that there should be ways *out* of ideology, and that some people at some point should have discovered them. This is not what is surprising—what is surprising is that this inauguration, represented in Machiavelli’s text and appearing to us as a complete rupture with the dominant ideology of its historical moment, has *endured*. What might surprise us, then, is the strange familiarity that we experience upon reading the work of someone who *has* escaped from the grip of ideology. We recognize this person in some way. Despite the fact that history has outmoded the content of its insight, Machiavelli remains gripping.

There is a certain equivocation here. Is Machiavelli detached from any ideology whatsoever? Or is he merely detached from the dominant ideology as a precondition for thinking beyond that dominant ideology? Here it may be helpful to refer to a distinction made by Karl Mannheim in his *Ideology and Utopia* (1936). Mannheim, in describing the possibility of the sociology of knowledge to play the part of helping society to understand itself through a rigorous scientific method, parses ideology in two: the particular and the total.663 With a particular concept of ideology, only specific claims of a subject are questioned as ideological, whereas in the total conception it is the totality of the subject’s mental architecture that comes into question. Because the use of the word ideology is vague as to which of these meanings is being deployed, and because he conceives the sociology of knowledge as being precise in its terminology, Mannheim opts to use the word “perspective” to describe “the subject’s whole mode of

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663. This is the argument of chapter five of *Ideology and Utopia*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936.).
conceiving things as determined by his historical and social setting.” It is clear that Althusser, in the ISA essay, makes an argument for the more “total” understanding of ideology. By bringing the tools of ideological criticism to bear on the PCF, he takes a position in line with what Mannheim called the sociology of knowledge and thus could be seen as embracing the idea of total ideology. But at the same time, in order for an awareness of ideology to be possible, it cannot be completely total. And here is where Mannheim is most useful in our appraisal of Althusser. Mannheim sees the sociology of knowledge as emergent from the socialist tradition; to put the argument in simplified form the sociology of knowledge is the logical application of the historical insights of socialism (and social science) to itself. What makes possible the sociology of knowledge is a wider horizon, in large part due to the passage of time. With more historical material available to it, the sociology of knowledge is in a position to understand those strands of thought that came before. It resists the urge to collapse into historicism or relativism, relying on this wider horizon to justify this maneuver and elaborating a theory of “relationism”

664. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 266. Mannheim situates the decisive moment for the concept of ideology in the nineteenth century, when the nature of reality entered into public discussion in a way that altered the relations between different political groups in society (70-75). Mannheim argues further that Marxism had managed to achieve a fusion of these two concepts of ideology and a kind of intellectual hegemony in their deployment but that use of ideology critique had filtered throughout society, thus producing a new development. As he puts it: “The analysis of thought and ideas in terms of ideologies is much too wide in its application and much too important a weapon to become the permanent monopoly of any one party” (75). Note that Mannheim is also critical of any mechanistic uses of the idea of “determination.” See note page 267. An essential element of his claim is that, for purposes of investigative clarity, it must be left open as to what the exact connection may be between a thought-process and a life-situation, or between the ideas and their historical context. Only a sufficiently rigorous empirical investigation can attempt to define the nature of this determination, and it certainly cannot be assumed *a priori* what the relationship is between thinking and practice.

665. This was a constant criticism of Althusser’s toward his contemporaries. His critique of Stalinism and his understanding of ideology are both situated at this focal point: they are two prongs in an attack that seeks to make a place for freedom of thought.
in place of relativism. Mannheim’s central concern is the same as Althusser’s: he seeks to discover if it is possible to scientifically guide political life.

The fact that must be reckoned with, if we are to get anywhere with the set of problems associated with an attempt to answer this question, is stated by Mannheim in the form of a question: “How is it possible that identical human thought-processes concerned with the same world produce divergent conceptions of that world?” For Mannheim, the diversity of modes of apprehending and coming to grips with the same world is what makes politics necessary. But it is also this diversity that makes social science necessary. If the utopian is pulled to the future and transcending the present, while the ideological is oriented toward the past and concealing the present, then the sociology of knowledge represents an uneasy yet productive amalgamation of these two tendencies. Like Althusser, Mannheim recognizes that the instability of concepts is a part of the research strategy of such a science, which cannot hover in a detached manner from reality nor remain tied to any singular point of view. Anticipating recent trends in philosophy and social science, Mannheim urges that no systematic or closed conception of society is possible or necessary, but unlike many contemporary theorists he maintains that a commitment to

666. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 79-83. Mannheim’s concept of “relationism” emerges from the insight that all of the “elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought” (page 86). Later, in a discussion on methodology, Mannheim uses the phrase “dynamic relationism” which incorporates a temporal dimension into this already complex interrelational concept (98).

667. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 5. The nature of this leadership, and its limits and possibilities, remains to be elaborated. For now, it suffices to refer to Tracy Strong’s characterization of two similar figures, Weber and Lenin: “While it is true that Weber’s ultimate commitment is to the fatherland and Lenin’s is to socialist revolution, what is of import here is that, for both, this transformation can be accomplished only by a particular leader who responds, not to the demands of the moment and the crowds, but to something else” (Strong, *Politics Without Vision* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), 200-201).


the whole and to objectivity is a vital component of effective social science. Althusser’s sometimes dogmatic insistence on the scientificity of Marxism puts him in company with Mannheim on this front as well, though his equally dogmatic (though dynamic over the course of his career) attempts to restrict that scientificity to the position of the proletariat pulls in the other direction.

Returning to Machiavelli, we can see Althusser’s treatment of the science of history at work. Machiavelli does not simply look backward, drawing inspiration from the political theorists of antiquity—Plato and Aristotle are not going to be of help with his task. But Althusser is not simply interested in proving that Machiavelli invented modernity or something to that effect, that we are still living in a Machiavellian age. “The fact that he was alone in stating a new truth is not enough to leave him in his solitude….Machiavelli is alone because he has remained isolated; he has remained isolated because, although there has been ceaseless fighting over his thought, no one has thought in his thought.” Standing alone, in a theoretical clearing of his own construction, Machiavelli nonetheless grips us.

While Althusser famously claimed that any society would have an ideology by virtue of being a society, that there was no “outside” of ideology and that therefore a communist society of the future would bring with it a completely different (perhaps unimaginable) ideology, what is worth noting here is that Machiavelli is isolated because he is outside of a given ideology. The Prince, as a figure who is political from top to bottom as it were, takes on a role that allows him to use ideology as a tool. This puts him in a “different realm of existence” because “it is not satisfaction of his needs that motivates him” and he “beyond the moral categories of vice and

virtue.” While a society, in order to constitute itself, foments an ideology and interpellates subjects, Machiavelli is instead “thinking” his own thought. Like the Prince who founds a state that endures, the only criteria by which to judge Machiavelli is his success.

Thought itself, in order to recognize the verity of the historical circumstances, must be free of ideology. But ideology pre-exists thought and is the product of a thinking subject so it would seem to be a precondition for thought itself. If one loses sight of the fact that ideology is always particular, always concrete (or material), we can quickly get lost in abstractions. While Althusser drew a sharp line of demarcation between science and ideology, this essay on Machiavelli reveals that thought itself is more closely aligned with science than with ideology, that thought interrogates the conditions of its own existence.

This may seem to indicate that Althusser is primarily to be read as a theorist of praxis, that he centers his attention on developing a theory of the relationship between theory and practice. This component of his thought is undeniable. But it has been claimed that Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli is a “neo-Gramscian one.” In making this claim, Holden and Elden maintain that Althusser “strengthens Gramsci’s notion that The Prince is a ‘revolutionary utopian manifesto’ by reflecting on the role of (theoretical) texts and philosophy as part of revolutionary struggle.” While this is not the only foundation of their argument, it is of central importance

672. Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 92. The resonance with Nietzsche here is unmistakable.

673. As we have seen, Althusser relies heavily on this notion of interrogation. We cannot get into the exact nature of this notion of interrogation within the confines of this chapter, or conduct an appropriate comparison with a similar idea, ideology critique. Suffice to say, interrogation is open-ended and in principle limitless.


to the discussion at hand.  As I have shown, reflection is not what Althusser attempts. What’s more, he puts the theory and experience of art at the center of his reading of Machiavelli, and locates revolutionary struggle in the space of theory, not in “theoretical texts.” This is a distinction with philosophical and political importance. As with many contemporary readers of Gramsci, there is at work here a tendency to hypostasize Gramsci’s thought—to establish a set of propositions that constitute Gramsci’s contribution to a larger doctrine. But more importantly, this line of argumentation completely misconstrues the nature of Althusser’s argument about the place of utopian thinking in revolutionary struggle by conflating the theoretical text with the revolutionary utopian manifesto.

Althusser deploys the concept of utopia only to jettison it when it is no longer fruitful. By the end of Machiavelli & Us we encounter the last word: “Machiavelli is not in the least utopian, he simply thinks the conjunctural case of the thing.” But this is not the same position that we started in, when the idea of utopia was introduced in the text. This term arrives via a brief discussion of Gramsci and the Leninist “agenda” of “proletarian revolution and the institution of socialism.” Althusser glosses Gramsci:

The means to this end is no longer a superior individual, but the popular masses equipped with a party that rallies the avant-garde of the working and exploited classes. Gramsci calls this avant-garde the Modern Prince. This is how, in the dark night of fascism, Machiavelli ‘speaks’ to Gramsci: in the future tense. And the Modern Prince then casts its light on the New Prince: Gramsci calmly writes that The Prince is a

676. Later they claim that Althusser is “properly utopian.” This claim is not the only one that might be taken issue with: the authors also claim that Althusser supports an “essentially republican” reading of Machiavelli. Against this view see Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 32, where he points out the “contradiction of denouncing a Prince who is simultaneously called upon to accomplish the great work of Italian unity; and this is the effect of the Prince’s presence.” Althusser argues that Machiavelli is neither a strict monarchist nor a strict republican—he subordinates both of those positions to the necessity of political unification for Italy, the “conjunction.”

677. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 103.
‘manifesto’ and a ‘revolutionary utopia’. For the sake of brevity, let us say ‘a revolutionary utopian manifesto.’

Whereas some readers take this claim uncritically, it is important to note that Althusser immediately qualifies this claim with the opening of the very next paragraph: “We shall have to ponder these terms.” What is more, he then quickly undoes the synthesis he has just conducted, shelving the claim of “utopian” for later and concentrating solely on the “revolutionary” element because of its invocation of the more recent Manifesto of Marx and Engels. Althusser then asks a central question: “What is the singular property of Machiavelli’s discourse signalled by Gramsci when he remarks of The Prince that it is a revolutionary utopian manifesto?” The answer will instruct the rest of our reading of Althusser’s text: “I would gladly say: it is, in the sequence of Machiavelli’s reflections, a quite specific dispositive [dispositif] that establishes particular relations between the discourse and its ‘object’, between the discourse and its ‘subject’.” While this answer may be “signalled” by Gramsci, telegraphed in some manner that Althusser does not elaborate upon, it is Althusser’s answer that stands in for Gramsci.

This fact should make us aware that we need to pay attention to how Althusser deploys this concept of utopia. With Freud in the background, and Gramsci falling off inch by inch, we are beginning to encounter Althusser’s thought in its own kind of “solitude.” The question of Althusser’s relationship to Marx and to Marxism is posited in the relation with Gramsci (and, of

678. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 13. Althusser does not cite a textual reference at this point. We can only assume that he is referring to pages 125-7 of Selections from the Prison Notebooks, but even here Gramsci is not explicitly describing Machiavelli in these terms. Althusser seems more concerned with using this concept for a specific purpose rather than getting it right in Gramsci—or in using this concept to show that Gramsci did not say what he thought that he said.

679. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 14.

680. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 14.
course, by Althusser’s life and work), and it is to this topic that we must turn before encountering Althusser’s theory of the New Prince.

**Beyond Marx?**

Miguel Vatter argues that Althusser’s return to Machiavelli represents a post-Marxist leap, a “self-overcoming” of the Marxist discourse. In drawing on Derrida’s “hauntological” explanation of the relationship between deconstruction and Marxism, Vatter situates his own analysis as a kind of retrieval of the insight that the “people” is not reducible to the political form to which it gives rise, that there is more of a deconstructive than a constructive relation between the people and its government. This Derridean understanding of Marxism sees itself as a self-overcoming of Marxism, as a destabilizing force. Nonetheless, Vatter sees the emphasis on republicanism and stability as Althusser’s central contribution to students of Machiavelli, noting that:

> For the central question of the Florentine Secretary, and one that Marx never broaches, is precisely how a durable political state emerges out of nothing. This is the Gramscian problem of the “new prince” as a figure of constituent power. Althusser’s innovation with respect to Gramsci is that he attempts to resolve this problem by returning to Machiavelli’s republicanism in a new, and in many respects brilliant, interpretation of the *Discourses on Livy*. For Althusser, the republic contains the moment of duration of the state; it is charged with reproducing constituent power, whereas the new prince contains the moment of beginning of the state.\(^{681}\)

But the status of politics comes under question in this account as well. Vatter sees in Althusser’s work on Machiavelli a departure from the classically-Marxist notion of politics as derivative of economic struggle. He sees *Machiavelli & Us* as an attempt to come to grips with the state, with its ability to arise out of nothing. This relocates the focus of Althusser’s work, as Vatter explains: “if resistance and struggle are to be considered as primary, then what calls for thinking is the

permanence of social antagonism and the consequent autonomy of politics.” 682 This analysis
draws on Lefort’s innovative reading of Machiavelli, a source that Althusser approvingly cites at
the outset of his own investigation. Vatter understandably sees Althusser and Lefort as pulling in
the same direction:

Althusser’s understanding of the way in which social antagonism functions in Machiavelli’s texts owes
much to the ground-breaking interpretation given of them by Lefort. The struggle between classes is no
longer determinant of the political forms that emerge out of it because Althusser sees that there is no longer
a self-identity, an ontological reality, to this struggle. The social antagonism is itself what is in contention in
a conflict of perspectives. 683

If this is true, it turns Althusser into a kind of “perspectivist” who has given up the class struggle.
Indeed, the discourse of post-Marxism can be loosely characterized as a movement away from
the fundamental nature of class, into a more pluralistic vision of social conflict that embraces the
emergent new social movements centered around such issues as racism and sexism, ecology and
colonization. 684 It also potentially sheds new light on Althusser’s theory of interpellation:

In Machiavelli’s reading of the Roman republic Althusser finds confirmation for a crucial intuition that
could already be read between the lines of “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’état”: the state as
ideological apparatus requires for its own foundation, duration or reproduction, that the people become the
political subject par excellence, i.e., that the people be the constituent power and thereby offer itself as the
basis of government. Here Althusser moves beyond the “absolute limits” of Marx because he discovers that
the foundation of the durable state is exclusively ideological: the state as ideological apparatus does not
find its ground outside of itself (e.g., as an instrument of specific class interests), but in its own ideology,
more specifically, as the exemplar of the Roman Republic shows, in the form of a representative and
constitutional democracy. Representative and constitutional democracy is that form of government that best
allows the state to fulfill its vocation as ideological apparatus. This is the form that allows for the
constituted power to create for itself a constituent power, i.e., the people as subject of the state, which in
turn assures the greatest duration, the most effective reproduction, to the state itself. Put another way, the

682. Vatter, “Machiavelli after Marx.” As I will note below, I question this claim that Althusser is arguing for the
“autonomy” of politics.


