Politics and Philosophy

Niccolò Machiavelli and
Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism

Mikko Lahtinen

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BRILL

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Foreword

In the mid-1990s, at the time I was completing the original Finnish version of this book, now published here in English, we were living in the aftermath of the crisis in Marxism and the collapse of 'real socialism'. This situation also created a less favourable academic-intellectual atmosphere for writing a book on a communist philosopher such as Louis Althusser. In a situation where the initiative of the Left was at a low ebb, it felt very reassuring to read – apart from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* – Althusser's then recently posthumously published analyses of Machiavelli and 'aleatory materialism'. It was illuminating to delve into his later views – views that can be traced to his earlier writings – on the theoretical problematics of the political intervention reflected in his analyses. I found an Althusser for whom it was essential – no more, no less – to reflect on the question of 'what is to be done' in the conjuncture, or to reflect on how the 'conjunctural' understanding of history and reality could offer a theoretical starting point for a subversive political strategy.

In the present book, it is indeed essential to read Althusser above all as someone who advanced a theory of materialist politics, and whose later writings open up potential – albeit incomplete – views for the advancement of Marxist political theory. As

I state in the Preface to this English edition of the book, neither the later Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli nor his notion of 'aleatory materialism' have been studied in any detail as analyses of political action and intervention but rather, more conventionally, from the point of view of a 'philosophical' perspective where 'politics' has been excluded.

The present English edition of my book does not significantly differ from the original Finnish edition, although here the footnotes and quotes refer (when available) to English editions of texts.

I would like to thank warmly the Kone Foundation and the Emil Aaltonen Foundation in Finland for their funding of the translation as well as Gareth Griffiths and Kristina Kölhi for sparing no effort in their translation.[1] It is certainly true to say that without the encouraging support of my friends Juha Koivisto and Peter Thomas this whole project would never have been realised, though the responsibility for its contents falls fully on the author.

<div align="right">Mikko Lahtinen, December 2007</div>

Author's Preface to the English Edition

1. Louis Althusser's interest over several decades in the history of 'political philosophy' – in eighteenth-century French political thought as well as in Hobbes, Locke and Machiavelli – was nothing new to those who attended his lectures at the École normale supérieure in Paris or who had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the widely circulated copies of his lecture notes.[1] Of Althusser's writings on political philosophy, the only ones to be published during his lifetime were his study on Montesquieu and his analysis of discrepancies in Rousseau's social-contract theory.[2] Even on the basis of these two texts alone, however, it becomes clear that Althusser's critical objective was to analyse 'philosophical ideas' within the contexts of the social contradictions and struggles of their time.

Althusser encapsulated his objectives in his 'Soutenance d'Amiens' of 1975 by reference to his own

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[1] Althusser 1959 and Althusser 1967. Cf. Matheron 2006, p. 19; cf. also Goshgarian 2003, p. xi. Already in 'Soutenance d'Amiens' (1975), Althusser discusses Machiavelli, Hegel, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant as individual objects of study (Althusser 1976b, pp. 166–7). The lectures contained in the collection *Politique et histoire de Machiavel à Marx*, published in 2006, dealing with Montesquieu and other eighteenth-century French philosophers, date from the 1955–6 academic year, the Rousseau lectures from 1965–6 and the Hobbes lectures from 1971–2 (Althusser 2006, *Summary*). In the 1972–3 academic year Althusser gave for the first time his lectures on Machiavelli based on the *Machiavelli and Us* manuscript.

