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What does a “conjuncture-embedded” reflection mean?

*The legacy of Althusser’s Machiavelli to contemporary political theory*¹

Introduction

Machiavelli depicted himself as a passionate reader who retreated at night to his cabinet in order to read and ask questions of some authors who helped him to reflect upon political matters. Five centuries later, readers of Machiavelli practice the same passionate kind of reading of his works. Machiavelli read Ancient authors through the mediation of translations and comments elaborated throughout the centuries up to his time. He read them and questioned them to enlighten his own time. Our reader’s position is not so different. In various ways, as he did, we enroll him to stress an issue, to advocate for or to discuss a thesis, to address a question relevant to our era. We turn to him with our own issues in mind. Most of the time, they are utterly different from the ones he tackled. As a result, when and if we “use” Machiavelli’s thought, the only legitimate ways to do so are probably indirect.² Besides, we must take into account, according to Cl. Lefort, the fact that we decipher his provocative thought through a chain of mediators we cannot escape.³

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) is part of this continuously growing chain of mediators. He developed an early and intense interest in Machiavelli’s thought as the examination of his archives and writings shows. In 1962, he dedicated a course to him, of which he prepared a second version ten years later. Throughout the 1970s and even the 1980s, he modified it at

¹ I would like to thank Filippo Del Lucchese and Céline Spector for their very useful comments on earlier versions of this text. I am also very grateful to Christopher Osborne for patiently helping me to find the proper words in English.

² Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, *Conflit civil et liberté: la politique machiavélique entre histoire et médecine* (Paris: H. Champion, 2004).

³ Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre Machiavel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972.

various times. This course has been posthumously published.⁴ In addition, he referred to Machiavelli in various other texts. In *La Soutenance d'Amiens* (1975), he mentioned his “method” as being a way to locate one’s thought in an impossible locus in order to make thinking possible.⁵ Finally, in 1986, he wrote “Machiavel philosophe”.⁶

In this paper, our intention is not to assess Althusser’s capacity to offer us an enlightening guidebook to accompany us in our reading of Machiavelli’s works. It may be that Althusser provided us with misleading glosses.⁷ In a way, the opening words of *Machiavel et nous* indicate to us that this is not necessarily Althusser’s primary concern. In fact, he dedicated a tribute to Cl. Lefort’s “acute”, “intelligent” and “far reaching” interpretation of Machiavelli, he set himself another kind of work.⁸ He wished to offer “another view”, linked to readers that were contemporaneous to Machiavelli, and based on what he called some “associations”.⁹ Starting from this observation, our contribution aims at another goal. It focuses rather on Althusser’s Machiavelli as an entity of its own. Thanks to its analysis, it intends to formulate an issue that is still crucial for contemporary political thought and to justify the interest in Althusserian comment on Machiavelli’s thought: that of a “conjuncture-embedded” political reflection. Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli offers us an exceptional opportunity to approach this issue.

We will try to demonstrate this in four steps. While taking account of the surprise, and even the shock entailed by the works of Machiavelli, Althusser emphasized the role played by the idea of newness, of beginnings. Because of this, he leads us to consider the challenge

⁴ Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New-York: Verso, 1999), from *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome II*, éd. Fr. Matheron (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, Biblio essais, 1997).

⁵ Louis Althusser, *La Soutenance d'Amiens*, in *Solitude de Machiavel*, ed. and introduction by Yves Sintomer (Paris: PUF, ActuelMarx, 1998), 205.

⁶ This text is part of the IMEC Archives.

⁷ Gopal Balakrishnan, *The New Left Review*, Friday, June 3rd, 2001. The relevance of Althusser’s interpretation of Machiavelli is a frequently raised issue. See on this topic: Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy, Niccolò Machiavelli and Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009); Filippo Del Lucchese tr. Warren Montag, “On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser’s Reading of Machiavelli”, *Decalages*, 1, 1, 2010, Art. 5, 3; Banu Bargu, “Machiavelli After Althusser”, in Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, Vittorio Morfino (eds.), *Breaking the Form: Machiavelli and the Crisis of Republicanism* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). We quote from the manuscript, to be published).