684. One key moment in the development of the discourse of post-Marxism was the publication of Hegemony and
Socialist Strategy by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (New York: Verso, 1985). Debates about this political and
theoretical position have persisted for decades, and it would not be possible to retrace its many avenues here. For a
more recent critique of this position from an Althusser-inspired viewpoint, see Geoff Boucher The Charmed Circle
themes of post-Marxism, see Philip Goldstein, Post-Marxist Theory: An Introduction (Albany: State University of
New York, 2005).
institutions and political practices of a representative democratic governance are the most powerful forces of “interpellation.”

Transposing Althusser onto the terrain of classical political philosophy and the question of the “best regime,” Vatter claims that Althusser discovers, through Machiavelli and the theory of ideology, that “representative and constitutional democracy” is the specific form of government that “best allows the state to fulfill its vocation.” Translated into the language of “constitutive” and “constituted” power, language that Althusser himself does not make use of, Vatter sees a self-grounding theory of democracy—one that makes use of ideology to ensure its own durability.

And this line of inquiry does not stop there. Crucially, Vatter reformulates the idea of revolution:

In a revolutionary event, properly speaking, the people no longer consider themselves political subjects: what they desire cannot be, as a matter of principle, realized by the state, in a project of government. The desire for no-rule is unrealizable from the perspective of the state, and it is this desire that makes the power of the people truly impossible to manage for the state at that moment. Whenever the people manifest their desire for no-rule, the process of reproduction as a whole suffers an arrest, and the machine of the state comes to a halt. For Machiavelli, the exemplary case of such an occurrence, where political interpellation ceases to work, is the secession of the plebs in early Roman history; for Benjamin, it is the idea of the general strike. The idea of popular power which accounts for these failures of interpellation, for these sudden arrests of the state-machine, is starting to be envisaged by some. What is already certain, though, is that such popular power cannot be captured either by the Marxist-Leninist formula of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” (i.e., with the conquest of state power, even for the sake of the eventual destruction of the state), or by the participatory formula of “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.” Both of these formulae express radical forms of hegemonic struggle, that is, struggles for government, whereas what is called for is precisely the attempt to distinguish as rigorously as possible a struggle for no-rule, that will never rule, from its captivation by political practices and forces of hegemony.

Vatter develops this idea of “sovereign in-difference” to rule into a radical recasting of the Marxist theory of revolution. Taking Machiavelli’s maxim that the people “want not to be oppressed” and modifying it into a formula whereby the people want “no rule,” he has made

685. Vatter, “Machiavelli after Marx.”
important alterations to the theoretical apparatus with which he is attempting to work. In
drawing a line of demarcation between struggles “for” government and struggles for “no-rule,”
Vatter resists being pulled back into the orbit of discussions of autonomy, self-determination, and
self-management. It would not be proper to label these efforts of popular struggle
“counterhegemonic” since counterhegemonic struggles seek to create their own form of
hegemony, conceived here as political rulership. The notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat,
which occupied my analysis in the previous chapter, falls under the category of hegemonic
struggle precisely because, as Vatter sees it, it takes its target to be the state. The upshot of this
argument is that:

If the people are powerful, then it is impossible for the constituted power to master the separation between
social antagonism and political form. The state attempts to master this separation always by giving the
social struggle the form of a struggle for hegemony, a struggle over who is to rule. But as “real movement”
the social antagonism is not as such hegemonic nor about hegemony. The in-different and radically non-
foundational character of this antagonism with respect to every constituted political form allows for both
moments of the political, reproductive and deconstructive, constituent and revolutionary, to exist. Without
their interplay, political freedom remains inconceivable. 687

But it is unclear if Vatter can reconcile his “late Althusser” with the Althusser of the ISA essay on
this front. As Warren Montag notes in his reply to Vatter, there is a way in which Vatter’s attempt
to trim away Althusser’s Marxism fits into a template that sees in Marxism a tendency toward
totalitarianism:

Vatter’s very attempt to save Althusser from his Marxism confers an importance on that from which
Althusser must be saved and, indeed, Marxism in the essay is not simply error, it is a danger, the danger of
totalitarianism (an overdetermined and symptomatic term if ever there was one), the danger of struggle
without limits. 688

As Montag goes on to argue, Vatter’s conception of “self-overcoming” has a distinctly Hegelian
teleology behind it, one that Althusser himself was consistently critical of in his writings about


688. Montag, “Politics: Transcendent or Immanent?: A Response to Miguel Vatter’s ’Machiavelli After Marx’,
Theory & Event 7, no. 4 (2005).
other self-proclaimed Marxists. Montag also points out that Vatter’s emphasis on Althusser’s incorporation of anti-communist writings (e.g. Popper, Arendt, Berlin, Aron) fails to interrogate the ways in which the dichotomy of the economic/political animates even the writings of these staunch anti-communists. Does not this base/superstructure model exceed the boundaries of Marxism? As Montag intimates, it seems more appropriate to think of the dichotomy as firmly in the province of liberalism, rather than see it as that which defines Marxism. When Montag faults Vatter for under-theorizing the concepts of the “social” and the “political” in his post-Marxist appropriation of Althusser he points to one of Althusser’s central contributions to the tradition of Marxism: “Althusser compels us to move beyond every transcendentalism, whether that of the economy in relation to politics or the inverse, in order to theorize their mutual immanence.”

The tacit claim here is that Vatter’s insistence on the transcendent character of constitutive power misses something central about Althusser’s discussion of politics. What is the nature of Althusser’s Marxism, and how does that inform his theory of politics and political action?

Since the time of the first Marxists, Marxism has been plagued by its supporters. Espousing deterministic ideas, engaging in opportunist political games, standing in awe of the forces of anonymous history, the self-proclaimed followers of Marx often developed ideas and theories that put the infamous base/superstructure metaphor at the heart of Marxist analysis. When Althusser takes up this theme, he consistently subverts what he calls the “topographical” metaphor, while simultaneously resisting the easy “inversion” that would place politics in the

689. Montag, “Politics: Transcendent or Immanent?”

position of privilege, over and above the economy. Why does he do this? Why not just argue that it is “politics all the way down” as some contemporary authors have done, and which would definitively make him a post-Marxist? What of the alleged “autonomy of the political?” The dichotomy itself comes under question. The text of “Marx in his Limits” poses this question precisely in terms of class dictatorship:

the means required to conceive of another interpretation of dictatorship were to be found in Marx and Engels, and even in Lenin himself: for what is in question here is the dictatorship, not of a government or regime, but of a class. In Marx’s thought, the dictatorship of a class has nothing to do with political dictatorship or a dictatorial form of government. There is another word in our authors—not hegemony, which has been contaminated by Gramsci and his authority, but class domination—that is a thousand times better than “dictatorship.”

As the previous chapter showed, there is a distinct history to the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, one that resists easy categorization as a “form of government” or a “regime.” To pursue the goal of taking state power under the auspices of the dictatorship of the proletariat is to ignore the subversive work of the concept: it destabilizes the dichotomy between society and government, class and politics. It elevates class to the position of rule, which both postulates a future and also criticizes a present situation. Althusser was attuned to the nuance of these discussions, and he attempted to offer a substantive contribution in the moment at which the PCF was “giving up the ghost” of socialism and striking the language of the dictatorship of the proletariat from its platform.

As this passage reveals, though, Althusser was far from dogmatic on this point. He concedes that the language of dictatorship is undesirable, but, as the debate within the PCF reveals, and as Balibar argued in his Dictatorship of the Proletariat, he simultaneously urges that, when it strikes this language, the PCF does not understand exactly what it is doing, what it

691. Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, 89.
is giving up. The concept that he defends, to the death so to speak, is “class domination.” And this sounds Marxist indeed. In a way, the thesis that there is such a thing as class domination and that it helps us to think about class dictatorship in a way divorced from liberal conceptions, falls prey to the same criticism as the dictatorship of the proletariat. It appears paradoxical because it combines an economic idea (the proletariat/class) with a political one (dictatorship/domination). But it is this paradoxical status that gives it a certain power: by putting together two uncomfortable ideas, it draws a contrast and thus makes visible a continuity where we might otherwise be tempted to see only stark difference. When we instinctively think in terms of “politics” and “the economy” we remain tossed between two poles of a dichotomy, with seemingly little chance of any resolution. Althusser points this out in explicit terms, pointing to the need to think beyond the limits of “hegemony,” when he urges the use of “class domination.”

So, in a certain sense, Vatter is right to point to the need to think beyond the stale language of hegemony and counter-hegemony, to look at social conflict at a more fundamental level. This was Althusser’s point when making the class to speak of class domination rather than hegemony, and rather than dictatorship. This is certainly Lefort’s understanding of the constitutive nature of social struggle. But we can’t help but notice that this conflict, for Althusser, is still conceived in terms of class. Althusser’s criticism of the concept of hegemony comes in the same text:

“However surprising it may seem, Gramsci has not got beyond the Hegelian-Crocean conception of culture as the ultimate End of Humanity, and therefore the ultimate task of Humanity.”

While we cannot resolve the dichotomy, consistently, in the direction of the economy, it is

692. Goldstein notes that “Althusser inconsistently retains the economy as the absent cause unifying disciplines and institutions” (Post-Marxist Theory, 45).

693. Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, 146.
equally troubling to resolve the dichotomy in the other direction, to posit constitutive power as an inherent, transcendent political property of the masses. The autonomy of politics is not a solution to the problems of economic determinism. Neither fear of the masses nor adulation will do. Here the critique of hegemony meets Althusser’s critique of humanism.

But what is left, then? A hopeless quagmire of unresolved contradictions? An infinite play of politics? Or is philosophy poised to go “beyond” limits that politics is otherwise limited by? As Montag asks, what would resolution look like? What does it mean to go “beyond” Humanity? And if the word “resolve” already contains a transcendent impulse, then how does one “theorize” this immanence? What would that look like? We might pose the question in a slightly different manner: can Marxism maintain a revolutionary impulse without resorting to an ideal of transcendence?

Can we arrive at an immanent theory of revolution that is not teleological or deterministic? If no resolution is aimed for, and instead this term is itself a kind of provocation, then we still need to account for the philosophical position that makes possible such a provocation to liberal ideology. Machiavelli takes center stage in this theoretical conception.

Yet, while Montag’s incisive reading of Vatter’s post-Marxist interpretation of Althusser centers on the opposition between transcendence and immanence he does not take up the question of Machiavelli’s place in this theoretical matrix. While Vatter’s text was centered on Machiavelli, and his place in Althusser’s larger theoretical trajectory, Montag does not engage with this line of Vatter’s argument. Instead, he questions the use of philosophical positions and concepts that would be anti-thetical to Althusser in an interpretation of Althusser’s philosophical

work—clearly an important line of attack. With this exchange between Vatter and Montag we can see that there is an important terrain opened up. The legacy of Marxism, of the popular struggles of the twentieth century that took Marx as their inspiration, is still being written. This line of questioning, with which Montag closes his criticism, ponders the “stakes” of reading Althusser as a post-Marxist, and calls into question decades worth of theoretical effort to think “beyond Marx.” I wager that a turn to Machiavelli will help to resolve some of this muddiness and help us to determine the nature of Althusser’s relation to Marx. Much like our encounters with Freud and Gramsci, in this constellation of issues Althusser is also remarkably difficult to pin down. Machiavelli, though, in his solitude appears to be a persistent guiding light.

The Solitude of History

Like the founder of a successful state, Machiavelli is also in solitude. His solitude is marked with the same potentiality—writer of a text and founder of a state share the same political horizon. This is because a text and a state live beyond a mortal life span, taking on a life of their own that (if successful) lives on beyond the author/founder. The theme of solitude and its relation to philosophy is an ancient one: Plato’s metaphor of the cave is perhaps the most famous discussion of the necessary movement from the deceptions inherent in collective life to the solitude of philosophical knowledge, and the necessary return to the realm of social life.\(^{695}\) But unlike Plato’s narrative arc, wherein the return to the cave seems guaranteed, Althusser’s vision of solitude is more aleatory. From within the horizon of the individual who takes on the

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\(^{695}\) I think it is profitable to think of Althusser’s conception of solitude as an analog to Nietzsche’s concept of the “good” solitude, that is the solitude that one embraces as a result of the exercise of “will to power” rather than as a result of social ostracism (the “bad” solitude). See *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York: Vintage, 1989). It was Leo Strauss who called Plato “Nietzsche’s irritant” and, it might be argued, this holds true of Althusser as well.
responsibility of founder/author, success is indeterminate, undecidable. Althusser locates this problematic of solitude in general terms of both author of text and founder of state, but he also brings it down to more particular terms when discussing Gramsci. He also deploys this metaphor when discussing psychoanalysis—in its relation (or lack thereof) with other sciences. As a former prisoner of war, Althusser clearly finds a certain empathy with Gramsci’s imprisonment and with Machiavelli’s exile from Florentine politics. Gramsci performs a certain kind of resurrection of *The Prince*, one which recognizes that its grandeur lies in its marginality:

He is one of the first to have related the unwonted character of *The Prince*, which he described as a kind of manifesto, a living and non-systematic discourse, to Machiavelli’s political position and to his awareness of the political task he was advocating. I say *awareness* advisedly, for it was because he knew his own position in the Italian political struggle and took the consequences in what he wrote that Machiavelli treated theory as he did treat it, both as something which would cast light on the major social realities that dominated that struggle, and as a subordinate moment in that struggle, inscribed somewhere in that struggle. Somewhere: no more than he could say who would found the new state or in what place in Italy, Machiavelli could not say where his work would be inscribed in the Italian struggles. At least he knew that it was somewhere in the background, that it was no more than a piece of writing, which he too abandoned to the chance of an anonymous encounter.