[2] Althusser 1972b, pp. 9–109; Althusser 1972b, pp. 111–60.

definition of philosophy at that time, according to which philosophy in the last instance is 'class struggle at the level of theory'. According to Althusser, this definition, emphasising the primary nature of the class struggle, 'implied a reversal of the traditional relation between philosophy and politics'. Hence it was also possible for Machiavelli to 'be considered a philosopher in a strong sense', 'even if he says almost nothing about philosophy'. Descartes, on the other hand, 'even if he says almost nothing about politics', 'can nevertheless be consider a political thinker in a strong sense'.[3]

In his study of Montesquieu from the end of the 1950s, Althusser was not so much interested in Montesquieu's 'philosophical life' as in how both *in* and *with The Spirit of the Law* he took a stand in contemporary politics: 'But I am also thinking of another life. Of the life too often masked by the very same discoveries that we owe to him. Of his preferences, his aversions, in short, of Montesquieu's *parti pris* in the struggles of his age.'[4]

During the next decade, the 1960s, Althusser defined the problem of the relationship between theory and class struggle as the central question in both Marxist theory and the ideological struggle. In his article 'On the Materialist Dialectic', dated spring 1963, the focal points of Althusser's analyses are Lenin's thesis that 'the soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of a concrete situation' and Marx's formulation about dialectics as a 'revolutionary method' 'rather than the theory of the *fait accompli*'.[5] The problematic of the interrelation between 'theory' and 'practice' is a central theme also in the different stages of Althusser's so-called self-criticism (from 1966 onwards) as well as in his later views during the 1980s.[6] In his last known interview, with Fernanda Navarro in 1987, he characterises the relationship between philosophy and 'ideological hegemony' as follows:

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[3] Althusser 1976b, pp. 166–7.
[4] Althusser 1972b, p. 14.
[5] Althusser 1979, p. 180 and p. 206.
[6] It is important to note that Althusser analysed the relationship between philosophy and the class struggle already in his writings from the early 1960s, even though later he indeed described his objectives at the time as being limited by a 'theoreticist' tendency. With this he referred, above all, to his definition at that time of philosophy as 'a theory of theoretical practice', which he used in particular in *Reading 'Capital'*. It is more difficult, however, to discern the tendency towards 'theoreticism' in Althusser's articles from the early 1960s, collected together in *For Marx*, particularly those in which the object of his analysis is the 'revolutionary leader Lenin'.

Even in its most abstract form, that of the works of the great philosophers, philosophy is situated somewhere in the vicinity of the ideologies, as a kind of theoretical laboratory in which the fundamentally political problem of ideological hegemony – that is, of the constitution of the dominant ideology – is experimentally put to the test, in abstract.[7]

2. The importance of Machiavelli to Althusser has become evident for the wider audience mainly after his death through the posthumously published writings 'Machiavelli's Solitude' (published in German in 1987, English in 1988 and French in 1990), his autobiography *The Future Lasts a Long Time* (1992), the manuscript titled *The Only Materialist Tradition* (1993), his letters to Franca Madonia (1998) and particularly his lectures titled *Machiavelli and Us*, published in 1995, as well as his first Machiavelli lectures from 1962.[8]

Finally, with the publication of *Machiavelli and Us*, it also became indisputable that Althusser had a much more appreciative attitude towards Gramsci's views – as indeed also his students have recounted – than could be deduced from his influential, but one-sided and faulty, critiques of Gramsci's 'historicism' and 'philosophy of praxis'.[9] It is also interesting to note that the first version of *Machiavelli and Us* was written at the same time as the important work *Elements of Self-Criticism* (written in 1972, published in 1974). As G.M. Goshgarian has shown in his significant prefaces to English translations of the posthumously published texts, the self-criticism did not mean that Althusser would have denounced the central theoretical views that he had developed in the beginning and middle of the 1960s, encapsulated in his anti-theological critique of the Leibnizian and Hegelian expressive totalities or emphasis on materialism. The changes above all concerned how Althusser perceived the relationship between Marxist philosophy and the economic-political class struggle of the masses, which interested him throughout his

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[7] Althusser 2006a, p. 287.

[8] Cf. Althusser 2006b. Only the first part of Althusser's manuscript *The Only Materialist Tradition*, which focuses on Spinoza, has been published in English (Althusser 1997). The latter part, which focuses on Machiavelli, is presently only available in French (Althusser 1994a, pp. 488–507).