⁸ Louis Althusser, *Machiavel et nous*, in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome II*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

addressed by Machiavelli to political theory: that of being able to develop a conjuncture-embedded thought (section I). This interest expressed by Althusser for the Machiavellian concept of conjuncture has been most often interpreted as being part of his arsenal for overcoming a deterministic approach to history (section II). However, giving some credit to this interpretation must not prevent us from observing Althusser's difficulty in describing this idea of conjuncture with proper words (section III). Now, rather than an hypothetical overcoming of historical determinism thanks to Machiavelli, this difficulty may be the most precious legacy of Althusser's Machiavelli. This is evidenced, at least partly, by the fact that it became a decisive incentive for some of his former students. They too have looked for a way to develop a conjuncture embedded political thought. Emmanuel Terray's approach of political issues, elaborated as a midway between "philosophy" and "anthropology", will illustrate this search (section IV).

I. The reasons for astonishment: the determination of political issues by conjunctures

In *Machiavel et nous*, Althusser began by evoking the surprise, and even the shock, felt while reading *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.¹⁰ *Solitude de Machiavel* expresses this astonishment in even stronger words and presents Machiavelli as a substantially strange and isolated political thinker, whose destiny is to remain a "foreigner" within Western thought.¹¹

Machiavel et nous offers a detailed account of this surprise, due to the issue raised by Machiavelli himself: the newness of events and more radically, the newness of beginnings. We will focus on this writing and follow its argument in order to understand the implication of this surprise for Althusser. Machiavelli appeared to Althusser as the thinker *par excellence* of beginnings as he claimed to bring to light a new way of political thinking, related to practice

¹⁰ As many commentators, he first relates to this surprise, speaking of "saisissement", *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel*, in *Solitude de Machiavel*, 318.

and “effectual truth”.¹² He was seen as the one that helped us to tackle the issue of the foundation of a state, as Hegel and Gramsci had already noted. In addition, Althusser stressed the difference between a Marxist approach to this issue, based on market economy and on class struggles, and the Machiavellian perspective focused on the “aleatory” dimension of the foundation of a state. This foundation was described as depending on many factors (economic, but also linguistic, geographic, cultural, historical, etc.), whose combinations formed a random set of conditions more or less favorable to such a foundation.¹³

After having commented on this aspect, Althusser came back to Machiavelli as a thinker who claimed to propose a new approach for political thinking. Althusser related this claim to the ambition of defining the laws of history and of grounding an actual political science. Of course, this immediately appeared as contradicting one of the main features of Machiavellian political thought, that of being inherently unfinished and focused on the specificities of each historical context. While Cl. Lefort emphasized the fact that Machiavelli’s main insight about politics was that it cannot be the subject of complete knowledge, Althusser considered this aspect as a contradiction. For him, the search for the laws of history, if there are to be found, was in opposition to any form of singularity.¹⁴

We will come back to this supposed contradiction later on. But for the time being, let us continue to follow Althusser in his presentation of Machiavelli as the first theorist of conjuncture. The next point is, to him, that Machiavelli opened up the way to consider political issues within their concrete and specific determinations. This meant not only to be aware of the singularities of each situation, but also to reflect on the issue at stake only once it has been understood how it transforms a general and abstract formulation into a particular one.

According to this perspective, for Althusser, theoretical language is dismantled and reshaped

¹² According to the translation proposed by Harvey C. Mansfield Jr, *The Prince*, chapter 15 (The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 60. See on this matter Mohamed Moulfi, « Lectures machiavéliennes d’Althusser », in *Breaking the Form: Machiavelli and the Crisis of Republicanism*.

¹³ Louis Althusser, *Machiavel et nous*, in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome II*, 52-53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

into the form of singularity.¹⁵

II. Machiavelli as an ally to overcome structuralism and historical determinism

It has often been stated that Althusser became a reader of Machiavelli because of his interest in the “aleatory” dynamics of politics: a crucial issue which Machiavelli has clearly grasped and expressed for any founder of a state.¹⁶ In this respect, according to M. Lahtinen, Althusser intended to show that Machiavelli looked for an art of governing able to tame the “aleatory” and create durable political forms.