Of the utmost importance is Althusser’s insistence that although Machiavelli takes up the viewpoint of the people he insists on the necessity of the solitude of the virtuous Prince: it is not the masses who must unify Italy. Althusser makes this point in contrast with the celebrated *Communist Manifesto*, which conflates the class viewpoint of the text with the agent of political change: the proletariat. Internationally, this theme of solitude resonates with the historical situation of the communist state: the policy of containment created a certain kind of isolation. Balibar, looking back at this period of “Cold War,” writes that “communism could only ever respond to Western ‘containment’ through what must be called ‘self-containment,’ an

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696. The theme of imprisonment and its relationship to ideology is a constant fixation of *The Future Lasts a Long Time* as well.

697. Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 129. One cannot help but think of the encounter that brought Gramsci’s notebooks out of the fascist prison.
internalization and organization of isolation.” We should interpret Althusser’s attempt to create a space of independent philosophy within the Communist party as a reflection of this world historical situation in which solitude is a necessary step in fostering critical dialogue. Since dogma and orthodoxy were more commonly rewarded than critical thinking or heretical speech, Althusser played an important part in opening up communism to the possibility of a serious dialogue and engagement with its past. At a time when the tents of democracy are hallowed in similar fashion, when totalitarianism is thought to be a ghost rapidly fading from view, Althusser’s efforts are a vital current in the history of communism. Althusser helps us to think critically about democracy because he insists on solitude rather than mass action as an index of a viewpoint’s political effectiveness. As an antidote to the electoral strategy of the PCF, this is a political position that demands that communism maintain its revolutionary roots.

Althusser, coming to Machiavelli at a time when isolation was both a foreign policy and an impossible intellectual position, creates a spatial arrangement that locates the people in an important place; it is not the place of political action:

But while the Prince who is assigned the mission of unifying the Italian nation must become a popular Prince, he is not himself the people. Equally, the people are not summoned to become the Prince. So there is an irreducible duality between the place of the political viewpoint and the place of the political force and practice; between the ‘subject’ of the political viewpoint—the people—and the ‘subject’ of the political practice: the Prince.

This insistence alone should give pause to Vatter’s attempt to think of Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli as leaning on the constitutive power of the people. Althusser points out that Machiavelli made no attempt to overcome this “irreducible” factor, but enigmatically leaves open a certain possibility: “History must be made by the Prince from the viewpoint of the people;
but the people is not yet ‘the subject’ of history.”700 Althusser puts inverted commas around ‘the subject’ in order to highlight the tentative nature of this terminology. Machiavelli never speaks of the subject of history, so Althusser is recognizing a certain anachronism in his use of this concept in describing what Machiavelli is doing. His use of the present tense causes us to question ourselves and the tenets of democracy: is the people now the subject of history? If not, what could help to bring about that result? Who is the subject of history in the present tense? His discussion of the theoretical space of Machiavelli’s thinking about politics indicates that there is, nonetheless, a position within Machiavelli’s thought that we can recognize and “fill” with this concept of the subject.

The way in which Machiavelli’s Prince will come to be loved by the people is through a kind of ideological work in the theatre of representation. “The objective is to establish a correct ideological relation between Prince and people, via the representation of the figure of the Prince.”701 Thus we come to the infamous dimension of Machiavelli’s thought that has rattled many readers: if the Prince must choose between being loved and feared, the Prince must seek to be feared rather than loved. Why? “The advantage of fear is that it persists….But it persists because it is the creation of the Prince, who controls its cause—something that is not the case with love.”702 Between the Prince and the people sits a third category, the nobility. This is of decisive importance because the nobility and the people are locked in class struggle, a class struggle that is outside the Prince. Here, the figure of the Prince, as a kind of absent center that is conjured by the conjuncture, remains apparently unconditioned by the ideological forces that

are at work in social relations. Feared by the masses, the Prince plays the nobility off of the people in order to constitute a larger entity: the nation. It is important to draw a further distinction; the historical task of nation-building is not \emph{dictated} by history. There is no necessary actor who will stand on the stage, at the appointed time. But if some leader is to arise at that moment, he will do so on the stage that exists rather than in a theatre of imagination.

This concept of history as \emph{both} structured in essential ways but also \emph{non-deterministic} serves a certain continuity between Machiavelli and Althusser. The contrast with \emph{The Communist Manifesto} serves to remind us of the historical nature of Machiavelli’s thought whilst simultaneously engaging us with that history. It is the actual making of history that is at stake here; Machiavelli’s “final solitude” is that he:

\begin{quote}
  knew that if his thought contributed at all to the making of history, he would no longer be there. This intellectual did not believe that intellectuals make history. And he had said too much, via his utopia, about the beginnings of the bourgeois national state, not to be denounced by that history. Only another system of thought, close to his by its rejections and its position, might save him from his solitude: that of Marx and Gramsci.\footnote{Althusser, \emph{Machiavelli & Us}, 129-30.}
\end{quote}

Returning from his solitude, Machiavelli is unrecognizable by the collectivity. In a passage clearly reminiscent of Nietzsche, Althusser describes the Prince’s apparent transcendence:

\begin{quote}
  For his part, the Prince belongs to a different realm of existence. It is not satisfaction of his needs that motivates him, or assuagement of his passions that should guide him. He is beyond the moral categories of vice and virtue. For he pursues a completely distinct goal: a historical goal—founding, consolidating and expanding a state that endures.\footnote{Althusser, \emph{Machiavelli & Us}, 92.}
\end{quote}

Machiavelli’s philosophical project, to think beyond the bounds of his time and to, in so doing, influence the future of his country, puts him into a different “realm of existence.” It is this “belonging” to an alternate reality that displaces the Prince into the horizon of utopia—removing his place in the world. From this “no place” he is able to conceive and enact a “completely distinct goal.” In solitude, in no place at all, a new beginning is possible. This kind of initiative
seems to demand solitude, but its realization also demands a dissolution of solitude—back into history. It demands a merging with the people.

Merging with the People: Leadership Relinquished

Politically, the attempt to be “of the people” has had a long history. Indeed, it would seem that this is the history of representative democracy, so-called mass democracy, itself. In democratic theory, there has often been an attempt to discuss the problem of the people in terms of representation: how can one person accurately, faithfully represent the interests of such a group as the whole people? As our discussion of Vatter revealed, it is impossible to reconcile Althusser’s political theory with representative and constitutional forms of democracy. His democracy must be of another kind. When Althusser invokes “the people” we are tempted to read into this partisan position our own democratic sensibility: it is “we the people” who come to stand in as the sovereign entity that constitutes a political regime.

Gramsci read Machiavelli in a similar fashion, explaining the exhortation that concludes The Prince as Machiavelli’s attempt to merge with the people whom he has convinced through argumentation. This puts The Prince on the terrain of politics, but politics of a certain kind. It equates political writings to propaganda that seeks to persuade the public to act in a certain way, engaging with the public on its own terms, as it were. Althusser uses Gramsci to address the question of the “manifesto” quality of The Prince, saying that “a manifesto is not written for an individual, especially a nonexistent individual: it is always addressed to the masses, in order to

705. In Rousseau’s On the Social Contract (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) this problem of democratic representation takes on paradoxical form in the concept of the general will: a will that must be so general that it is unclear exactly what it can do without necessarily becoming particular.

706. See Selections From the Prison Notebooks, 125-7.
organize them into a revolutionary force.”707 But if Althusser is to maintain his Leninism, in the face of Machiavelli’s incisive comments about the necessity of deception and fraud in political life, he must somehow bring together this persuasive rhetoric of the mass party with Lenin’s dictum that the only way to relate to the masses is that “You must tell them the bitter truth.”708 Somehow, deception and truth must be melded together.

In the famous dedicatory letter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli assumes the posture of a member of the people, saying that “to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people.”709 This relational perspectivism is an essential component of Machiavelli’s thought. Like Freud and Althusser, Machiavelli gives great emphasis to the role of perspective in defining political engagement:

> Nor do I want it to be reputed presumption if a man from a low and mean state dares to discuss and give rules for the governments of princes. For just as those who sketch 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.710

As Althusser sees it, Machiavelli consistently takes up the political position of the people. Stalin did the same; he declared that the proletariat did not exist in the USSR any longer, that the state was the state of the whole people. As the head of state, this had the *de facto* effect of making Stalin into a composite of the whole people—a towering Leviathan who channels the power of the mass to the ends of absolute power.711 But Machiavelli accomplishes something distinct from this rhetorical embodiment of the people. Remembering that, in each of these instances of

707. Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 25. Althusser cites the above-mentioned pages by Gramsci at the end of this sentence (see 105-6).
711. I am thinking of the frontispiece to Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. 

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the invocation of the people, it is a specific voice speaking from a theoretical position, one can draw the contours of a long history of intellectual obsession with self-effacement. It is as though the marked difference that often accompanies intellectual activity—the necessity of solitude—must necessarily seek to return to its source, to become the same once again and lose its specificity. But, in most cases, this perceived need to return to the source, the anonymous mass of original identity, is constantly deferred. In fact, the difference between intellectual (theoretical/philosophical) activity and practical action is enshrined precisely in its seeking to return—through the embodied text. Whether we think of these texts as “traces” of the particular journey that they represent or singular landmarks of human ingenuity and perseverance seems to be of little importance. What does seem to be of vital importance is whether this return is deferred or embraced, whether it is accomplished or short-circuited. Rather than an empty gesture meant to secure consent for a government policy, Machiavelli’s purpose is distinct from that of the politician who takes up the place of the people. As a “manifesto” The Prince seeks, consciously and with vigor, to return to the people.

Knowing Althusser’s staunch Leninism we may be tempted to read this as a vanguardist treatise with Machiavelli as a guise. But being equally aware of Althusser’s crypto-Maoism, and his celebratory writing (anonymously published) on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, we should pause before jumping to any conclusions about how he is reading Machiavelli. As has already been indicated, there is a critique of the PCF, what has been called an attempt “to break the Stalinist-humanist stranglehold on the Party’s intellectual life,” at work here that we would do.

well to allow some breathing room. At any rate, it is not clear that vanguardism is a simple affair either—there are real and unresolved tensions in vanguardist politics.

These tensions of a vanguardist politics have been evident from its very inception. On the one hand, the vanguard must lead ahead of the masses and is therefore categorically different from the masses in that it must necessarily espouse different values than are currently held by those masses. On the other hand, the vanguard must maintain close ties with the masses and may even necessarily merge with it in order to develop its political program in a set of values that can lead it to success. Without the vanguard to pull it in one direction or another, the masses are thought to be incapable of action. But without the masses to ground it, the vanguard is doomed to misconceived adventurism. This aporia of political leadership depends on a distinction between some element that is “ahead” or “above” of the masses themselves, who are simultaneously postulated to be incapable of self-organization. This is a theoretical articulation, a product of the mode of thought that we bring to bear on political issues. Despite this conceptual necessity, though, Lenin, writing in 1920, theorized that the success of the Bolshevik party was due to its “devotion to the revolution” and secondly to “its ability to link up, maintain the closest contact, and—if you wish—merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people—primarily with the working proletariat, but also with the non-proletarian masses of the working people.” Or “the Party will not merit the name until it learns to weld the leaders into one indivisible whole with the class and the masses.” 714 This perceived necessity of merging with the masses, with the people, undoes the distinction that upholds the existence of a professional class of vanguard revolutionaries. It seemingly undoes the possibility of effective

leadership, relying instead on the masses to initiate political or social change. The political future is the place of the erasure of these difference, differences that apparently must seek to erase themselves by merging together. On this terrain of the homogenous state, in which conflict would apparently disappear and harmony be installed in perpetuity, social conflict would seemingly be at an end. As many have noted, this sounds in some ways more like a nightmare of totalitarianism than a blissful utopia.

But what if homogeneity were kept to a specific sector of political life? Is not the goal of political equality just this kind of enterprise, in which we collectively postulate that *as if* that makes all the differences disappear for a moment? The liberal notion of rights has this leveling quality in that it locates rights in an abstract individual, who in principle could be anyone. The related question emerges: is it not the very fact of the utopia that makes possible the more limited vision of, for example, political equality? Do we need this abstract placeholder, this universalist vision, to prop up the all-too unevenly distributed rights of an “actually existing” democracy? Is this not the function of the idea of utopia itself, in the terrain of politics, to give a direction to the political aspirations and thereby function in a vanguardist manner?

On a practical level it doesn’t seem to matter if this utopia is a Platonic ideal or a pragmatic truth claim. Those who would lead any political body must demonstrate a differentiation of some kind—either superior knowledge, extraordinary will power, or some combination of various desirable traits. Not just any ideals can function as utopian. Because of this problematic, it is often argued that leadership is a matter of *character* and that possessing certain key traits will enable an individual to lead the larger group. Thinking in this way, we are lead to believe than any collectivity necessarily values some set of characteristics and will justifiably reward
those members of the collectivity who best display or embody those characteristics. Leadership is thus conceived as a natural self-articulation of the whole. Even elite theories of democracy, as centered as they may be on the actions of leaders, ultimately put power in the hands of the masses for determining who those leaders are at a given time. Experts will assuredly differ on what these key traits are, and it is certain that they will change historically and culturally as well. From within this conceptual framework there is a long tradition of rumination on the proper relationship between authority and power, between knowledge and authority. But the upshot here is that democratic thinking has a theoretical tendency toward the relinquishment of leadership, wherein an abstract entity like “the people” stands in as the sole authoritative reference point for political action. This theoretical placeholder both mobilizes a future of potential political activity and simultaneously allows a space in which power operates in the present. It thus has a multiple temporality and multiple spatial characteristics as well. Perhaps this is the reason that political theory, in recent decades, has failed to grapple with the question of political leadership.