[9] Althusser and Balibar 1997, especially pp. 126–37. On the problematical aspects of Althusser's critique, see Thomas 2009, and Sotiris 2008 on the political background of the Althusser's critique of Gramsci's Marxism.

whole *oeuvre*. With the self-criticism, this question was directed more clearly than it had been earlier regarding his own intellectual role and actions as a 'communist in philosophy'.[10]

Already in the summer of 1966, Althusser self-critically stated that his theories of 'theoretical practice' and 'epistemological break' isolated theory from 'non-theoretical' social practices. Goshgarian summarises this first moment of Althusser's self-criticism as follows: 'Theory became theory by virtue of a distantiation that ruled out both its internal determination *by* ideology and its direct intervention *in* ideology; a theory, by definition, had no *practical* relation to the ideological practices with which it broke'.[11] In this context, Althusser criticised the theoretical conceptions of 'theoreticism' he had advanced in his earlier book *Reading 'Capital'* (1965), which he now saw as an overreaction against the 'absolute historicism' of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis. Althusser had argued that a central problem in Gramsci's thinking was that 'the real philosopher is simply the politician'.[12]

The first stage of the self-criticism had been preceded by a resolution from the Central Committee of the French Communist Party (PCF) to dissociate itself from the Stalinist tradition and to adopt the viewpoint of 'humanist Marxism'. Louis Aragon and Roger Garaudy, intellectuals on the Central Committee, had central roles when the resolution was being debated in the winter of 1966. Althusser lost the battle, and the resolution document published in *L'Humanité* on 15 March 1966 was based on the views of Aragon and Garaudy. Althusser wrote a long letter to the Central Committee in which he aimed to show the theoretical problems contained in the resolution. The letter, however, was never sent.[13]

For Althusser, the defeat was a harsh experience and also a concrete example of the complex relationship between 'philosophy' and 'politics': theory cannot be simply 'applied' into practice from the outside in the case of class struggle.[14] On the other hand, with his isolated position within the PCF, Althusser understood that he lacked the possibilities for political intervention, and

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[10] Goshgarian 2003, especially pp. xiii–xxii; Goshgarian 2006, especially pp. xiv–xvi and xxxix–xlvii.

[11] Goshgarian 2003, pp. xiii–xiv.

[12] Althusser and Balibar 1997, p. 128; see Goshgarian 2003, p. xv.

[13] See Lewis 2007, pp. 133–51; for Althusser's letter, see Althusser 2007; see also Goshgarian 2003, pp. xi–xv; and Matheron 2000, pp. 170–5.

[14] Cf. Goshgarian 2003, p. xx.

thus the only way to have any influence was 'by way of *pure theory*, that is, *philosophy*'.[15] Withdrawing into 'pure theory' did not mean, however, a return to the 'theoreticism' of *Reading 'Capital'* but, rather, a continuation of the self-criticism and further work on the problematics of the relationship between theory and practice. For example, Althusser planned to publish a book on the union between theory and practice, but from the extensive material only the long article 'Matérialisme historique et matérialisme dialectique' was sent for publication, published only in the *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* (April 1966) and written already before the 'humanist controversy'.[16]

In 1968, the year of student and worker radicalism, an interview with Althusser, titled 'Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon' was published in *L'Unità* (February 1968). Althusser emphasised the importance of Lenin, who had been rejected by philosophers, for the critique of French academic philosophy. Althusser discussed Lenin's importance in a more systematic way in the small book *Lenin and Philosophy* which was published at the same time:

> [A]cademic philosophy cannot tolerate Lenin (or Marx for the matter) for two reasons, which are really one and the same. On the one hand, it cannot bear the idea that it might have something to learn from politics and from a politician. And on the other hand, it cannot bear the idea that philosophy might be the object of a theory, i.e. of an objective knowledge.[17]

Althusser agreed with Lenin's statement that the majority of philosophy teachers were 'petty-bourgeois intellectuals functioning in the bourgeois education system as so many ideologists inculcating the mass of student youth with the dogmas – however critical or post-critical – of the ideology of the ruling classes'.[18] In the *L'Unità* interview, he also emphasised that left-wing intellectuals had a 'long, painful and difficult re-education' ahead of them if they wanted to become 'ideologists of the working class' (Lenin) or 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci). The precondition for the development was 'an endless external and *internal* struggle'.[19] Althusser presented his self-criticism against theoreticism in a more systematic form in the small book *Elements of Self-Criticism*, written

