Reading Politics with Machiavelli

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For Eleanor

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"Take this, then," Machiavelli writes in the dedication of the *Discourses*, "in the way in which everything is taken from friends." This book, from its initial premise to its final form, owes much to friendship. I developed the idea during discussions with the Maine Political Theory Reading Group, including Jason Read of the University of Southern Maine, Brian Duff of the University of New England, and Jill Gordon of Colby College (who also provided insight and assistance while I was working on chapter 3). I benefited, as always, from discussing some of these ideas with Cristina Beltran, Jonathan Bernstein, Laurie Naranch, Jeannine Uzzi, and Ron Yungul, as well as with Dan and Charlie Ruderman and Cat Smith, whose home in Los Angeles always provides comfort and shelter to this exile from Southern California. The anonymous reviewers at Oxford University Press saw things in Machiavelli and in my argument that I did not, and the book is better by virtue of their contributions, and I am very grateful to my acquisitions editor, Angela Chnapko, for her support and guidance. Bonnie Honig and James Martel provided great help, valuable insights, and good fortune from the inception of the project. My parents, as always, helped me in innumerable ways while I worked on this book.

I have taught the works of Machiavelli at the University of Southern Maine for almost two decades and have learned a great deal about the former Florentine secretary by talking about him with many exemplary students. Among them, Megean Bourgeois and Dylan Reynolds were

invaluable interlocutors, and Dylan's research assistance was vital in the production of chapter 4.

I could never have written this book at all without the help of my wife, Gabrielle Stevens, who provided emotional, intellectual, and strategic support throughout the process (by, for example, her perceptive readings of private letters between Machiavelli and Francesco Vettori, her good humor, and her planning of our trip to Machiavelli's farm house); or without the example of our daughter, Eleanor, who makes the surprises and pleasures of imagination and hope a daily reality, and to whom *Reading Politics with Machiavelli* is dedicated.

Reading Politics with Machiavelli

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The Uncanny Friend

> Machiavelli's discourse, like a black hole, exerts a gravitational pull on the whole of modern political philosophy, calling it back to this uncanny of legitimation which it tends all too easily to forget or repress.
>
> —Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event*

Niccolò Machiavelli occupies the uncomfortable position of being overly familiar, a cliché, to a community that does not recognize him. Within a generation of his death, the political theorist and secretary of the Florentine Republic was transformed into a representative of amoral connivance, the "murderous Machiavel" of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, if not actually "Old Nick" himself. At the same time, Western political theory moved into the realms of natural law and social contract theory, and the exhortations and the manifestos that Machiavelli penned became curiosities, anachronisms from a time both familiar and ill-defined, neither medieval nor obviously modern. This fate is oddly fitting; Machiavelli worked within the framework of anachronism as he wrote the works for which he is still remembered. I don't say "anachronism" in the sense of a relic, an out-of-fashion thinker whom events have passed by. He was a willful proponent of anachrony, a thinker who, deprived of his political community and his public identity at the height of his talents, created new communities through letters.

I use "anachrony" here as Derrida does in the first chapter of *Specters of Marx*, to suggest a point in time that is "out of joint," like the moment that the specter of a broken authority, the ghost of Old Hamlet, "looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry," Derrida writes, "de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony . . . Here anachrony makes the law." This "out of joint" time of dead-yet-still present authority creates the potential for a new beginning. "Hamlet declares 'the time is out of joint' precisely at the moment of the oath, of the injunction to *swear together* . . . at the moment in which the specter, who is always a sworn conspirator, one more time, from beneath the earth or beneath the stage, has just ordered: 'Swear.'" At the moment when the time is out of joint, authority appears as both a dead foundation of the law and a "living" guide to radical new political action (if we survive). This desynchronizing and plastic moment, this moment of "anachrony" is comparable to the moment in which Machiavelli writes. In conversation with the ancients, using their lives and ideas as models, Machiavelli engaged young Florentines of his time; but more than that, he created new readers, new audiences, far into the future. As Louis Althusser pointed out in *Machiavelli and Us*, Machiavelli greets us as an uncanny companion for reading and thinking. Reaching out across time, this unrecognized and anachronistic thinker becomes a strangely familiar resource for our times.

A *democratic* resource.

Wendy Brown, in *Undoing the Demos*, argues that the contemporary neoliberal regime is characterized by a turn against democracy that operates beyond and below the institutional and electoral world. "Desire for democracy is neither given nor incorruptible,"[1] she points out, and the logic of contemporary neoliberalism is eroding not just our desire for democracy but also our ability to imagine it. Neoliberalism—the substitution of almost every public value with market rationality—bears much of the responsibility for that crisis. From public education to public policy debate, market rationality has disrupted other discourses of political theory.