Because this line of thought has a tendency to place leadership “below” there is also a long tradition of discussing “the people” as an agent of political change. One of the touchtones in this historical conversation is Machiavelli. Machiavelli famously makes the claim, in *The Prince*, that to have knowledge of princes one must be of the people. This would seem to claim

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715. It is tempting to begin with Plato, since this is such an evident example of the kind of thinking that I am referring to here; Plato is often considered to be the original author of the Western canon, which makes all who come after into mere “footnotes.” Whether this is actually the best place to start is another question entirely.

Machiavelli for the purposes of democratic theory.\textsuperscript{717} Indeed, if Gramsci is onto something in his reading of Machiavelli, then this claim can even be interpreted as an explicit stance within the class struggles of socialism; as Althusser exaggerates, “Marx does not say anything else, in substance, in his entire work.”\textsuperscript{718} Machiavelli’s claim authorizes a politics that takes up the theoretical position of the lower class.\textsuperscript{719} In fact, Machiavelli seems to undermine the very idea of character as a basis for leadership when he declares that “it is not necessary for a prince to have all the above-mentioned qualities in fact, but it is indeed necessary to appear to have them.”\textsuperscript{720} Indeed, for Machiavelli the only thing we can rely upon when it comes to our leaders is that as contexts change so too what counts as value or vice is bound to change: “if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and well-being.”\textsuperscript{721}

As these brief quotes show, there is a problem with any attempt to establish a set of generalized criteria upon which to judge the capability of any leader. Relying on any particular vision or utopia would be equally problematic, in that as contexts change the desirability of any particular set of values or the appeal of a given vision is liable to wane.

\textsuperscript{717} This has been a recurrent theme in the literature. See John McCormick, \textit{Machiavellian Democracy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) or Martin Breaugh, \textit{The Plebian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom} (New York: Columbia Press, 2013) for two more recent attempts.


\textsuperscript{719} It is interesting to note that direct references to Machiavelli are not common in Althusser’s published writings. In the piece “Freud and Lacan” he shows up as in kinship with Marx, a theme that is striking.

\textsuperscript{720} Machiavelli, \textit{The Prince}, 70.

\textsuperscript{721} Machiavelli, \textit{The Prince}, 62.
Here we are on the shores of Althusser’s argument regarding the political imperatives that emerge from his reading of Machiavelli. The last step on this journey is to consider, again, the nature of the “break” with ideology that Althusser obsessively describes. It has been argued that Marxism is, after all, an *importation* from the bourgeoisie, that Marx and Engels were trained in bourgeois science and thinking and that they used this training in approaching the political organization of the proletariat. Taking up a position analogous to Freud in his defense of the novelty of psychoanalysis, Althusser claims that Marxism was not an *imported* intellectual enterprise, that Marx and Engels (while trained as bourgeois intellectuals) had to undergo a kind of *ordeal* by which they shed ideological notions:

There is at the heart of this idea that in order simply to *see* and understand what is transpiring in a class society, it is indispensable to occupy proletarian class theoretical positions, this simple observation that in a necessarily conflictual reality like such a society, *one cannot see everything from everywhere*, one can discover the essence of that conflictual reality only on the condition of occupying *certain positions in the conflict itself and not others*, since to occupy passively other positions is to allow oneself to be led into the class illusion known as the dominant ideology.

Althusser’s polemic is aimed at those who argue that Marxism, as a motivating force of the world wide socialist movement, was of bourgeois origin. Such theories implicitly argue that power and knowledge are isomorphic—any accurate or otherwise compelling knowledge of the world must necessarily come from those in power. Althusser points out that this conceit (which has undoubtedly lead many intellectuals into academic work) is itself an ideological byproduct of the relations of capitalist society. It was only by participating in the class struggle, by attempting to work politically to enact revolutionary change, that Marx and Engels were able

722. Freud dwells at length on the problems that psychoanalysis meets in its attempt to gain legitimacy. See *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966). One of the fictions that overlaps these two efforts is that of the homogenous self.


724. Foucault takes up this theme, perhaps with the intent of overloading the circuits that hold it together. I intend to consider his work, in depth, in future research.
to arrive at their revolutionary *ideas* about political practice itself. This idea cuts against the grain of those who would read Althusser as a rationalist or as a positivist. By forcing a sociological analysis of knowledge, Althusser problematizes the potentiality for knowledge to be *inherently* emancipatory. With the proletariat removed from its privileged position of political agency, and with the emancipatory potential of knowledge hobbled in its capacity to propel revolutionary change, the locus of political action must shift elsewhere. Intellectuals must come to recognize that the struggle is being waged, and that if they continue to rely on outmoded philosophical ideas they will persist in their inability to understand the world and act in it.

It would be a mistake to think that Althusser is making a “vulgar” argument about the necessity of “the proletariat” to engage in a struggle to emancipate itself, through which it creates a scientific theory of that struggle that becomes a necessary part of progress toward socialism. What is being undone is the necessity: of the knowledge produced during the struggle as being *inherently* emancipatory, of the need for the proletariat to struggle against its chains, of the end result of such struggle. The stakes of this argument are clear: any political agent, acting within an ungraspable social totality, must develop a limited picture of that social totality. But pure speculation is not the manner in which this is done, in the space of theory: “To move within the class theoretical positions of the proletariat, there is in effect no other way in the world than *practice*, that is, personal participation in the political struggles of the first forms of proletarian organization.” No one can add up each individual slice to get a grasp on the whole because, rather than an external position on the whole, a given political position is always our starting point.

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725. Althusser, “On Marx and Freud” in *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, 110-111. In Althusser’s work, this theme comes to fruition in the explication of the production of knowledge. If knowledge is produced within a given social formation then it is subject to an analysis of the mode of that production and the way in which knowledge circulates (or is distributed) within that larger social body.

point. When Marx and Engels shed their bourgeois intellectual pretensions (at least some of them) they did so only through the active engagement with the political position of the lower classes. In an interview given in 1968, Althusser argues that the luminaries of Marxist theory (he names Gramsci and Lenin, contrasting them with Gorky) only arrived at their insight via an engagement with the political struggle of the proletariat. But this is not a momentary flash of inspiration—to become a revolutionary philosopher requires a sustained effort; such a “reeducation” is “long, painful and difficult” and ultimately “endless.”

Citing this interview, sociologist Annie Kriegel asks:

What reason have we to believe that Marx, Lenin—especially Lenin—Mao subjected themselves to this [/\“lengthy, painful and difficult process of reeducation\”]? And if they did not, who gave them permission to dispense with it? Wasn’t it precisely such thinking about the need for an initiatory ascetism [sic] that destroyed all dignity, honor, and the simple capacity to think, precisely in the field of “reeducation”? 728

The difficulty of being a communist philosopher, according to Althusser, is in bringing together the theoretical insights of the world of intellectuals with the mundane lives of the masses and their struggle against oppression. If, as Machiavelli argues, the people want only not to be oppressed, then they require an authoritative presence in their midst, one that will not seek to oppress them. In Machiavelli’s words, they require a leader who they can fear without hating. Here several themes of Marxist theory come together: the withering away of the state, the “organic intellectual” and the revolutionary potential of theory itself.

Allegedly, the reason that the state will wither away is that it becomes no longer necessary. 729

With class domination (i.e. oppression) obliterated, the state as we have known it will cease to


729. As I argued in the last chapter, this notion of the withering away of the state has a certain paternalism about it: much like a parent should ideally no longer be necessary when its offspring reach maturity, so too should the socialist state bring its charges out of a state of “nonage.”
be. Whatever state apparatus is established by a dictatorship of the proletariat must take on this temporary character: it must seek its own abolition. Rather than create a class of persons in a state of dependency or of “lower” class, such policies and implements must be geared toward erasing the need that caused them in the first place. This idea can profitably be contrasted to the social “safety net.” The welfare state as such does not necessarily aim at the total transformation of society such that it obviates itself—in recognizing the cyclic nature of the economy and the dynamic nature of the job market in particular, it seeks to alleviate the systemic problems brought on by the capitalist mode of production. Historically speaking, the welfare state represents a compromise between the forces of capitalism and the pressures from below that would seek to stabilize the pernicious effects of that capitalism. But the welfare state, historically, does not orient itself toward eliminating capitalism and devouring the place from which it operates.

According to Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli, the foundations of a given political order will determine its future possibilities. We can see the payoff of this perspective immediately when we consider an institution like social welfare. If the goal of a social welfare system is to eliminate the need for social welfare in the first place then its policy goals will be crafted toward that purpose. While any institution can become “corrupted” (to use Machiavelli’s terminology) away from its goals, these goals matter because they offer a reference point by which others can attempt to steer the institution back toward its mission. The goal will determine which means will count toward its achievement. While Machiavelli is often incorrectly seen as a theorist of “instrumentality” who argues that, in politics, the ends justify the means, Althusser finds that the goals ultimately determine which means will be acceptable. Because the goal of the Prince is to
found a state that endures, and because that state depends for its existence upon the people themselves, the Prince must be feared or loved by the people, *but not hated*; he must carefully cultivate the image that he projects to the people. Clearly, this goal cannot authorize any and all means toward its achievement: brutally repressing the people can easily shift them into hatred and thus erodes the project’s intention.

One could split hairs, pulling quotations from Althusser’s large body of published and unpublished work to buttress an argument about whether Althusser ever thought that communism was an achievable goal.\textsuperscript{730} I think that ultimately it does not matter whether communism is achievable in its entirety, whether the world will ever undergo a worldwide communist revolution. Certainly such dreams seem to be an antiquated, idyllic vision from our standpoint. But these goals motivated countless people to act collectively during the perpetual upheavals of the twentieth century. Revolutions were fought, barricades were mounted, and capitalism was itself the target. Bodies were stacked like wood, and mass graves were filled as if with trash. In the face of these historical facts, the utopian vision that encounters the necessities of reality inevitably transforms into something more ambiguous. Althusser’s life displays this ambiguity: while he remained unrepentant that his affiliation with the PCF was *essential* toward his theorizing, he also remained committed to combatting utopianism in the larger socialist movement. He justified his party loyalty precisely by virtue of his theoretical disloyalty, saying that he had to remain close to the class struggle in order to ground any theory that might come about. At this moment in history, staying close to the struggle could only mean seeing it *in*

\textsuperscript{730} Althusser seems to poke fun at his various attempts to define communism and communist practice when he claims that he has freed himself of the fear of facing the future: “I now feel I know for certain that one is not really alive unless one spends, takes risks, and therefore has surprises, and that surprises and spending (freely rather than for profit, which is the only possible definition of communism) are not simply a part of all life but consititute the ultimate truth of life itself, in its *Ereignis*, its surging forth, its very happening, as Heidegger has argued so well” (*The Future Lasts Forever*, 107).
decline and the opportunities for worldwide socialist revolution very grim. To stay attached to such a movement at such a moment must have required either courage or delusion. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

Drawing on Lenin, Althusser saw politics as a realm of making, a process whereby human beings enact new structures and collectively determine their lives; following Freud he noted that in some ways this process is conscious, in others it remains unconscious. According to such a view, we remain deluded so long as we live. It is the nature of this delusion, its source and possible remedies, that becomes important. The question of the revolution then becomes displaced into an analysis of a given set of conditions and possibilities, an understanding of the “conjuncture” which is not the cause of human activity but the framework in which it unfolds. This sheds new light on the concept of overdetermination, as pointed out by Tracy Strong: “it is only when the dynamics particular to the different spheres of society line up, that is, have the same action implications, that one approaches the true revolutionary moment—what Louis Althusser, following Jacques Lacan [and Freud], calls ‘over-determination.’”

But even if we grant that communism is unlikely or even impossible, the lesson that is underneath this reading of Machiavelli remains pertinent nonetheless: the goals matter. Utopia—even deception—can serve a democratic political purpose. There can be lies told in the name of truth. Steering toward an unreachable goal will change the interpretive grid by which policies are evaluated, the very measures by which we assay success or failure. And even though conflict over what is the best way to achieve success is inevitable—politics will always be with us—the goals around which this politics revolve will dictate a set of limits for the resolution of conflict.

For example, if the goal of a particular state policy is the elimination of oppression, then the use of oppression will always be “out of bounds.” While there are no guarantees on this terrain there are nonetheless historically established parameters in which politics operates. An institution that steers toward an unreachable goal, one that seeks to eliminate the need for itself, embodies the democratic moment, that ephemeral shift that happens when power recedes back to its source. This has nothing to do with traditional notions like sovereignty or legitimacy, except in its negative relation to them.

In order to frame this discussion we must return to the idea, pervasive since being put forth by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956, that Stalinism represented a “cult of personality.” Previous to this memo, the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism as bureaucracy gone awry was the most prevalent. After this intervention by Khrushchev, the cult of personality took on a majesty of its own, revising history and allowing the past to be purged in a manner befitting Stalin himself. But in this notion of bureaucracy we can already see the dialectic between personality and structure at work.

Bureaucracy has been called the “rule of nobody.” Althusser has been charged with being the historical embodiment of this idea because of his “structuralism” and his skepticism about the role of human agency in history. Indeed, Althusser celebrates Machiavelli’s aptitude in calling for a Prince to come forth from nothing and nowhere to liberate Italy from its “yoke.”

What relationship does this reading of Machiavelli have to Stalinism? This description of Stalin, by the historian Isaac Deutscher, paints him in color-less hues:

When one contemplates Stalin, that grey, inconspicuous, almost faceless character, one is more than inclined to see in him but the vehicle of anonymous forces at work in the background. He appears as the

732. Steven B. Smith, Reading Althusser, 218.
embodiment of Anonymity itself, Anonymity which rose to the pinnacle of power and fame and even there remained true to itself—utterly impersonal and therefore utterly elusive.\(^{733}\)

It is difficult to reconcile this image of the “faceless” Stalin with the idea of the “cult of personality.” In this image, Stalin is not so much a personality as a non-persona, incapable of invoking a cult following. But there is something of the American Dream in this image as well: anyone can rise to the top, anyone can be leader, anyone can transcend the original condition to attain a “higher” being. The utterly impersonal remains utterly elusive, in Deutscher’s understanding.