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15 Althusser 2006a, p. 253; cf. also Suchting 2004, p. 4.
16 Goshgarian 2003, p. xi.
17 Althusser 1971, p. 37.
18 Althusser 1971, pp. 37–8, cf. also p. 67.
19 Althusser 1971, p. 16.

in 1972 and published two years later. The object of the self-criticism was also now his 'speculative' definition of philosophy from the early 1960s as a 'theory of theoretical praxis', which 'represented the highest point in the development of this theoreticist tendency'.[20] Even now, Althusser emphasised the 'primacy of the class struggle' in relation to philosophy and theoretical praxis, which was encapsulated by his new philosophical definition adopted soon after *Reading 'Capital'*: 'philosophy represents the class struggle in theory'.[21] In his theoreticist stage, the juxtaposition had been the opposite, that is, the 'primacy of theory over practice'.[22] The question was not, however, about whether philosophy should be seen as a less important activity than previously, but, rather, the fact that the 'ground' on which philosophy is based lies outside it, and usually goes unnoticed: 'all the social practices are there in philosophy … in the same way that the stars are in the sky'.[23] Instead, Althusser's own philosophy was to lie within the sphere of the class struggle taking place on the theoretical terrain.

Althusser attempted a new philosophical-ideological intervention against the leadership of the PCF after the party suffered a bitter defeat in the French legislative election in March 1978 and the Socialist Party (PS) led by François Mitterrand became the largest left-wing party. A series of four articles was published in *Le Monde* in which Althusser strongly criticised the leadership of the party for 'building fortifications' between the Party and the masses. He defined the relationship between the Party and the masses as the decisive issue for the Party and proposed that they 'abandon the fortifications'. Here, he was referring to Machiavelli's principle, according to which the prince must not ensconce himself in the fear of his own subjects but, rather, must earn their love and respect.[24] Therefore the Communists would have to bring back to life 'a theory which will not dodge mass initiatives and social transformations, but which will, on the contrary, openly face them and impregnate and nourish itself with them'.[25] Now the 'primacy of the class struggle' also meant that the connection to the masses was the *conditions of life* for Marxist *theory*.

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[20] Althusser 1976b, p. 124.
[21] Althusser 1976b, p. 124; cf. an early formulation (1967) in Althusser 2003, p. 217.
[22] Althusser 1976b, p. 124, note 19.
[23] Althusser 1990b, p. 249, cf. also Koivisto 1993, p. 63.
[24] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 20.
[25] Althusser 1978b, pp. 39 and 45.

Though Althusser's self-criticism increasingly emphasised the importance of the *interaction* between theory and practice, he never put forward any concrete analyses concerning intellectuals and the masses in relation to questions of organisation as Gramsci had done in his *Prison Notebooks*. Using Gramsci's terminology, Althusser did not analyse the *organisational-political* connections between Marxist science and philosophy in relation to the ideologies or *senso comune* of the masses or the intellectuals and other élites. Thus, the effects of the possible change in this relationship on philosophical-scientific institutions and practices themselves also remained outside the focus of Althusser's observations or, at the most, remained critical remarks about the 'petit-bourgeois position' of teachers of philosophy or other intellectuals.