This first point is frequently followed by another argument, according to which Machiavelli contributed to Althusser’s reflection on materialism. B. Bragu, among others, thus considers that “casting Machiavelli as a materialist philosopher” offers Althusser the opportunity to “rethink historical materialism”.¹⁷

This function would be even more important in regard to Althusser’s relationship to Marx.¹⁸

This is the leading interpretative line elaborated by M. Vatter in an in-depth study of Althusser’s relationship to Machiavelli.¹⁹ M. Vatter argued that Althusser’s position develops as a “self-overcoming” of Marxism and has been in this way able to influence various politically involved thinkers, such as A. Negri, or some former students of him, for example É. Balibar. M. Vatter himself also pursued an “after Marx” approach, but a specific one in comparison with the “after Marx” designed by these philosophers. With this perspective in

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy, Niccolo Machiavelli and Althusser’s Aleatory Materialism*, and from the same author, “Machiavelli was not a republicanist – or monarchist: On Louis Althusser’s ‘alatory’ interpretation of The Prince”, in *Breaking the Form: Machiavelli and the Crisis of Republicanism*.

¹⁷ Banu Bargu, “Machiavelli After Althusser”, in *Breaking the Form: Machiavelli and the Crisis of Republicanism*. As far as the late Althusser is concerned, see Vittorio Morfino and Luca Pinzolo, “Le primat de la rencontre sur la forme. Le dernier Althusser entre nature et histoire”, *Multitudes*, 2005, 2/21, 149-158; and Vittorio Morfino, *Le Temps et l’Occasion, La rencontre Spinoza-Machiavel* (Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2012).

¹⁸ Mohamed Moulfi, “Lectures machiavéliennes d’Althusser”, in *Breaking the Form: Machiavelli and the Crisis of Republicanism*.

¹⁹ Miguel Vatter, “Machiavelli and the After Marx: the Self Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser”, *Theory & Event*, 2004, 7, 4.

mind, he paid a particular attention to one of the critiques addressed to the Marxist theory: the idea that Marxist theory is unable to give an account of historical becoming, “due to its reliance on the flawed assumption that history follows deterministic laws and processes”.²⁰ É. Balibar spotted an ambiguity in Althusser’s thought, occasioned by two contradictory interests: appraisal of the conjuncture and acknowledgment of the complexity of structure.²¹ According to him, the tension created by these two lines of thought has remained unresolved. For M. Vatter, in a different way, Althusser indeed took the criticism of historical determinism seriously.²² But he also enrolled Machiavelli to his side in order to elaborate a way to remedy this flaw and according to M. Vatter, he was thus able to escape this theoretical tension. To be more specific, after having considered for a while the Gramscian path to solve this problem,²³ Althusser would have found in Machiavelli the theoretical means to ground the autonomy of politics (that is the “permanence of social antagonism”) and to emancipate oneself from “the base-superstructure schema of Marxist theory”.²⁴ This emancipation would be made possible by the consideration of the singularity of events that no causal scheme can account for: “The self-overcoming of Althusser finds its ripest formulations in the posthumously published texts, where he explicitly affirms the primacy of the event over the structure, and inscribes into theory a decision, perhaps also his most ancient *parti pris*, for materialism over against dialectics, singularity over against causality, popular resistance over against institutional domination, communism over against Marxist-Leninism, from which contemporary post-Marxist thought may still have something to learn.”²⁵

In order to settle his argument about the consistency of the Althusserian views on the

²⁰ Ibid., § 4.

²¹ Étienne Balibar, “L’objet d’Althusser”, in Sylvain Lazarus (ed.), *Politique et philosophie dans l’oeuvre de Louis Althusser* (Paris : PUF, 1993), 94.

²² Louis Althusser, “Marx dans ses limites” (1978), *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome I*, ed. and pres. by Fr. Matheron (Paris: STOCK/IMEC, Biblio essais, 1999).

²³ Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu, La politique et l’histoire* (Paris : PUF, 1959).

²⁴ Miguel Vatter, “Machiavelli and the After Marx: the Self Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser”, § 5.