This elusiveness is similar to that which Althusser discovers in his approach to Machiavelli. The image of the faceless Stalin draws attention to the reality of his mass support, the way in which the organizational structure defines the persons it takes up into its fold. Deutscher reminds us here that it is irresponsible to attribute to Stalin super-human powers, to make him into a supernatural monster, to forget that his base of support was with the masses, to forget that there is something *democratic* about *dictatorship*. Khrushchev’s words in 1956 point in the same direction:

> it is impermissible and foreign to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism to elevate one person, to transform him into a superman possessing supernatural characteristics, akin to those of a god. Such a man supposedly knows everything, sees everything, thinks for everyone, can do anything, is infallible in his behaviour.\(^{734}\)

But despite the fact that Khrushchev wanted to bring Stalin back down to earth, to remove the veil of the supernatural from his persona, he does not go so far as to merge Stalin with the masses. Stalin remains a person, a corrupted person, who is a moral agent responsible for many crimes. The masses, from this viewpoint, must have been *deceived*. Stalin’s error is to have sought power for its own sake—he forgot the lessons of Machiavelli and fell into the grip of

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Machiavellianism. The basis of Stalin’s responsibility, according to Khrushchev, is that he allowed himself to be corrupted by power: “The cult of the individual acquired such monstrous size chiefly because Stalin himself, using all conceivable methods, was intent on the glorification of his own person.” This crime is a moral failure. The analysis offered by Khrushchev ensconces responsibility for all the crimes of the past on the shoulders of a single person. Stalin represents an aberration not by virtue of the terrible human costs that attended his reign, but because he dared to glorify the self at the cost of the society.

One consequence of this line of reasoning is that there is some essential similarity between the process of interpellation as it happens “generally” in ideological reproduction and the historical event of Stalinism. This intense attempt to glorify himself at the cost of all else ended in ignominious failure, as history has shown. The same would happen to any ego that fails to adequately become socialized. But carrying through this logic reveals the flaw of the argument: if Stalin was indeed such a deeply “flawed” individual, one in whom the socialization process had failed, then what can account for his ability to maintain power for so long? What can account for his appeal to his colleagues and the masses? There is a tacit anti-democratic message at work here, one that ultimately holds that the people cannot be trusted to make good decisions on their own.

Yet, while Stalin is reviled almost universally today, this was not always the case. There is something true about the cult of personality, about the mobilizing power of the glowering face of Stalin, his brusque mustache and his stony glare. In the history of the modern world there are few figures who receive such approbation—Hitler, however, seems to have reserved a spot for

himself at the “bottom,” but there is no “Hitlerism.” It seems easier to suggest that communism, that most avowedly collectivist ideology, turned into a cult of a singular individual, Stalinism, than it is to suggest that fascism in its German form, the result of the efforts of a political party, could have been purely the result of Hitler’s scramble to establish himself in history and add those fateful three letters to the end of his own proper name. There is a paradox at work here, an enigmatic fact that stubbornly persists despite Khrushchev’s best attempts to extract it:

Stalin, on the other hand, used extreme methods and mass repressions at a time when the Revolution was already victorious, when the Soviet state was strengthened, when the exploiting classes were already liquidated and socialist relations were rooted solidly in all phases of the national economy, when our party was politically consolidated and had strengthened itself both numerically and ideologically.

And Althusser himself is credited with merging into his work by his most careful reader, Warren Montag:

If he [Althusser] remains ungraspable, it is because there is something new, a beginning, a rupture there, not a new doctrine, a new theory of history or society, but simply a new way of inhabiting philosophy, that is, the philosophical conjuncture, that makes visible the lines of force that constitute it, opening the possibility of change. Althusser, too, it appears, has slipped away: he has disappeared into his intervention, a line of demarcation that is not even a line, the emptiness of a distance taken, a cause that exists only in its effects, the shattering of obstacles that opens new perspectives.736

There is another element of this theory of institutions that illustrates the close affinity of Marx and Machiavelli. Writing before the bourgeois revolutions, Machiavelli could only glimpse the rising of bureaucracy. Writing at the outset of the international socialist movement, Marx saw the ways in which organization mattered to either maintaining a given social arrangement or helping to bring about its collapse. But he lacked a science of organization, a science of the party. The mass party was only beginning to become politically effective, a reality to which Marx and Engels contributed in their helping to establish the First International in 1864. In bureaucracy (in which the logic of management dictates that each compartment of the larger bureaucracy posit itself as necessary and struggle for resources accordingly) there resides the

736. Montag, Althusser and His Contemporaries, 211.
organizational cement of the capitalist order. It has been the ship that has kept capitalist organization afloat for the last two centuries, amidst the various attacks on its bulwarks. The party has often been counterposed to this, as the only possible manner of organizing against encroaching bureaucracy and a crippling status quo. But Althusser calls into question the ability of the mass party to break with bureaucracy and help bring about a different future. This is the heresy that underlies Machiavelli & Us, the almost esoteric teaching that “cannot be said.” And it is this space of the New Prince that must be sketched out.

The New Prince: the Politics of Fear

Fear is now an environment, a surrounding, a world. —Paul Virilio.

To restate the theoretical problem that closes chapter three: Machiavelli’s “whole reflection” is centered on the “beginnings of a state that endures, the conditions for the foundation and duration of this state—a problem that takes the political form of the New Prince.” This founding must be initiated in solitude, but it must result in a merging with the people. By using Gramsci’s concept of the Modern Prince (the Communist Party), Althusser gestures toward a critique of the party and its potential to become a positive agent of political change.

These are questions that are overdetermined by the context of Althusser’s writing. Knowing that the problem of the formation of a socialist state, and the question of the “transition” from capitalism to socialism, is high on the agenda we can easily surmise that Althusser will be offering an analysis of this problem and a political solution to the dilemma that

737. This theoretical debate is still taking place. See Theory and Event 2013, Volume 4.
738. The Administration of Fear (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 14.
739. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 80.
faces the PCF. What strategy should the PCF take if it seeks to create a new, socialist state? What is the appropriate relation to maintain with Moscow? What organizational structure should the PCF embody, and what is the appropriate relation to maintain to violence, deception, and force of arms? What role has bureaucracy played in the developments surrounding the PCF? These are the questions that linger in our minds as we plunge into the fourth and final chapter of *Machiavelli & Us*. But we will not find a point-by-point programmatic manifesto. Something much more enigmatic confronts us.

When looking to chapter four of *Machiavelli & Us*, it is helpful to consult an obscure article by Étienne Balibar. Writing in 1978, in a piece devoted to assessing Althusser’s controversial use of Bachelard’s concept of the “epistemological break,” (*coupure*) Balibar takes up the question of how to conceive of such a thing. At a philosophical level, we are tempted to think in terms of variance/invariance when thinking about a “break.” The central question here is what stays the same (and allows comparison over the break) and what has changed (and constitutes the break as such)? This is a typical philosophical question when thinking about the relationship between the ancients and the moderns, or when attempting to think in terms of the encounter between two incommensurable historical horizons/paradigms, or even when thinking of ideological relations that would be inhabited by a society organized on a different mode of production. In each case, the intelligibility of the *thought* that constitutes the object of analysis comes into question. How can we *recognize* such a break at all? The concept seems at best provocative but less than rigorous. Balibar, however, encourages us to see Althusser’s use

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740. Balibar does cite both Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault as exemplars of the kinds of problems that one encounters when trying to think about discontinuity in this way. Steven Smith compares the use of “problematics,” “paradigms,” and “language games” on this terrain of incommensurability or unintelligibility, wherein the problem becomes how one can “rationally choose between basic theoretical outlooks or adjudicate differences between opposing perspectives” (*Reading Althusser*, 81).
of this concept of the break in a different way. He severs the connection between Althusser’s elaboration of the theoretical relations of production and the “couple” of “variant/invariant.” This makes space in which we can:

credit Althusser with the originality—in relation to his contemporaries—of having attempted the elaboration of a theory of discontinuity without invariance, a theory of discontinuity thought not as a counterpart to invariance but as the counterpart of a tendential transformation, as a relation between terms which are processes of a different nature, instead of being different invariants but of the same nature.741

This is a valuable clue toward seeing what remains so vital in Althusser’s thought. If we speak of the “logic” of capitalism or the “logic” of political inquiry, we speak of processes of a different nature, processes that do not rely on a single, universal structural determinant to order their movement and relation with one another. In this idea I am tempted to see the result of a moving beyond Hegel, of an attempt to take seriously the deeply different without giving up the attempt to live peacefully in a world with others, without dissolving difference into the rationality of the real. In this conception, nature is neither universally immanent nor radically transcendent or beyond knowledge.

In the break between the third and the final chapters of Machiavelli & Us, there is a similar relation being brought to bear. There are two terms at stake: the prince and the new prince, and although we are tempted to think of them in terms of the couple variance/invariance, as if one mode of political practice held constant some elements of the other, varying only a relatively small (though undoubtedly important) element of the original formulation, we should instead try to see these two modes of political leadership as having a radically different process. This is not a question, in the end, of changing some elements of the party and keeping others. A mass party is a different process of political action than the sectarian parties of the seventeenth century, even

though there certainly are elements of continuity that one might discern when looking at these two different forms of political activity from a more comprehensive vantage point. This is incredibly important when we begin speaking about the topic of political leadership. The use of the linguistic placeholder “leadership” is itself a kind of lure: it artificially imposes a continuity over a rupture. It compares Alexander the Great and Joseph Stalin.

Althusser indicates this subtle displacement by his dropping of the inverted commas which had, in the previous chapter title, surrounded the “New Prince.” In chapter four, Althusser takes up the subject of “The Political Practice of the New Prince.” The scare quotes are gone. The space that was created in theory is now occupied by a definite political force: the New Prince. We must note immediately, to the potential discomfort of party loyalists, that Althusser does not use Gramsci’s formulation the Modern Prince. The Communist Party is thus tacitly foreclosed from this position of political power. For this reason alone, we should read carefully this final chapter to discover the nature of Althusser’s criticism against the PCF. But before doing so, it may be worthwhile to consider another related text. 1978 marked a major electoral defeat for the PCF and its “alliance” with the socialists. In response to these political blunders, Althusser published the scathing manifesto “Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le Parti Communiste [What must change in the Communist Party].”742 Perry Anderson notes that “it is probably safe to say that Althusser’s manifesto of April 1978 is the most violent oppositional charter ever published within a party in the post-war history of Western Communism.”743

742. Interestingly, the literal translation “what cannot continue” emphasizes the negative side of this critique, whereas the common English translation emphasizes the positive elements. The couple variance/invariance runs deep.

In this text, Machiavelli is clearly on Althusser’s mind. Likening the retreat of the PCF from the masses to walling itself within a fortress, Althusser deploys Machiavelli against the PCF and its authoritarian and unsuccessful mode of political leadership. These strategic deployments of Machiavelli against prevailing party leadership should alert us to a similar purpose in *Machiavelli & Us*. Yet, in construction and form, in style and content, the oppositional charter is much different than *Machiavelli & Us*.

And if Althusser is staging a criticism of the party leadership then perhaps we may find in his text a kind of “trap.” Just as Althusser indicates that one could read *The Prince* as a kind of snare in which the actually existing Prince may become trapped by the truth, so too there may be something more dangerous than mere intellectual criticism at work in this text. Because Althusser was consistently—if not obsessively—concerned with articulating a view of Marxism as a science, the form that this truth takes may be linked with this theory of science and the “break” that inaugurates it. Knowledge comes to replace opinions.

As a way of authorizing this reading, I would like to point out another important similarity between Balibar’s casting of Althusser’s project and the text of *Machiavelli & Us*. In discussing the emergence of a new science, Balibar schematizes a rough formula: “By our formulation we must understand that ‘every science’ is first, a critique of ideology, secondly, a recognition of the

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744. Mary Dietz has argued along similar lines as to Machiavelli’s purpose. See “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 3 (1986): 777-799. For a co-authored piece that considers this thesis as well as the possibility that Machiavelli was sincerely trying to educate the Prince, see John Langton and Mary G. Deitz, “Machiavelli’s Paradox: Trapping or Teaching the Prince,” *The American Political Science Review* 81, no. 4, (1987): 1277-1288.
(historical) necessity of ideology, and thirdly, theoretical knowledge of its mechanism, the production of misrecognitions and illusions.”

Admittedly, this rough schema finds difficulty standing on its own as an explanation of the birth of “every science.” But what it does indicate is a certain formula for the emergence of a science, one that has an Althusserian impetus. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that we find a similar trajectory at work in Machiavelli & Us, in particular in the beginning of the fourth chapter.

It is striking that in a text that is clearly oriented to the problem of “new beginnings” and the moment of constitution of a new state, Althusser immediately walks alongside Machiavelli, who “puts aside the problem of the original founding moment for practical purposes, since it cannot be localized. He assumes that things have already begun….” Thus, the problem of beginnings is set aside. With a paragraph, Althusser moves beyond the problem of foundations and jettisons metaphysical concerns about before and after, continuity and discontinuity. We are always already in the thick of things, as it were. Keeping in mind that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is still a major factor in world politics, and that this alleged “dictatorship of the proletariat” exercises a strong influence on the PCF and its policy, we can see that Althusser points us toward understanding this passage as an analysis of the situation. If we ask ourselves “where to begin?” we can only answer “here and now.” There can be no discussion of doing the Russian Revolution over again, or of completely tearing down the party and building it back up.

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745. Balibar, “From Bachelard to Althusser,” 231. Note that this text is published in the same year as Althusser’s withering criticism of the PCF, and follows on the heels of the 22nd Congress of the PCF and the debate on the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Balibar participated in via On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (London: New Left Books, 1977).

746. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 81.
from the foundation. We are already within the historical trajectory that we must, nonetheless, seek to influence.