The essential questions in Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' – questions about 'learning from the masses', about philosophy 'as the critical element of the *senso comune* of the masses', or about the views of 'intellectual and moral reform' and the analysis of social institutions and practices linked to it as well as their transformation – do not have a central role in Althusser's thinking, despite the emphasis of the connection to the masses in the 1978 critique of the PCF. Althusser's analyses of the political-historical positionings of theory in social reality are indeed clearly less substantial and more abstract – 'more theoreticist' – than the 'cultural-materialistic' analyses of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For Gramsci, philosophy appeared also as a concrete social-cultural practice, whereas for Althusser, philosophy – as well as his own role as a philosopher – was after all primarily a 'theoretical practice' *in abstracto*. When Althusser, for instance, writes about 'the class struggle *in* theory', he does not reflect very much about what kind of effects this could have on the material practices and institutions of philosophy or the sciences, or about how a revolutionary Marxist science and philosophy would or should be articulated in relation to the economic-political struggles that the working class undergoes in the historical conjuncture, that is, by 'changing the world'. In Althusser's analyses, the intellectual who has adopted even a Marxist theoretical anti-humanism seems to remain a researcher or philosopher-theoretician who *spontaneously* reproduces the division between intellectual and material work typical of the capitalist class society.

3. As is well known, Althusser withdrew from public life after his 1978 critique of the Party, until the tragic events of November 1980 brutally dragged

him to the centre of attention. After the posthumous publication of previously unpublished works, it became clear, however, that Althusser had not ceased writing but had developed his views on the 'underground current of materialist philosophy', 'real materialism', 'aleatory materialism' or the 'materialism of the encounter'. However, he did not leave Marx behind. On the contrary, by studying the history of the 'underground current' he also tried to establish a foundation for his proposed analysis of Marx's *Capital*.[26] Between 1982 and 1986, he also reworked the manuscript *Machiavelli and Us*; among other things, he changed the references from 'dialectical materialism' to 'aleatory materialism' and changed the vocabulary into the language of 'aleatory materialism'.[27]

Studies of the posthumously published later writings of Althusser have thoroughly discussed the contradictions, shortcomings in argumentation and reasoning as well as the conceptual problems and inconsistencies in the fragmentary developments of 'aleatory materialism'.[28] But despite all this research, to date (December 2008) there is still no study – apart from the present book – that systematically analyses Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli or how *Machiavelli and Us* can be placed in relation to Althusser's overall thinking or his views on philosophy and its relationship with the 'class struggle undertaken by the masses' at different stages of his self-criticism.[29]

In various writings discussing Althusser's posthumously published works, especially his later manuscripts and notes, Machiavelli appears as only one of the materialists of the 'underground tradition' among others – from Epicurus to Heidegger and Derrida. Perhaps the neglect of Machiavelli has been aided by the fact that according to the spontaneous concept of philosophy Machiavelli has not been considered – despite Althusser's remarks – as a 'philosophically' important figure. It should be kept in mind, however, that, of all the thinkers of the 'underground current', Machiavelli is the only one to receive a detailed and systematic analysis in the later texts of Althusser. Also, for this

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[26] Althusser 2006a, p. 188 and p. 260.

[27] Matheron 1995, p. 41 and p. 163.

[28] Suchting 2004 has systematically mapped the inconsistencies; cf. also Tosel 2005, pp. 190–5.

[29] The second edition of Elliott's *Althusser. The Detour of Theory* (2006) contains a useful, long 'Postscript' and a bibliography of Althusser scholarship undertaken since his death, as well as a bibliography of Althusser's published writings.

very same reason, the interpretation of Machiavelli in the 'aleatory' texts of the later Althusser should have a considerably more central position than it does in the existing Althusser scholarship.

4. In the Althusser scholarship published when I was undertaking my own research, as well as since then, only François Matheron, Emmanuel Terray and Antonio Negri have focused on Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli and its culmination in *Machiavelli and Us*.[30] In the philosophically slanted writings of Vittorio Morfino – who has worked more systematically with the later writings of Althusser – Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli occasionally becomes the object of analysis, as it also does briefly in Federico Dinucci's and in André Tosel's interpretations of aleatory materialism, in Yoshiyuki Sato's book on power and resistance in Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida and Althusser, and in the substantial analyses of Filippo Del Lucchese of the concept of 'occasione' in Machiavelli.[31] In the writings of Jean-Claude Bourdin, Yann Moulier Boutang and Wallis A. Suchting on aleatory materialism, Machiavelli is only mentioned as one 'aleatory materialist' among others.[32] In the introduction written for the original French language edition of *Machiavelli and Us*, Matheron only provides the background to the manuscript and does not present a more detailed analysis of it. Gregory Elliott's introduction to the English edition is also rather cursory in its brevity.[33] Matheron's article 'Louis Althusser ou l'impure pureté du concept' (2001), on the other hand, contains a discussion of several pages of the central arguments in *Machiavelli and Us* (e.g. the book *The Prince* as a manifesto and Machiavelli as a theoretician of the conjuncture).[34]