²⁵ Ibid., § 8.

dynamics of politics, M. Vatter made several interpretative steps. The first one referred to Althusser's interest in the thesis of an insuperable political antagonism.²⁶ The second was linked to the question that Althusser has identified as basic in Machiavelli's political thought: that of the necessary conditions for the emergence of a new state, or to call it differently, the Gramscian issue of the "new prince". His third step was a comment about the move made by Althusser to question the conditions of maintaining such a new state, in other words the conditions thanks to which the republican form of government could reproduce the constituent power and then establish itself on a long-term basis.²⁷ In relationship with this move, M. Vatter pointed to the role given to the "people" in Althusser's interpretation of Machiavellian republicanism:

"Althusser' reading of the people in Machiavelli, on the contrary, allows for the possibility that the people express their political agency precisely by inscribing a resistance to institutionalization, an inscription which is achieved both internally and externally, to the political form as such. That political body which contains, in its form, the resistance to its form of domination, Machiavelli calls 'republic', to be carefully distinguished from 'democracy' as a form of government."²⁸

Thus "the people" is the name of "the source of resistance to the reproductive powers of the political".²⁹

M. Vatter provided us here with a reading of Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli that happened to be very close to the Machiavellian-Marxist conception of democracy developed by M. Abensour.³⁰ This is an interesting point to be noted as M. Abensour urged us to consider the inner resources of Marxism in order to conceive of democracy. Thus, he did not, as L.

²⁶ Ibid., § 19.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., § 27 – see also § 26.

²⁹ Ibid., § 22.

³⁰ Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (1997) (Polity, 2011).

Althusser did according to M. Vatter, “exit” from Marxism to find an answer to this requirement. In both cases, despite this important difference, Machiavelli plays a decisive role. It thus appears that his thought may be used in various and even diverging ways: in order to highlight a hidden side of Marx or to overcome his supposed flaws. To comment further on this point would take us away from our topic but it would certainly deserve more attention.³¹

Finally, M. Vatter revealed himself unconvinced by Althusser’s argument. To him, Althusser did not go far enough. Indeed, he gave up the “structuralist perspective” and adopted what he called the “perspective of the eventual”.³² However, “his interpretation remains reductive in one crucial respect: it fails to develop the implications of such a discourse for an understanding, not of the arcana of political domination, but of the possibilities of political freedom. By claiming that ‘Machiavelli is interested only in one form of government: the one that allows a state to last’, *Althusser himself collapses the point of view of the people into that of the prince*”.³³

On the contrary, according to M. Vatter, the point of view of the people never left Machiavelli’s concern. He insisted on the necessity to stick by Machiavelli, rather than by Althusser, in order to define the actual conditions of political liberty:

“Althusser’s reading of the Roman Republic solely in terms of the problem of duration of the state misses these other dimensions of Machiavelli’s discourses that are essential to the project of rethinking political freedom in a post-Marxist context.”³⁴

³¹ Warren Montag mentions E. Laclau and C. Mouffe’s elaboration on the idea of “radical democracy”, in “Politics: Transcendent or Immanent? A Response to Miguel Vatter’s ‘Machiavelli After Marx’ », *Theory & Event*, 7, 4, 2005. On this topic, see Étienne Balibar, “Une citoyenneté européenne est-elle possible ?”, *L’Amérique, l’Europe, la guerre. Réflexion sur la médiation européenne* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), 127; Marie Gaille, “Désir de liberté, citoyenneté et démocratie - Retour sur la question de l’actualité politique de Machiavel”, *Asterion*, 2015 (<http://asterion.revues.org/2623>).

³² Miguel Vatter, “Machiavelli and the After Marx: the Self Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser”, § 21.

³³ Ibid., § 36 (I underline).

³⁴ Ibid., § 40. Here, Miguel Vatter advocates for a conception of democracy that is very close to J. Rancière, in *La Méésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), as he himself notices (note 57).