This leads into a discussion of three central elements of Machiavelli’s theory. First, the state is necessarily a popular state. The Prince has power that is rooted in the people. Althusser makes the bold claim that a Prince’s practice will be “unintelligible” if it is not recognized that state power is rooted in the people. The implication here is that ideological understandings of politics emerge and obfuscate politics if the radically democratic nature of state power is not taken as a fact. Second, the Prince is focused only on the state in a narrow sense: it is not concerned with the “social organization of a people in all its manifestations: economic, political, and so on. It is the state in the narrow, political sense as a form of state power, as state power held by an individual and exercised by what the Marxist tradition has called the state apparatus.” Third, Althusser divides the state into three component parts, the army, religion (including “the entire system of ideas”), and laws. These three apparatuses are the “means, substance and mechanism” that constitute the state.

The first point is a critique of ideological notions of political power, the second is a recognition of the necessity of these ideological notions, and the last is the product of this reflection on ideology: a knowledge of the functioning of the state by way of its mechanism. We are following the schema laid out by Balibar in describing the birth of a new science. Thus, while we cannot completely clear the ground for a new beginning we can, nonetheless, through a process of a scientific nature, create a knowledge of the state that has hitherto been lacking. The critique of notions of political power that fail to take note of the de facto (i.e. popular) nature of

747. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 81.

748. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 82.
political power opens up a wide array of political options. If political power is popular, it would seem, the Prince must be popular as well. This is the road of social democracy, by way of which a political party must establish the consent of the majority, as indexed through popular elections. But the second point, the recognition of the necessity of state power wielded through the state apparatus, prohibits this political position. Instead, one is left with a narrow definition of political power: the state apparatus. If one stopped here, one would be left with the vanguardist position: the leadership must seize hold of the state apparatus and force the ship of state onto a course that they chart. But the third theoretical position problematizes this notion as well, by bringing it into contact with the first. This means of wielding state power becomes the target of an investigation that attempts to create a knowledge of this apparatus. This knowledge becomes vital toward overcoming the stale dichotomy between popular social democracy and vanguardist elitism. Thus, the third stage of scientific process is laid out: what is sought after is not a removal of all illusion or ideology. Instead, science seeks an understanding of the specific modes of ideology via a theoretical knowledge of the manner in which misrecognitions and illusions are cultivated and crafted. It does not jettison the idea or practice of deception, it does not see itself as existing in correspondence with the truth. The object of such a science is not “reality” but instead the various ideologies that construct a certain kind of relationship to reality.

749. That Althusser articulates a theoretical dispositif such as this should not surprise us. See his previous discussion in chapter two of Machiavelli & Us.
Having already discussed law in chapter three, Althusser takes up the issues of the army and ideology.\(^ {750} \) This is not an accident—force and consent are the duality that demands an investigation. But a slight elision has taken place. In the preceding paragraphs Althusser had discussed the army, religion (or “the apparatus of consent, represented by religion and the entire system of ideas that the people forms of the Prince”)\(^ {751} \), and the system of laws. Here, ideology stands in for religion. Because religion is based on fear, as is the Prince’s popular power (“fear without hatred”), consent, it would seem, is rooted in fear. With this common denominator in place, Althusser buttresses the claim made in the ISA essay that the major shift in apparatus from the Church to the School rests on a similar ideological mechanism. *Machiavelli & Us* is thus steadily forging ahead on the terrain opened up by that essay, and the problematic concept of ideology that it lays out.

Thinking about Balibar’s comments about a “relation” between processes of “different natures,” we can see that religion and ideology function in this manner. Both are ultimately based on fear and both can be made to serve the goals of the Prince. This creates a relation between two types of virtue that seem to be similar only by a linguistic convention:

> The result alone counts: but the goal is the sole arbiter of the result that counts. It is from this perspective that the relation between political virtù and moral virtue and vice can be considered. Virtù is not the opposite of moral virtue: it is of a different order. It does not exclude moral virtue; virtù is so positioned vis-à-vis virtue that it can include it, yet simultaneously exceed it. Thus, virtù can take the form of moral virtue. But it must then be said that the Prince is morally virtuous through political virtù, and Machiavelli would like him to be so as often as possible.\(^ {752} \)

\(^ {750} \) As if to illustrate his closeness to Machiavelli he paraphrases the opening of chapter XII of *The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 48. The part he leaves out is Machiavelli’s dictum that “because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws, I shall leave out the reasoning on laws and shall speak of arms.” Compare this to Althusser’s “Laws have already been discussed. We shall therefore leave them aside and concentrate on the other two elements: the army and ideology” (*Machiavelli & Us*, 82).

\(^ {751} \) Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 82.

\(^ {752} \) Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 93.
What is essential to note, though, is that we are still on Machiavelli’s terrain. If we don’t think of Machiavelli’s *virtù* as opposed to moral virtue, but as existing in a different register completely, we make room for a kind of action that can only be described as political leadership. The exercise of *virtù*, in this analysis, is determined by *solely political factors*. As the last page of chapter three states:

The striking thing is that Machiavelli firmly grasps both ends of the chain—in short, thinks and formulates this theoretical disjuncture, this ‘contradiction’, without wishing to propose any kind of theoretical reduction or resolution of it, wether notional or oneiric. This thinking of the disjuncture stems from the fact that Machiavelli not only formulates, but thinks, his problem *politically* —that is to say, as a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed by thought, but only by reality. It can be removed only by the sudden appearance—necessary but unforeseeable and inascribable as regards place, time and person—of the *concrete* forms of the political *encounter* whose general conditions alone are defined. In this theory that ponders and preserves the disjuncture, room is thereby made for political practice. Room is made for it through this organization of definite and indefinite, the necessary and the unforeseeable. This discrepancy, thought and unresolved by thought, is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself.\(^{753}\)

Here, Althusser is still discussing the mode of practice of the Prince, *not* the New Prince. Thus, when Althusser speaks of the intensely personal nature of the Prince in his relation to power, whose grip upon society is unintelligible unless it is understood that it is ultimately *the people themselves* who make possible such a figure, it is not far fetched to postulate that the Prince he is discussing is in fact Stalin. Who might doubt that the adjective “Machiavellian” had found its home on the shoulders of Stalin? As Stalin’s first biographer, Boris Souvarine, accounted, Stalin was frequently referred to in terms that are uncannily similar to the phrases Althusser used when introducing Machiavelli. Referring to a *Pravda* article of 1929, Souvarine collects a host of phrases used outside Russia to describe Stalin: “Stalin the Enigma,” “Stalin, the mysterious host

\(^{753}\) Althusser, *Machiavelli & Us*, 80.
of the Kremlin,” “Stalin, Impenetrable personality,” “Insoluble mystery,” “indecipherable enigma,” “Stalin the Communist Sphinx.”

If Stalin stands in for the Prince, then the New Prince must be the post-Stalinist Communist Party, a completely reformulated political entity that breaks with its past in a meaningful manner. But to rethink the party means to give up its identity completely—to make a break with antiquated forms of political organization: perhaps it is no longer a party at all. It is true that this discussion is sufficiently abstract that any person who conducts politics in this way fits the bill. In this way, the PCF leadership that fails to distance itself sufficiently from Stalinism can easily be subject to the same critique. Althusser points to any leader who creates a personal relation with the people through a manipulation of ideology and thereby welds together force and consent into Gramsci’s famous formula (cited by Althusser): “the Marxist definition of the state: ‘hegemony [consent] protected by the armour of coercion [force]’.” These “princes” represent the raw material, the current state of politics, from which a science must begin.

But the political practice of the New Prince must be different from this mode of political leadership. It must operate by way of a different process. Rising above tyranny, which cannot endure because it cannot root itself in the people, a state that can survive and expand necessitates

754. Boris Souvarine, Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), xiii. Souvarine writes that these phrases were commonly used “no doubt because Stalin emerged quietly from an obscure past and an apparently banal present, and because none but a few of the initiated could explain his access to unlimited power” (ibid.). Writing about the adulation of Stalin that takes such forms as “‘His enemies will write with hatred and his friends with love’” Souvarine notes that those who make such claims are “forgetting that it may be possible to write ‘without hate and without fear,’ conscientiously and with some degree of critical spirit, in an attempt at impartial investigation and historical truth” (xiv).

755. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 82. How could we not be aware that Gramsci’s elegant formulas are oftentimes far more complex than they first seem? We might simply recall that Althusser’s editorial insertion of “consent” and “force” into the equation is already a kind of distortion. Here, by inflating Gramsci’s definition of the state into the “Marxist” definition writ large Althusser seems to be implying that the Marxist definition of the state is outdated, imprecise, or otherwise inadequate to the political practice of the New Prince.
different political forms. Althusser’s emphasis on Machiavelli’s formula of arming the people sets the tone for this discussion:

The existing army, the forms of its employment, recruitment and organization, all existing military techniques—these he condemns and repudiates as politically incompatible with attainment of his political objective. To this new end, a new army is required, one that is politically compatible with that new goal and, like it, popular and national. 756

With this goal of constituting national unity in place, Machiavelli can articulate a new mode of forging that unity through a popular, national army. But this goal must likewise distance itself from naive conceptions of democracy. Without a material means of uniting the people, of giving them a common identity and purpose, there can be no question of meaningful democracy. A demos as such is inconceivable without such a condition being met. This assessment of the potentiality of democracy runs into many beliefs that hold democracy sacred—as inviolable as the majestic figure of the Leviathan. Machiavelli is convinced that “there is no escaping the reign of men’s opinion, beliefs and judgments.” 757 The common people, “impressed by appearances and results” are easily manipulated. 758 For this reason, the Bolshevik claim that dissolving the National Assembly in 1918 was a means of maintaining the possibility of democracy is tacitly supported: only by removing this avenue of manipulation could space be made for the enactment of something like a demos. Under the conditions of 1918 the Bolsheviks had every reason to fear that such an Assembly would be hijacked by the recently disempowered bourgeoisie. This line of argument also casts a shadow on the PCF strategy of electoral success: to pursue electoral success under conditions of prevailing social fragmentation, without a mechanism of forging real unity amongst the people, means to necessarily engage in fraud and

756. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 88.
757. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 89.
758. Althusser, Machiavelli & Us, 89.
manipulation. Dogma and propaganda cannot substitute for material mechanisms of forging identity and unity. Such schemes are politically perilous; Althusser writes in his “What Must Change in the Communist Party,” that “one of the oldest maxims of political practice (Machiavelli, even Napoleon!) states that it is never advisable to treat people as imbeciles.”

The PCF must stand in a position of alleged superior knowledge, as the self-proclaimed vanguard of the working class, in order to support this argument that it holds the true knowledge that can guide France to socialism. But this is a lie. To put the point another way, it seems as though Althusser is taking seriously the problem of ideology in its relation to the question of democratic practice, without falling back on a theory of elitism to fill in this gap between power and knowledge. He walks a fine line indeed: to support democracy without idealizing the masses, to support science without completely devaluing opinion. In the end, it would seem, the only responsible political leaders are philosophers who themselves do not directly lead the masses. Theirs is a discursive leadership, a meta-discursive activity that shapes the boundaries of thought itself. Perhaps, then, it is to them that Althusser writes, to a new class that he seeks to create through his theoretical activity.

**Conclusion: By Force and by Fraud**

In the vein of modern theorists like Karl Mannheim, Althusser argues that a science of politics is a theoretically necessary component of a world in which human beings recognize and deal with the irrational undercurrents that otherwise determine their behavior. But his science is strange. His is a politics geared toward control, even if it eschews prediction. It fits the pattern of

theories that claim that the “higher” must govern the “lower.” Althusser’s obsession with science takes its historical examples from the natural and mathematical sciences. But, unlike theorists of the Enlightenment who take for granted the transformative power of truth, Althusser ultimately rests the political capability of his New Prince on force and fraud. True, this fraud has as its goal the friendship of the people rather than the self-aggrandizement of the tyrant or the accumulation of wealth. This is a goal that matters in fundamental ways, but fraud it is nonetheless—because the people are easily manipulated and one cannot rely on the “truth” to be self-evident. Any democracy that hopes to live up to its name must reckon with this truth in some way. If this is uncomfortable, then we are forced to ask in what the source of this discomfort consists. And maybe, just maybe, the source of this discomfort is in fact the “grip” that Machiavelli exerts on us, by force and by fraud, in such a remarkable text. Perhaps what we encounter in Machiavelli is a shadow of our own ideological history. On this terrain perhaps the American dictum that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” demands re-interpretation.

While the problem of ideology opens upon a history of determinism, one that thinkers like Foucault were eager to entomb, it is also the discursive predecessor to the contemporary theoretical scene. A widespread transition into theoretical discussions about “discourse” and “language” has shifted the terms of the debate, but some of the stakes remain the same. At the level of politics the discussion of ideology opened up discussions of political practice and forms of organization. At the level of theory it opened up the question of the author, the death of the subject, and the limits of thought itself. It laid bare the necessary relationship between violence and knowledge, and the powerful forces that work against novelty and innovation. When distancing ourselves from Marxism, we often tell stories about its determinism and its tendency
toward totalitarianism. But determinism is not the only legacy of Marxism. Totalitarianism is not our only fear. And the necessity of political philosophy returns with a vengeance in the face of these revelations.

In his reading of Machiavelli, Althusser took up this theme alongside the question of history. If, as his *Reply to John Lewis* argues, history is made by the masses, then the relationship of those masses to political power becomes an important node of analysis. It is no surprise, then, when the masses return to the scene of politics, in the final chapter of Althusser’s *Machiavelli & Us*. With this return of *il volgo* to the scene that is staged by the text, we get an analysis of the political practice of the New Prince. In this moment, traditional forms of thought seem to run aground on certain uncomfortable truths. The traditional typologies of political science become stripped of their essential differences: dictatorship and democracy alike rely on the masses for their support and their intelligibility. Freedom becomes just another word for “nothing left to think.” All contemporary theories that posit essential differences between different governmental forms, in obscuring this relationship to the masses, perform ideological work akin to the tradition of natural law. But recognizing *theoretically* the position of the masses just outside of the scene of politics is one thing; establishing how and when, why and what for the masses *act* in history as an agent of change is another. And even if the masses do in fact *make* history, they do not *write* it. That, it would seem, is up to the intellectuals. Here, the grip of the text becomes ineluctable.