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[30] Matheron 2001; Terray 1996; Negri 1996 (French original Negri 1993), Negri 1997. In Negri's and Hardt's book *Empire*, the Gramscian viewpoint on Machiavelli's *The Prince* as a political manifesto as developed by Althusser in *Machiavelli and Us* is discussed (Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 63–6).

[31] Cf. Morfino 2002, pp. 90–1, p. 94, p. 97 and pp. 102–3; Morfino 2006, p. 21; Morfino and Pinzola 2005, pp. 152–5; Dinucci 1998, pp. 11–12; Tosel 2005, pp. 173–6; Sato 2007, pp. 198–201; Del Lucchese 2002, p. 62, note 61, where he refers to Althusser's view on Machiavelli as the 'first theoretician of the conjuncture'.

[32] Rather strangely, I would argue, in two of the most recently published general introductions to Althusser's work (Montag 2003, Ferretter 2006), little space is given to Althusser's later thinking and his interpretation of Machiavelli is completely ignored.

[33] Bourdin 2005, pp. 140–2; Moulier Boutang 2005, pp. 163–4; Suchting 2004, p. 24 and pp. 28–31, pp. 34–5, p. 40 and p. 66; Matheron 1995, pp. 10–14, p. 21 and pp. 39–41; Elliott 1999, pp. xi–xxii.

[34] Matheron 2001, pp. 380–4.

Apart from Goshgarian, of the above-mentioned interpreters, Morfino and Negri are perhaps the ones who have most highlighted continuity between the philosophical-theoretical views that Althusser presented at different times.[35] Morfino also makes interesting comparisons between the later Althusser's 'aleatory materialism' and his earlier views, and indeed uncovers ideas in his later writings that already occurred in his writings from the 1960s (albeit sometimes appearing only in the margins).[36] Negri, on the other hand, has argued that, besides the continuity, there is a particular positive turn, *die Kehre*, in Althusser's thinking, realised by his aleatory materialism.[37]

A central aim in my own study has also been to discuss a viewpoint that justifies important theoretical continuities. An even more important aim in my study has been to highlight the aspiration permeating Althusser's thinking to present a *theoretically* argued starting point for the possibility of political intervention. The basis for such argumentation is the unconditional rejection of the Hegelian idea of the expressive totality. Instead of the 'self-development' of the Hegelian historical totality, the question was about a complex social formation and the need to understand it 'conjuncturally'. In 'On Theoretical Work: Difficulties and Resources' (1967), an article Althusser wrote in the early stage of his self-criticism, it becomes clear that he considered the 'conjuncture' in particular as a substantial concept in terms of Marxist history and political theory:

> To take only *one* example, Lenin's political texts (analyses of the situation and its variations, decisions taken and analyses of their effects, etc.) give us, with dazzling insistence, *in the practical state*, a *theoretical* concept of capital importance: the concept of the 'present moment' or 'conjuncture'. ... Only a little attention is needed to grasp the decisive import of this new theoretical concept. Not only does it retrospectively cast light on the distinctiveness of the Marxist theory of history, on the forms of *variation in dominance* within the social structure on the basis of determination in the last instance by the economic, and thus on historical periodisation (that 'cross' of the historians); not only does it for the first time permit the enunciation of a theory – that is,

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[35] On the interpretations of the possible 'Kehre' in later Althusser's thinking, cf. Sotiris 2008.

[36] Morfino 2002, especially p. 87; cf. Morfino 2006, where he emphasises anti-essentialism as a permeating thread in Althusser's thinking.