III. Facing the Machiavellian conception of “conjuncture”: Althusser’s interpretative battle and its outcome

Much could be discussed about the supposed divergence between Machiavelli and Althusser stressed by M. Vatter to conclude his argument about a Machiavellian after-Marx. It could be observed that M. Vatter did not discuss the idea, implicit in Althusser’s reading, according to which Machiavelli considered politics independently from economics. Here though lies a delicate interpretative issue. It is obvious when one reads the *Florentine History*, in which the insuperable civil conflict is clearly not independent from economical aspects (status, inequalities, etc.). But it would also require further analysis of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.³⁵ However, let us here concentrate on the question of conjuncture. M. Vatter followed Althusser as far as the latter paved the way for political thought on “the emergence of the world of forms out of events”.³⁶ He departed from him when he viewed in Althusser’s analysis of the republican regime a “collapse” into a frame of thought that neglected the role of both the event and of the people, and thus lost sight of the conditions of political liberty. It is not sure that Machiavelli’s thought fully supports this perspective. Does he not rather try to consider both the insurgent and the institutional dimensions of politics, the event and the form in the same frame of thought?³⁷ Again, this is not the place to develop further this discussion of M. Vatter’s interpretation of Machiavelli, but we may keep it in mind as we turn back to Althusser’s Machiavelli.

The idea of conjuncture, as we mentioned in the first part of this paper, appeared as the central expression of Althusser’s interest in Machiavelli. In fact, we are soon to acknowledge

³⁵ See my paper: “Peut-on être riche et bon citoyen? L’Aristote humaniste au secours de l’esprit capitaliste florentin”, *Asterion*, 2007, 5 (<https://asterion.revues.org/696>). See also Filippo Del Lucchese, “Crisis and power: Economics, politics and conflict in Machiavelli’s political thought”, *History of Political Thought*, 2009, 30 (1), p. 75- 96; J. Barthas, *L’Argent n’est pas le nerf de la guerre. Essai sur une prétendue erreur de Machiavel* (Rome: Collection de l’Ecole française, 2011).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, § 41.

³⁷ It is the perspective I have advocated for in my book *Conflit civil et liberté: la politique machiavélique entre histoire et médecine*.

how the idea of conjuncture raised some questions rather than solved problems in Althusser's thought. It did not imply, according to him, the disappearance of the "laws of history or of politics".³⁸ In fact, to him, these laws still existed but had to be considered within the context to which they applied. To express this idea with accuracy, Althusser tried different types of wording. At first, he commented on the distinction between theory and practice, insisting on the fact that theory was subverted by political practice. He then spoke of the "variations" of the laws of history. He also introduced the word "emptiness" to point at the contingent space in which practice came to shape new political forms. He finally went on to describe the specific nature of *The Prince* as a political manifesto and Machiavelli's work as a kind of political action.

Later on, in the second part of *Machiavel et nous*, meaningfully entitled "Théorie et dispositif théorique chez Machiavel", he came back to this issue of the proper relationship between the singularity of circumstances and the laws of history, practice and theory. The fact is that the prominence of practice in Machiavelli's thought seems to contradict the presence of what Althusser called, again in various ways, "a theory of history", "a general theory of history's laws" or even "the theses about universal history".³⁹ There, we see that Althusser struggled hard in order to make Machiavelli's thought consistent, and achieve a combination of the ideas of perpetual movement and of an immutable order of things. As we know, he relied on the Machiavellian use of the notion of historical cycle, understood as that of a shift of "virtù" and "fortuna" throughout time and space, to solve this issue, before coming back to the examination of his central concern: the foundation of a state and the conditions of its duration, as Machiavelli elaborated it.

Althusser did not raise any questions about his decision to rely on the notion of historical cycle nor about his conviction that the ideas of perpetual movement and of immutable order

³⁸ Louis Althusser, *Machiavel et nous*, in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome II*, 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

of things are contradictory in Machiavelli's thought. However, there would be many elements to refer to in Machiavelli's works to claim that such a questioning is relevant. It seems that, in a way, Althusser created a difficulty that did not exist for Machiavelli, probably because he introduced an interpretative filter linked to his critique of a structuralist and/or deterministic and/or teleological vision of history. Now, we, as contemporary readers, may be bewildered by the fact that Machiavelli considered that human beings display the same desires and civil passions throughout time and space and of the same time, always thoroughly defines the specific circumstances of the action. But Machiavelli's primary concern, like his contemporary Fr. Guicciardini, was to pay enough attention to the subtlest variations of the "effectual truth", rather than formulate a consistent conception of human history. In addition, Machiavelli's concern lay in the question of the appropriate imitation: to what extent an action must be and may be reproduced? In this line of thought, he above all developed a critical use of history in order to be able to spot the differences between specific contexts and address the proper recommendations to the political agent, to discriminate between what may and may not be imitated.⁴⁰ It is doubtful that he viewed as a contradiction what Althusser considered as such.