I say disrupted, though, not replaced. Neoliberal rhetoric has effectively undermined democratic assumptions but has failed to replace those

assumptions with an alternative political vision. That failure has created a vacuum in the democratic imagination that, as Hannah Arendt demonstrates in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, enables deceptive fantasies of community and power for rootless and powerless individuals. These fantasies lend a disturbing strength to neoliberal rationales, but they extend beyond the fetishization of the market to fantasies of authoritarianism and absolute power over vulnerable populations. Consider, for example, the reactionary and xenophobic response throughout the West to the largest refugee crisis since World War II, or the *herrenvolk* coalition politics that decided the 2016 US elections. From gutting Medicaid to targeted immigration bans, the promise of a great wall on the southern border of the United States to a promise to keep "the poor" out of power in cabinet appointments, our current political rhetoric reflects a picture of policy debate in a country that has lost its ability to imagine or sustain a democratic vision. All of this helps explain President Trump's boast that "torture works," as though, all evidence to the contrary, torture could be measured like any utilitarian economic strategy and be judged "efficient." The arguments in favor of torture (and other related forms of terror) that have emerged from the executive branch of the US government since 2002—which have taken on an increasingly racialized tone since the election of Donald Trump—pose a threat all their own to democratic practices and beliefs.

"In torture," Elaine Scarry writes, "it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power."[2] The inability of a tortured citizen to believe in democratic power enables the torture(d) script of those regimes willing to convert people's pain into stories about their own legitimacy.

Since 2001, this has been a feature of our embattled democracy. It also mirrors the challenge faced by Niccolò Machiavelli after the fall of the Florentine Republic. Faced with exile and torture, Machiavelli did *not* turn to privatized fantasies of power comparable to those Arendt finds in Europe the early twentieth century. He, instead, created a political

community from his library and began to write his way back into the *res publica*, even though he had to find a way to create that "public thing" first. This is the democratic resource behind my anachronistic trip to Machiavelli's study: I will establish that, in an uncanny moment of isolated, radical potential, *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy* provide new life for the democratic imagination. Close readings of issues that concern Machiavelli and us—conspiracy, apocalyptic prophecy, torture and exile, issues that confront democratic crisis with antidemocratic fantasy—reveal uncannily familiar resources for reimagining a vibrant democratic vision that exceeds the boundaries of the neoliberal twenty-first century.

For our time in Machiavelli's study to be productive, I must first establish three points. That is the work of this introduction. First, I will argue that approaching Machiavelli anachronistically is not only appropriate but also in keeping with his method of reading and writing. Second, I will establish that he offers us a form of, in Althusser's terminology, *uncanny* authority. Third, we will see that he writes to his audiences, including us, via a form of friendship.

OUT OF TIME

In the second volume of the *Discourses on Livy*, before turning to the topic of Roman foreign policy, Machiavelli presents us with what sounds like the beginning of a fable. "Nothing made it harder for the Romans to conquer the people around them and part of the lands at a distance than the love that in those times many peoples had for their freedom." In the early sixteenth century, he writes, only Germany among the countries of Europe had multiple free cities, "yet in ancient times there were in all lands many people completely free."[3] Just imagine that; once upon a time, human beings lived in a republican world! Rendering that fable real, positing that pre-Roman antiquity demonstrates that human beings have been free, and therefore can be free again, is central to Machiavelli's goals as a writer. If we are to serve as Machiavelli's audience, we must be willing

to see ourselves in the distant past and to imagine that, in doing so, we can affect the future. A self-consciously anachronistic method is central to that project.

Machiavelli describes the circumstances under which he began this project in a letter that has become one of the most famous in early Renaissance history, sent to his friend Francesco Vettori, on December 10, 1513, from his home in exile. Sant' Andrea di Percussina, in the countryside around the Tuscan town of San Casciano, can be cold, wet, and inhospitable in December. Even now, the otherwise-charming house in which Niccolò Machiavelli lived for several years can be uncomfortably cold and damp; in 1513, despite the house's multiple fireplaces, it could be cold enough to keep one in a coat and gloves at midday. Machiavelli's country house—no, that sounds almost aristocratic, let's say the farmhouse—faces a road that was frequented by pilgrims making the trip from southern France to Rome, and which was also, therefore, frequented by thieves, and worse. (The front of the farmhouse, in figure 1.1, still gives you a sense of Machiavelli's day.) But it wasn't the cold or the danger that bothered Machiavelli as he took up permanent residence at a place that was meant to be an occasional getaway and source of some extra income in rents, produce, and swine. (The farm's time as a successful vineyard was still in the future.) Machiavelli's pain was rooted in the reason why he was living so far outside the city he loved. He was in exile.

Machiavelli's career, his status, everything about his life that he valued was rooted in what had been the Florentine Republic. But in 1512, with the return to power of the Medici family, Machiavelli lost his political positions; soon after, he was imprisoned, tortured, and then expelled from the city. By the end of the following year, when we find him, he was two days' ride from Florence, and it was a crime for Florentine citizens to even visit him. In the December letter to Vettori, Machiavelli describes a typical day: he walks into the woods and then walks to a spring. He chats with woodcutters, argues with them about their prices and their obligations; he catches birds and reads books in the fields. In the afternoon, he plays games of chance in a nearby bar and gets into fights over who won and who lost, who is