But, in describing the ability of a text to invoke meaningful political change, Althusser found himself on the shores of intelligibility. Astute readers like Richard Rorty note that Althusser’s
language and style do not promote clarity.\textsuperscript{760} If we are to answer the question of “for whom” Althusser wrote we must grapple with these thorny problems. Even if \textit{Machiavelli & Us} is dense and provocative, it is not of the same ilk as \textit{The Communist Manifesto} or even \textit{The Prince}. His writing is not aimed at a mass audience. His most profound effect was certainly on the students with whom he came in contact, several of whom are still writing and teaching today. On this terrain, what Althusser does \textit{not} say is just as important as what he does say: and he does not say that leaders must act in the “best interest” of the people. His Party is not a mobilization of interest groups. He does not claim to write for the masses, to write a political manifesto of his own. There is a tripartite distinction at work in his approach to politics, whereby the masses are tethered to the leadership by way of the work of intellectuals.\textsuperscript{761} What Althusser seems to suggest is that intellectuals should recognize and take responsibility for this important form of leadership—that guiding discourse can be \textit{more} important than leading a platoon or winning an election. If left to the forces of ideology, those self-propelling mechanisms of unthinking repetition, this potential leadership is relinquished. Thinking in this way, leadership and science merge: a science is that which can transform from opinion into knowledge, creating authority and legitimacy in the process. Political leadership, in the Machiavellian tune, is not inflected with a language of economism or rational choice. Leadership is not meant to “represent” the interests of the lead. But neither is the goal here to lead ahead of the witless masses, to subjugate them and dominate them, these hapless folk who can never appreciate or understand the truth of their condition. What is at stake is popular unity—the forging of unity amongst the people through

\textsuperscript{760} “I haven’t the foggiest idea what Althusser meant by ‘science.’ His book seemed to me bullshit from beginning to end...he completely baffles me,” in \textit{Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty} (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{761} This, of course, is Gramsci’s claim as well.
specific means and toward political ends. In arguing that ideology is material Althusser encourages us to analyze the existing institutional arrangements and look beyond them, toward new modes of organization. But such a process is not floating above politics, untied to any political positions. It must take as its reference point the one agent that matters: the people. But it must do so in concrete terms. Althusser stakes his political position within the people, even while advocating a theory of political leadership that must be outside of the people. In this sense, Althusser takes up the theme of “intellectual honesty” or integrity, the probity that is demanded of an intellectual in an age of rationalization and democracy. His critique of humanism and Stalinism, of the prevailing ideologies that crippled honest reflection on the horrors of twentieth century politics, gestures toward a new mode of political leadership that might keep alive the goals of communist politics while cutting away the bureaucratic dead weight. This leadership might construct its authority by creating knowledge that resonates with the people, that helps to transform them into a political agent capable of meeting the challenges that arise. In this conception, the goal of political leadership, even while built on fear and deception, is the goodwill of the people, their friendship which makes possible the strength of the political entity of which they are the key element. If it loses sight of this goal it loses sight of its purpose as political leadership, and descends into tyranny. To be sure, this is a peculiar formulation of democracy, one that comes into conflict with most of our traditional concepts and ideas. Even while it accepts the role of dishonesty in politics we should, for that reason, recognize its profound integrity.

Does this integrity grip us? Does Althusser write for us? Falling back upon Freud’s notion of the “uncanny,” which also underpins his theory of interpellation, Althusser gestures to the limits of what one may verbalize. In the end, we really can’t come up with the words to answer the question of Machiavelli: “what makes him grip us?” This ineluctability, the ephemeral nature of the uncanny feeling that comes with reading Machiavelli, constitutes an agent in the world—an agent that remains just out of reach. It remains just as ineffable to describe the grip of Stalin upon the Soviet Union, just as impossible to understand rationally. But our inability to explain the fact does not make that fact disappear completely. We remain, as intellectuals, responsible for articulating history and describing the effects of the unspeakable. It is true, when and where it is true, that Machiavelli does indeed grip us. It is true that Stalin’s grip upon the Soviet political system inflicted untold horrors and incalculable terror upon the people of Russia. How could such a thing have happened? As unlikely as these events might seem from a certain vantage point, they are facts that nonetheless emerge in history. Impossibly, implausibly, but with a force that we experience in a very real way. From a certain perspective these facts are analogous to a deity or a sovereign power: over, above and utterly compelling. Such thinking finds a kind of solace in theories of necessity and determinism: at least we can stop thinking here. This sensation that a force is operating upon us is also found in the domain of ideology. In both cases, the common denominator is fear. While we may never rationally be able to say why, the truth is that Machiavelli has gripped countless minds in the same way (that is to say, through the same mechanism) that ideology (e.g. Stalinism) can grip an entire population. We may fall back on a notion of necessity to explain this reality, to force it into intelligibility. But can we really say Stalin was necessary? We might say that Machiavelli is the architect of modernity,
that “we moderns” are therefore by definition in his grasp because he gave birth to the forms of thought that we inhabit and we are necessarily trapped within those forms of thought. Is this what Stalin has done to us? As Freud reminds us, we often speak of necessity when a repressed fear re-emerges, when we might otherwise speak of chance.

There is an element of chance that surely operates at the level of history, a chance that appears as a necessity through its organizing power. Recognizing chance became the first goal in the effort to dethrone Stalinism and its insistence on its own necessity. Incorporating this notion of chance into a theory of history became Althusser’s goal in the later stages of his life. Chance, Fortuna, the aleatory: these concepts come to represent a challenge to orthodoxy and a key component of the wider process of de-Stalinization. Building these non-deterministic ideas into a framework of social science proved to be a daunting task indeed. Little headway has been made on this front in the last few decades. In order to open the space to think through these possibilities, a new social science must retell the history of itself, of its emergence and its backslides, its battles and its surrenders. The politics of the twentieth century have still often been seen in terms of necessity, forerunners, and preconditions rather than opportunities, avenues, or ruptures. It seems plausible that this reliance on the guardrails of necessity is directly related to the age of democratic politics, that the abstract and contradictory nature of the demos is isomorphic with the glacial, impending tide of history. It is comforting to see democracy as necessary, as the pre-ordained winner of the race to develop the best regime. The failed competition can then be safely buried in the historical junk drawer, dusted off as curiosity items rather than useful tools. But if we work against these vestiges of Stalinism and its tale of the necessity of history, then the path of history must be drawn anew. The concept of the
dictatorship of the proletariat, then, comes to occupy a unique position in this constellation. It serves as a *theoretical utopia*, a no-place that allows new thought to emerge. It provokes thought where otherwise we are tempted to let ideology do the thinking for us, but it lacks the endurance and durability of something like an “Idea” in the Platonic sense. As a fragile and evidently bad idea, the dictatorship of the proletariat no longer holds the promise it once did. But the history of this idea reveals that it once mobilized political action, that it once compelled new thought to emerge. This was its audacity.

Althusser sees the space that is opened up by the dictatorship of the proletariat as a result of the successes of the Russian Revolution, a case of political practice outpacing analysis and philosophy. He draws on this lineage to justify his intervention within the PCF, to draw a contrast where mythology seeks to create seamless continuity. Althusser shows that this theoretical utopia is not to be conflated with the “actually existing” regime based in Moscow, but it is nonetheless, in discomfiting manner, linked with it. This theoretical utopia is made possible by widespread political action, and this action opens up history to the influence of chance encounters. A science of politics that hopes to stay close to the “truth” of history must take this as its starting point. Abandoning the goal of “prediction” in the realm of social sciences is but the first step on this journey. The tension seems irresolvable: if a science is to be judged by its effects, and if a social science must take as its key reference point the opinions of the masses (i.e. society), then any science that flies too close to the sun is bound to crash and burn. For this reason, perhaps we must give up the race to explore the moon.

Without prediction, social science may seem lost to the infinite regress of interpretation. An uncommitted social science does indeed fall into this spiral. But accepting the fact that politics
can serve as a *foundation* for science—this heresy is the clearing that has been cut into the countryside by Machiavelli and Marx, Althusser and us. The space of political action is wedged open via the theoretical work of thought embodied in text. We are summoned by the conjuncture, by our relation to it, and by the perception we have that there is something strangely familiar about the history of the previous century. As Machiavelli reminds us, all human institutions are either in ascent or decline. There are clear signs of *both* to be catalogued in our environment, which compels judgment and action. The beauty of this simple interpretive marker is that it allows for a shift from one instant to the next: if we agree that a state is in decline then this can serve as a rallying cry that may, perhaps, bring the state back into ascent. If we feel compelled to rest easy, thinking that everything is going well then we are likewise reminded that this placidity, too, can change in an instant. If the course seems set, as icebergs loom on the horizon, the inevitability of a crash is a crippling panic that prevents the taking of appropriate measures. As Karl Mannheim put it, writing at a time when such a dramatic course change was palpably necessary, “We could change the whole of society to-morrow if everybody could agree.”763 There is no necessary fatalism in this account of history—no outcome is pre-ordained. There is though something of the tragic.

As Althusser demonstrates, Machiavelli brings this paradox of constant change and constant continuity into a new space of theoretical freedom. If it is to have its effects known, then we ourselves must transform, in a process that maintains a certain openness to the future. But this freedom also demands scrutiny: ascent or decline relative to what? The place of judgment

cannot be elided, and thus the place of political philosophy emerges out of “no place” and into the polity. But, despite our wishes and dreams, this is still not a place of guarantee and certainty.

With chance comes responsibility. We cannot take for granted that Machiavelli grips all who read him, nor can we take for granted that Machiavelli has the authoritative power to transform us into fitter, happier citizens or otherwise make clear the obfuscated truth. The truth is not necessarily an emancipatory force that would make anyone’s life better in any recognizable manner. Indeed, the truth may be deadly. Likewise, we cannot take for granted the “truth” that Althusser’s politics is easily transposed into a foreign context—like the United States. Taking up Machiavelli, in a mode of either deference or force may not end well: under such conditions the result of our wrestling match with the thought of Machiavelli might end up being a stalemate or perhaps even a loss. A different mode of approach is in order. In the spirit of entertaining all possibilities, we must also consider that some roads are best left untraveled. In this context, perhaps this means forgetting Machiavelli and Althusser, severing (at some level) the connection to “us.” Perhaps it means departing from the people, in search of a place of solitude. In this place, agape at the landscape that has swallowed us unawares, we may seem to be bereft of scientific instruments. But perhaps, if chance would have it, our solitude will reveal new instruments of far more power and promise, which we may bring back to the crowd that gives us meaning.
CONCLUSION:

Navigating the Theoretical Turn

In the previous discussion I have attempted to defend the idea that Strauss and Althusser, for different reasons and within different contexts, participated in something I have called the “theoretical turn” in political leadership. I described this as an engagement with the problematic of vanguardism, a set of concerns and considerations that worked to structure thinking about political leadership in the wake of Stalinism and the perceived failures of the Bolshevik Revolution. This was a problematic with a history tied to the legacy of 1917 and the sustained thinking about the relationship between science and politics that occupied the West in its convulsions throughout the century. In what little space I have left I want to summarize and condense what I mean by this idea of the theoretical turn.

Considered from the perspective of the nineteenth-century, in particular the work of Marx and Engels, we find a concerted effort being made to bring philosophy back to “the ground.” Here, as formulated in the celebrated maxim we know as the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, philosophy is declared to have been hitherto solely concerned with interpretation; Marx and Engels demand more of philosophy, stating that the “point is to change it [the world].” This political demand can be traced to have exerted a strong influence on the early twentieth-century. German philosophy, through the reception of the work of figures like Hegel, was of a decisive importance in shaping the thought of figures like V.I. Lenin. As is well known, at the outbreak of World War, with the international communist movement run aground on the forces of nationalism, Lenin turned to a months-long study of Hegel in order to prepare himself for the battle ahead. In the face of the breakdown of his life’s work—the international communist
movement—Lenin picked up *The Science of Logic*. Many of us would find such a move to be idiosyncratic or perhaps a sign of insanity: would we want or expect our leadership to turn to books of the past when faced with a situation of unprecedented character? What on earth can Hegel, philosopher of the previous century, teach the leader of a fledgling state that declares itself to be on the frontier of the scientific institutionalization of the next phase of human self-government? If, upon hearing news of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in 2001, we discovered that George W. Bush had locked himself up in Camp David with a copy of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, would be be encouraged that he had the situation under control, or would we question his sanity?

The stubborn fact is that, for us, the idea that philosophy and political power belong together is inconceivable. Knowledge, in the sense of scientific objective knowledge, is meant to be brought to bear on human problems and needs. Wisdom, conceived in more practical and “this-worldly” terms, is useful for judgment but doesn’t seem to require any rigorous training or systematic study. Intuitively, we “know” that some people are better at making judgments than others, but we seldom chalk that difference up to something like reading Hegel. At the level of public discourse, there is a firm barrier between knowledge in this practical sense and sound judgment, or wisdom, in the more philosophic sense. This leaves two possible modes of understanding that could motivate human political leadership: knowledge or wisdom? We find it nearly impossible to think that a practical, successful leader could also be full of knowledge of the scientific kind. The intellectual and the leader have, seemingly, parted ways under the prevailing division of labor. The idea of the statesman, on the other hand, derived from ancient philosophy but constituting a concrete connection between past and present, serves as a guide for
understanding how leadership is supposed to be if it is to be both legitimate and successful. This is undoubtedly in part why it is currently undergoing something of a renaissance in contemporary political science. It combines knowledge and wisdom into a practical ethos, seemingly solving the problem of action and opening up the possibility of a meaningful engagement with history. The old thesis of the “great men” of history thus becomes dressed up in new uniforms. Several of the great statesmen of the previous century were most certainly also intellectuals: Woodrow Wilson and V.I. Lenin are the two most readily apparent cases. This fact is difficult to understand from our viewpoint, and this difficulty means that it is oftentimes easier to just consign these exceptional cases to the realm of “genius” and leave analysis at that.

But this sparks more questions than it lays to rest. What exactly is genius, and how does it form? How can we make sure that we select these special kinds of people for positions of leadership? Are all geniuses good leaders? Is charisma the best quality of leadership, over and above genius or intellectual capacity? Can we actually dredge up ancient or outmoded models of political leadership and expect them to work in today’s world? Political leadership thus remains a black box, a variable of unknown origin that nevertheless seems to have such profound effects on the world. A democratic political leader is something to be.