If Althusser did not express doubts about his own reading of Machiavelli in this respect, the variety of the formulations he used to describe the matter of conjuncture testifies his difficulty to come to terms with the Machiavellian focus on the particular circumstances of an action. We may interpret the fact that some of these phrases are "late handwritten addenda"⁴¹ in the same manner.

IV. The on-going quest for a "conjuncture-embedded" political thought

⁴⁰ See my book *Conflit civil et liberté: la politique machiavélique entre histoire et médecine*, chapter 5.

⁴¹ François Matheron, Introduction, 39-41, and critical notes, 169-171, *Machiavel et nous*, in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome II*. See on this matter Filippo Del Lucchese, "On the Emptiness of an Encounter: Althusser's Reading of Machiavelli", 7-8.

F. Del Lucchese suggested that the best way of interpreting these texts was to preserve their ambivalence, complexity and stratification.⁴² Following this idea, we may consider that, in Althusser's comments on Machiavelli, something remains unresolved and has still to be examined in the future. In this last section, we would like to examine how this suggestion was actually embraced by some of Althusser's former students of and show how it led them to develop their own conjuncture embedded political reflection. At least two of them have brilliantly made this Althusser legacy their own: É. Balibar and E. Terray. They did so not by coming back to Machiavelli's works as *commentators*, though they occasionally analyzed his works.⁴³ They rather forged a way of theorizing that gives a decisive place to social reality and particular circumstances.

In search of the proper words, we saw that Althusser directed our attention to several features of Machiavellian thought: its orientation toward the "effectual truth"; its defiance *vis-à-vis* philosophical speculation and generalised affirmation; its strong inclination to consider the singularity of each situation in order to determine the appropriate action and his refusal of abstract analysis. These features may be related to each other. But they are not synonymous with each other, despite the fact that Althusser shifted from one to the other in a conceptually loose way. However, Althusser expressed the *effect* produced by these Machiavellian features on "political theory" quite clearly and unambiguously: the emergence of an imperative, as strong as the Kantian moral one, according to which the conjuncture must determine the content and orientation of theory.⁴⁴ Consequently, the capacity to observe and describe it appears as the main quality both for a political agent and thinker.

While É. Balibar could determine a way to answer this requirement from within

⁴² Ibid.,14.

⁴³ Étienne Balibar, "Une citoyenneté européenne est-elle possible?", *L'Amérique, l'Europe, la guerre. Réflexion sur la médiation européenne*; Emmanuel Terray, "An Encounter: Althusser and Machiavelli", in (ed.) A. Callari, D. F. Ruccio, *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); and Emmanuel Terray, "La politique contre la loi", in *Combats avec Méduse*, (Paris: Galilée, 2011).

⁴⁴ Louis Althusser, "*Machiavel et nous*", in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, tome II*, 60.

political philosophy, E. Terray, also educated as a philosopher, decided to embrace the career of a political anthropologist in order to reach the same goal. He developed a significant line of thought to give an account of this shift and its reasons. He has dedicated attention to this issue as such, while É. Balibar has practiced a conjuncture embedded political theory without commenting so much on it. We thus propose here to turn toward E. Terray's reflection as a striking attempt to answer the Machiavellian methodological imperative.

Throughout his works, E. Terray showed himself convinced by the idea that social life is dominated by violence and conflict. He also considered that these express themselves in ways that are always very diverse and specific. In this respect, he explored two types of very different references. The first one refers to the medical Hippocratic thought. He referred to the model of knowledge suggested in the Hippocratic works, according to which physicians must constantly go back and forth between the categories they elaborate to define diseases and the examination of particular cases. He derives from this epistemological model the idea that, to physicians, reality undergoes constant changes and never appears the same.⁴⁵ Consequently, physicians try to elaborate a knowledge that gives place to an organized view of such reality without simplifying it.⁴⁶ With this perspective in view, they have created general categories that function as "frames" to consider particular cases. What's more, they are always ready to redefine these categories. According to E. Terray, political thinking must follow the same methodology in order to be able to grasp the specific dimension of each moment in history.