[37] Negri 1996, pp. 58–60.

a genuine conceptualisation – of the possibility of political action, detached at last from the false antinomies of 'freedom' and 'necessity' (the 'play' of the variations in dominance in the conjuncture), and of the real conditions of political practice, in designating its object (the balance of class forces engaged in the struggle of the 'present moment'); not only does it allow us to think the articulation of the different instances whose combination of overdetermined effects can be *read* in the conjuncture – but it also allows us to pose, in a concrete manner, the problem of the union of theory and practice – that is, one of the most profound questions of dialectical materialism, not only in the domain of political practice but also in the domain of theoretical practice. …[38]

The 'conjuncture' was indeed one of the most central concepts connecting the different stages of Althusser's work. It had an important *theoretical* position already in Althusser's writings from the beginning of the 1960s, particularly in the articles contained in *For Marx* (1965). The 'conjuncture' also played a central role when Althusser attempted to [re]construct a theory of Marxist history from Marx's *Capital* and particularly from Lenin's political writings, which could offer a theoretically appropriate starting point for the analysis of the conditions of political activity.

5. Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli as the 'first theoretician of the conjuncture' is guided by Gramsci's interpretation of *The Prince* in the *Prison Notebooks* as a passionate political manifesto: '*The Prince* is not a book of "science", understood academically, but of "immediate political passion", a party "manifesto" that is based on a "scientific" conception of the political art'. Furthermore, Machiavelli's works are 'expressions of a personality that wants to intervene into the politics and the history of his country and in that sense they have a "democratic" origin'.[39] With Gramsci's interpretation as his starting point, Althusser analyses *The Prince* both as Machiavelli's specific political act in his own conjuncture and as a unique analysis in the 'practical state' of the conditions of a specific political act. In my study, I have characterised this double viewpoint with the terms 'practice of *The Prince*'

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[38] Cited in Althusser 1990b, pp. 64–5.
[39] Gramsci 1975, pp. 1928–9.

and 'practice of the prince',[40] the former referring to the political intervention Machiavelli carries out with his book in his own conjuncture and the latter to the political practice of the prince that emerges in the book.

Emmanuel Terray hits the nail on the head when he says that 'Althusser himself returns to these affirmations, pointing out that a manifesto of a moment both analyses a conjuncture and proposes an action'.[41] In his short article, in which he refers only to 'Solitude of Machiavelli' (*Machiavelli and Us* had not been published at the time when Terray wrote his article), Terray does not, however, systematically analyse Althusser's analysis of Machiavelli. Without knowing of *Machiavelli and Us*, Terray also ends up making the excessively polarised conclusion that

> in the absence of a real Marxist political theory, it is fruitless to pretend to graft Machiavelli's political theory onto Marxism, notwithstanding the undeniable similarities. When we come to the role of the masses – who are, after all, the *Reply to John Lewis* reminds us, the ones who make history, a far from Machiavellian formula – then rejecting this graft becomes inescapable.[42]

Machiavelli and Us, however, related to Althusser's views about the possibility of political intervention as well as his theory of the 'conjuncture' or his comparison between *The Prince* and *The Communist Manifesto* could have shown Terray that there was no basis for such a polarised conclusion. On the contrary, it is important to take seriously Althusser's view that Machiavelli

> went a lot further than Marx on a number of issues, for example in trying to conceive the conditions and kinds of political action in its pure form, that is to say at the conceptual level. What struck me again was the radical manner in which he took account of the chance nature of every conjuncture.[43]

Despite everything, Terray – along with Matheron, Negri and Tosel – is one of the few commentators to have noted that for Althusser *The Prince* was, besides Lenin's political writings, a rare example of *both* a theoretical problematic of a political intervention *and* a political intervention in and with a text. I hope that the present book convinces the reader that Machiavelli should not be

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[40] Cf. Chapter 4.3 and 4.4.
[41] Terray 1996, p. 262.
[42] Terray 1996, p. 273.
[43] Althusser 1993c, p. 220.

reduced to a single thread in Althusser's fragmentary and, in many places, contradictory 'aleatory materialism'. Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli is an important achievement, which (together with Gramsci's interpretation) deserves much greater recognition than it has received so far.[44] Such recognition should not be strived for simply for of 'academic' reasons but also because Althusser's 'philosophy of the conjuncture' and 'aleatory' interpretation of Machiavelli can be an intellectual pointer, a revolutionary weapon, on the battlefields of global capitalism in our own 'conjuncture'.