And, while political leadership has always been something of a mystery to human understanding, I believe that it was the events of the twentieth century that have rendered it nearly impossible to even think under the heading of democracy. This is a profound and disabling prospect for those of us who remain committed to democratic principles. Even the systematic and rational elaboration, at the level of theory, of the “best” way forward for a democratic polity requires implementation and promulgation—it must be actionable. History is
not much help in establishing models or templates of democratic leadership that stand a good chance of working in the present. There is a profound difference in tempo, in quality, in dynamism and in transformative potential between the political movements of the early part of the previous century and those of the latter half. The boldness has faded. There is something sinister, we feel, in the scientific structuring of society. We are more skeptical, more cautious, more uncertain. The mass political party frightens us and reminds us of fascist rallies and Soviet marches. With the failure of communism, with its avowed optimism and its unflinching certainty, we “late” moderns seem to have lost hope in our ability to make a better future. This loss of hope is poorly timed: we confront global problems of epochal proportion at the very moment when we find it hardest to conceive and implement responses to these problems. We do not believe in ourselves enough to trust a mass political movement of any kind. Or, to put the point differently, we recognize that politics acts upon the public in a way that conditions what is possible at a given moment, in a given place.

The way that I have attempted to makes sense of the glaring difference between the way that our grandparents and great-grandparents were capable of thinking about politics and the way that we confront the topic is to compare the modes of political leadership as practiced in the beginning of the twentieth century with those of the present. In order to account for the stark differences that are evident, I make reference to a “theoretical turn” in the problematic of political leadership. While I do not claim that there is no such thing as political leadership “outside” this turn, I do claim that what counts as political leadership is itself now up for grabs, and that the conversation about the previous century has shaped our thinking about such topics in profound and not always intelligible ways. Leadership is no longer merely about convincing
people, through either appeals to their best interest or rhetorical savvy. The public is not a source of legitimacy, because it has become the target of deliberate action that seeks to mold and shape the boundaries of what is discussable and thinkable. Propaganda and mass communication has played its part in this result, but it is not the only factor of importance. The political history of communism, the problematic of the vanguard party, and the resulting politicization of knowledge have intertwined with these new technological innovations to produce a potent new form of political power. What we think of as neoliberalism is largely the result of this abdication of political leadership: leadership has moved to the level of the meta-discursive at the same moment when the economy is held to supersede politics. This discourse legitimates itself in the “reality” of the economy and the power that it brings.

It is likely true that this is a “first world problem.” When I speak loosely of “us” and “our” ability to think I am, in the main, concerned to speak to political scientists and concerned activists here in the United States. I am concerned to speak to those who seek to act in the world, who might yet dare to take on the challenge and humbling responsibility of political leadership at a time of immanent crisis. I speak to the same audience as Machiavelli and Marx, Althusser and Strauss. But, as a result of the situation we inhabit, I do not speak to everyone. It is possible that I speak to no one at all. This may be an indication that the division of labor that characterizes so much of modern life has come home to roost: political leaders are no longer expected to be up to date with cutting edge philosophy or the frontiers of science. Those who know how to act may be structurally incapable of acting. This is the most frightening possibility of all, because it seems to condemn the polity to “going down” in full knowledge of its demise, and with the available resources and initiative to reverse the process.
Consider the current relationship between political science and political power here in the United States. Political scientists are no longer expected to help organize politics. But many find work as consultants and number-crunchers for think-tanks, advocacy groups, and political parties. We are more like mercenaries than the Knights of the Round Table. Is it surprising that under these conditions we find it hard to imagine that an intellectual could, in fact, be a good political leader? Political Science even has a long history of importing its methods and models from other disciplines, a fact which exacerbates this mercenary attitude. We are also jealous of our older cousins, the economists, but even they do not live up to the task of linking up knowledge and authority: economists are more like the high priests of the modern state than its leaders. Political scientists are largely concerned with methods and numbers, and they often openly disavow the incorporation of the “normative” into the purely factual domains of quantification. The image of the egg-head intellectual, all brains and no savvy, dominates our perception. The figure of Woodrow Wilson, president of both Princeton University and the United States and an accomplished scholar of political science, is inconceivable in today’s standards of political discourse. The idea that one of the foremost leaders of the Bolshevik revolution should have written a book about empiricism and the boundaries of knowledge is a dusty reminder of the archaic assumption held by a previous age that, perhaps, a single person could be in a position to make meaningful claims about the “whole.” In our present discourse, the most profound question we can think to ask of presidential candidates is “will you be able to make jobs for us?” And, despite our fears, we demand decisive, firm action from the heads of state rather than discussion and prudence. A president has to know how to surround him or herself with the right cadre of experts, the unelected heads of state that subtly influence and
guide the terrain of what is possible. Here in the U.S. there is no group or movement, persuasion or attitude that has recognized the situation and operated effectively in the prevailing constraints than neoconservatism. But how did they do it?

As scholars, we speak readily of a given book or article, argument or lecture, as an “intervention.” In order to speak in this way, we need to think of the text as an object that is at work in the world, attempting to guide discussion or shift debate in a planned and predictable manner. If politicians remain beholden to appeals to the public in order to secure office, they must frame any and all arguments in terms that are readily understandable in public discourse. It is the shaping of this public discourse that thus becomes the “real” site of politics, the guiding force that dictates what arguments are allowed and which are not, that determines what can be said and what cannot. In acting upon the public, in constituting that public at the level of discourse, this kind of politics takes its cue from the ancient idea of the “regime” or the politeia. Neoconservatism, here in the United States, has been very successful in conceiving of itself and acting politically with this view of politics guiding it. This theoretical turn, then, is also a turn to the past and a reinvigoration of old ideas.

When I describe the “turn” as “theoretical” it is important to note that I do so with the following qualifications. First, by “theoretical” I do not mean “ideal” or “speculative.” Second, I do not mean that this is a completely new idea, never before seen in the history of the world. In a way, this theoretical turn is as old as the written word itself, a quality of writing to be both immanent and transcendent, to persist against finitude and open up the continent of history for our inhabitation. Yet, in the concrete conditions that we find ourselves, the theoretical turn operates in a particular manner, opening up certain kinds of action and foreclosing others.
The idea of theory had a specific and concrete character in the thought of Louis Althusser, for example. As my discussion of *Machiavelli & Us* has made clear, theory has a *spatial* quality according to Althusser. Theory makes a space and summons the reader into that space, in a way that serves a pedagogic or transformative purpose. The creation of this theoretical space opens up the possibility of politics. This purpose is contrasted with the ideals of utopia, those that are by definition unattainable. The resulting synthesis is Althusser’s use of “theoretical utopia:” a no-place that one can nonetheless inhabit and that is made possible by theoretical work. Althusser’s Maoism consisted in his insistence that the space of the future remained open, that Stalin and Khrushchev had not managed to achieve a class-less society, that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was yet something to be, but that it was nonetheless a “real” place. He refused to assign it a utopian, speculative, and thereby unreachable character. His reading of Machiavelli was motivated by the attempt to understand social transition—how epochal changes are recognized, understood, and propagated. There is thus an incorporation of the realm of theory into the sphere of purposive human activity: it is a place that we live, work, think, and write. Althusser’s idea of “theoretical practice” reveals this necessity to bring the two worlds together by way of a certain kind of activity, to guide social life through massive social transformations of the kind experienced by the birth of modernity. This activity is, in principle, open to anyone in a democratic society. His attempt to pry open the sarcophagus of inner Party life, to breath new life into the Party by way of vigorous and open debate, testifies to the central place that intellectual and philosophical discussion held in Althusser’s thought. He tried to bring about, by way of written and oral intervention in the debates of his time, a turn toward a more open and egalitarian future. He attempted to transform the utopia of communism into a lived experience,
grounded in scientific truth. This commitment to the “after” of capitalism, of the birth of new social relations out of the corpse of the old, remained throughout his life. But it is his reluctance to see Mao as the prophet of a revelation that likewise put a hard limit on his ability to wager on the future of the Chinese Party. In the end, Althusser put all his faith in the text itself: this is the raft by which we might navigate the shores of intelligibility and seek out a land described only dimly by the likes of pioneers like Marx and Engels. This is the site of transformation, in the interface with the reader, in a place of both immanence and transcendence.

Because it is grounded in the experience of an other, art demands a privileged role in Althusser’s understanding of politics. But the ephemeral, unspeakable character of aesthetic experience does not fit easily into a treatise or a manifesto. It comes as a necessary supplement to Althusser’s insistent science, at the moment when he tried to think his way out of ideology. In the end, this hopeful art is as slippery as an epistemological break.

But, for all its vagueness and ambiguity, this slipperiness is undoubtedly also why Althusser remains invigorating to read, and why he remains so influential today on academic discourse. Of necessity, his readers are anonymous, unknown to the author, and therefore constitute the public that the text acts within and upon. Yet, while in principle they are aimed at “anyone” they nonetheless accept the limits that are placed upon them, and take aim at only a certain kind of reader. They are not mass democratic pamphlets, nor pithy slogans that can be scrawled on classroom walls. Although written by a Party member, they are meant to recruit new members. It is not too far off the mark to say that these texts create, through their influence, a kind of aristocracy within the field of democracy. They take what they see as the best, that which is
worth saving, of the audacious dreams of the communists, and encapsulate them for a future that “lasts forever.”

This is true also of the work of Leo Strauss, whose *Thoughts on Machiavelli* attempts to perform this same kind of transformation of its readers—some of them. It is well known that Strauss reinvigorated political theory by bringing certain texts and certain conversations back into the domain of political science. Within the confines of political science, then, it is easy to justify the label “theoretical turn.” But there is more to it. By “theoretical turn” I also mean a turn toward the transformative power of the text over and above that of political action as such. Strauss saw, perhaps better than Althusser, that Machiavelli’s grip on the reader takes a particular form: we encounter Machiavelli in a text of his writing, a space he has created. Machiavelli works desperately to persuade us of the integrity of his mission—to enlist us in his cause. Like a guiding light, the idea of self-interest, so seemingly evident to us moderns, is incorporated into political life. It situates us relative to history and politics, and encourages us to think primarily about ourselves and our narrow window onto the world, which becomes definitionally unknowable.

Strauss viewed modernity as the result of a particular conseit: the melding of political power with knowledge of the best regime, a scientific approach to politics that views human nature as infinitely malleable and subject to absolute control. Self-interest is the mechanism by which modernity seeks to regulate human behavior, through institutions and incentives. Thus, despite its communist pretensions the Stalinist regime was the pinnacle of modern achievement. In it, Strauss saw the threat of a new form of tyranny, one that was not contained by political
boundaries but instead targeted thought itself. His critique of communism remains a critique of modernity and thus of mass politics in general.

We remain yet in the grip of Machiavelli. To the extent that we seek to influence the world through philosophy, through the writing of philosophy, we remain open to the claim that it is only our own self-interest at work, our seeking of glory, that motivates such an activity in the first place. And if this is so, the entire edifice of classical political philosophy must justify itself in terms of our immediate, pragmatic needs. The common good become secondary, derivative, accidental. But the ancients never intended to meet our needs. Strauss, thus, attempts to undo the effects of modernity, to unsettle our sense of historicism and our sacrosanct notions of self-interest. His concern here is to remake the possibility of philosophy by trimming away the pervasive self-interest that dominates our thinking about the relationship between knowledge and action. He expects his readers to harbor certain notions of history and themselves, and he meets his readers where they are rather than where he expects them to be. But he has a place in mind, a place to which he leads his readers carefully. As such, his is an eminently pedagogical work that takes a leadership role in history by cultivating a readership out of the larger demos. This deserves the label “political” leadership because it redefines politics at a meta-discursive level, raising the goal-posts of political action to the level of world-historical significance and away from the pragmatic, daily concerns of deciding who gets what, when they get it, and how much they get. This is his definition of liberal education—the cultivation of an aristocracy out of a demos.

On the level of the theoretical turn, then, Strauss and Althusser are somewhat unlikely compatriots. One was an avowed communist, the other an outspoken friend of liberal
democracy. But they wrote and lived in the same historical period, a time when the massive
horrors of the concentration camp and the terror of totalitarianism were all too real. They wrote
about politics at a time when the problematic of the vanguard party demanded their attention.
They devised unique responses to the demands of this problematic and the difficult
circumstances in which they attempted to think through the limits of what was possible. Because
of this effort to go beyond the boundaries of modern thought, they enact a mode of political
leadership that takes seriously the threat of the concentration camp, that is skeptical of mass
political action and that elevates reason to a guiding principle of collective life. Althusser seems
to have been more optimistic about the capability of the masses than Strauss, but each seemed
certain that their efforts could reach the ears of someone who could understand, transform, and
live differently. The lessons of the twentieth century live on in their thought, and we would do
well not to ignore them. The theoretical turn has not yet begun to disappear in the rear-view
mirror, as our discourse reveals.

If global history is no longer necessarily tied to imminent and knowable development, to the
unfolding of the laws of history, this meta-discursive level of intervention becomes defining of
history. Politics has reached the level of reason itself. To the extent that we still hope to
understand ourselves and our world, to make meaningful and impactful changes in that world for
the better, we are compelled to understand these recent developments and situate ourselves in
relation to them. On this terrain, contemplation is the only defense against the power of the
practical.

But we should also beware of thinking that any argument is justifiably labeled as an
“intervention.” Those that recycle old themes in new packages, or that surreptitiously cover over
the presumptions that animate the discourse, do not deserve this label. We must simultaneously be careful to note what kind of aristocracy is being crafted out of the *demos*, what kind of values we either tacitly or consciously espouse. What qualities are we to judge “the best?” From what vantage point is such judgment possible? In order to make a meaningful intervention in a given discourse, one has to have a grasp of that discourse “on the whole,” a viewpoint that is, philosophically, off limits to many schools of thought. This is where the real challenge lies: to perceive the historically conditioned limits of our thinking about politics, and to influence the discourse responsibly and virtuously for the generations to follow.

This task is always unfinished.
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