E. Terray's study of Clausewitz's art of war was a second landmark on his way to a conception of political knowledge as an inherently unfinished science of singularities.⁴⁷ To him, Clausewitz faced the same challenge as physicians: the description of a substantially diverse

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Terray, *La politique dans la caverne* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1990) 90-91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Terray, *Essai sur Clausewitz* (Paris : Fayard, 1999).

experience.⁴⁸ He appeared as a theorist of social sciences to E. Terray because he conceived of concrete situations not as examples, but as the object itself of science. He battled against speculation to show that the “laws” of war were at best probability laws. These two references (to Hippocratic thought and to Clausewitz) contributed deeply to determine a conjuncture embedded political thought in E. Terray’s work.

What interests us here is that these two references are related to Althusser’s influence. As a matter of fact, in 2008, E. Terray was offered the opportunity to elaborate a reflective meditation on his work. He stressed the role played by Althusser in directing his intellectual efforts toward such a conception of political knowledge: to E. Terray, Althusser created the “conditions of realism” while opening the way to an examination of specific conjunctures.⁴⁹ E. Terray underlined that this new path was not an easy one to choose. To explore it, he explained that he became an anthropologist rather than a philosopher, considering that the ambition to reduce chaos thanks to speculative reason was an illusion.⁵⁰ But according to him, anthropology in itself was not the solution. There were traps to be avoided: namely that of “sociological Platonism”,⁵¹ and that of “nominalism”. One must escape abstractions and generalizations. They were nothing but simplifications of reality. One must also escape radical empiricism.⁵² In this line of thought, it is no wonder why E. Terray gave up the Marxist rigid analytical frame he used as a young anthropologist,⁵³ to develop later on an in-depth historical and ethnographic study, his *histoire du royaume abron du Gyaman – des origines à la conquête coloniale*.⁵⁴

Related to the issue we discuss, it is a remarkable fact that this orientation did not actually mean a rejection of philosophy for E. Terray. As a matter of fact, he stressed that his choice of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 58

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Terray, “Dernière séance”, in *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 2010, 2-3-4, n° 198-199-200, 535.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Terray, *Lettre à la fugitive* (Paris : Odile Jacob, 1988) 39.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Terray, “Une nouvelle anthropologie politique?”, *L’homme*, 1989, 29, n° 110, 5-29.

⁵² Emmanuel Terray, “Marc Augé, défenseur de l’anthropologie”, *L’homme*, 2008/1, n° 185-186, 68.

⁵³ Emmanuel Terray, *Le marxisme devant les sociétés primitives : deux études* (Paris: Maspéro, 1972).

⁵⁴ E Emmanuel Terray, *Une histoire du royaume Abron du Gyaman: des origines à la conquête colonial* (Paris: Khartala, 1995).

anthropology was made because of his desire to encounter reality. However, to him, anthropology keeps looking for an answer to the questions raised by philosophy.⁵⁵ Consequently, this choice did not express a refusal of theory as such, but rather his decision to elaborate theory in a different way. As we know, G. Balandier's anthropological work and the Manchester school's attention to changes and conflicts, and to the dynamics of history have been crucial for such an elaboration. Political theory, according to this line of thought, must be anchored in the analysis of particular situations

Conclusion

Althusser commented on Machiavelli as he did for other political thinkers. They all belong to the sphere of the "classics" read and taught in philosophy academic classes: mainly Machiavelli, but also Spinoza, Rousseau, Montesquieu. Each of these authors played a significant theoretical part in Althusser's own reflection, at various phases of it. We may consider that his reading of Machiavelli was a way to carry on with his interpretation of Montesquieu's thought as a first essential step, before Hegel, toward an experimental science of history.⁵⁶

However, within this sphere of classical political thinkers, Althusser probably gave a unique place to Machiavelli: that of being "in-between" a political frame of thought inherited from the Ancients and influenced by religion, and a political frame based on the idea of social contract and natural law, considered as that of the bourgeoisie.⁵⁷ So, he did not only stress the uniqueness of this stance, and the isolation associated with it. He also emphasized our own difficulty to think in a Machiavellian way as the second frame of thought was victorious over

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Terray, "Dernière séance", 531

⁵⁶ Céline Spector, « Couper le maître en deux ? La lecture althussérienne de Montesquieu », *La Pensée*, « Althusser, 25 ans après », n°382, avril-juin 2015, 85-97.

⁵⁷ Louis Althusser, *Solitude de Machiavel*, in *Solitude de Machiavel*, 323.

every alternative political language. As a consequence, we may argue that among these classics, Althusser had a special interest in Machiavelli: he viewed him as a lever to highlight our conceptual and political limits and to open up the door to a radical criticism of the second frame of thought. In other words, he related Machiavelli to Marx, which led him to the apparent paradox of their shared isolation.⁵⁸

The stress on the relationship between Machiavelli and Marx may be considered part of the Althusser legacy. But this cannot be affirmed beyond a certain level of generality. It is certainly possible to describe a political frame of thought that takes into account class struggles as “Machiavelli’s theorem”, as É. Balibar does.⁵⁹ But this affirmation implies leaving aside the question of whether the Machiavellian civil conflict is comparable or even compressible into the Marxian view of class struggles. From this point of view, M. Abensour’s reflection on Marx’s “Machiavellian moment” gave evidence of a thorough attempt to ground in a precise and specific way the supposed relationship between Machiavelli and Marx.⁶⁰

As far as Althusser is concerned, one may consider that Machiavelli has remained above all useful to him, both in order to criticize the bourgeois political thinking and to find a way to escape certain theoretical difficulties related to a deterministic interpretation of history. This could lead us to think that the relationship of Althusser to Machiavelli is a topic that belongs to the past.

The intention of this paper is to show, on the contrary, that it is still a significant issue for contemporary political thought. According to us, this significance is related to the fact that Althusser did not come to terms with Machiavelli: his most important legacy lies in his unfinished work. In order to show this, our paper has departed from the interpretation of Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli as being only a strategy to escape from a certain type of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Étienne Balibar, “Une citoyenneté européenne est-elle possible?”, 127.

⁶⁰ M. Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*.

Marxist historical determinism and elaborate a criticism of structuralism. This shift has led to emphasize the complexity and the ambivalence of Althusser's interpretation: he leaves us with the task of designing a fully elaborated conjuncture-embedded political theory. Some of his former students made this task their own. They made it clear that there are several ways to answer this requirement. We mentioned É. Balibar and E. Terray: they responded to Althusser's ambition in different ways. In E. Terray's work, it finally appeared as a never-ending quest, accomplished through various means: in addition to scholar studies, he adopted several writing styles and had numerous political involvements.

Althusser's former students also clearly emphasized one of the implications of this type of political theory. It meant to be always at the same time both theoretical and militant Althusser was somehow uncomfortable to hold this double stance: philosopher and "political agitator",⁶¹ a double stance. He was certainly not far from it as is suggested both by his comment on the "Manifesto" style of Machiavelli's *Principe*, and by what he called his "hallucinatory" awareness of the intimate connection between what is personal, subjective, and what is objective, political.⁶² While inspired by Althusser's Machiavelli, É. Balibar and E. Terray created styles of thought and writing in which "the Personal is Philosophical is Political"⁶³: a far reaching and meaningful echo of *Il Principe's* dedication. This suggests to us an open road to present and future elaborations of other types of "conjuncture-embedded" political theories.

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⁶¹ Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, 1961-1973, ed. and introduced by Fr. Matheron and Y. Moulien-Boutang, (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1998), 750-751.

⁶² Ibid. (letters of April 26th, May 21st and October 23rd, 1963). See Yoshihiko Ichida and François Matheron, "Un, Deux, Trois, Quatre, Dix Mille Althusser? Considérations Aléatoires sur le Matérialisme Aléatoire", *Multitude*, 2005, 2, 21, 172.

⁶³ Eva Feder Kittay et Licia Carlson, *Cognitive disabilities and its challenge to moral philosophy* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 393.