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[44] *Machiavelli and Us* has been almost completely bypassed also in Machiavelli scholarship, which in recent decades, at least in the English-speaking academic world, has been one-sidedly dominated by the 'republicanistic' interpretation of Skinner and his students. After the publication of *Machiavelli and Us*, it is clear that the 'effective truth' is not the whole truth about the nature of Machiavelli's thinking and its possible importance. In my study, I pay attention to the most central problems of Skinner's interpretation, which unfolds particularly well against the background of the interpretations by Althusser (and Gramsci).

Chapter One
Introductory Comments

1.1. Althusser, Machiavelli and political theory

Of those writings by French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918–90) published so far since his death, Florentine political philosopher and statesman Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) is the object of study in five of them. Apart from Machiavelli, there is also present in most of these writings the 'underground' philosophical tradition that Althusser characterises as the 'materialism of the encounter' or 'the philosophy of the encounter',[1] and 'real materialism' or 'the only materialism'.[2] The most extensive of these writings is the approximately 100-page manuscript titled *Machiavel et nous*.[3] While Althusser was still alive, German and English translations were published of a lecture he gave in 1977 entitled 'Solitude de Machiavel', but the original version was only published after his death. Two other writings essential to Machiavelli scholarship are *L'unique tradition matérialiste* and Althusser's autobiography

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[1] Althusser 1994c, p. 561; Althusser 2006a, p. 188.
[2] Althusser 1992a, p. 95; Althusser 1993c, p. 103.
[3] Althusser 1995a; Althusser 1999.

L'avenir dure longtemps.[4] The oldest of the posthumously published writings is Althusser's manuscript of the lecture series he gave in 1962 at the École Normale Supérieure, titled *Politique et histoire de Machiavel à Marx*.[5]

My objective in the present study is to show that these five writings published after Althusser's death contain an important contribution to Machiavelli scholarship, political theory and political philosophy. What makes the task more difficult, however, is that most of Althusser's writings in which he discusses Machiavelli and the underground current of the materialism of the encounter are incomplete, unpolished with regard to form and structure and very fragmentary with regard to their argumentation.[6] Despite this, however, they shed further light on those of Althusser's writings published during his lifetime and, furthermore, demonstrate that the claims that Althusser's structuralism, structuralist Marxism and 'theoretical anti-humanism' ignore human freedom are one-sided and erroneous.

Even though, in those of his writings published during his lifetime, Althusser does not specifically analyse Machiavelli, I aim to demonstrate (in Chapter 2) that many of them are nevertheless concerned with Machiavellian themes, the central issue of which is the identification of the theoretical conditions for political practice. The question of political practice can be found in these writings in his critique of Hegelianism and, in particular, Hegelian Marxism, as well as his 'theoretically antihumanist' interpretation of Marx.

The main object of critique in Althusser's writings from the 1960s and 1970s is the idea of *expressive totality* in Hegelian Marxism. The central factor connecting this earlier critique to his writings from the 1980s is the critique of teleological thinking as well as the 'philosophy of essence [*philosophie de l'essence*]'. Even though Epicurus and Machiavelli are perhaps more central

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[4] *L'unique tradition matérialiste*, in the first part of which Althusser discusses Spinoza and the second part Machiavelli, was originally included in the manuscript of Althusser's autobiography. However, he left it out of the last known version of the manuscript. It was only published after his death, together with the incomplete autobiographical text *Les Faits*, written in 1976 (see Corpet 1993, pp. 72–3 and Elliott 1994, p. 179). Only the first part of the manuscript has been published in English, 'The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza', in Montag and Stolze (eds.) 1997.

[5] Althusser 2006b.

[6] Althusser states that he intends to write a book that would bring together Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza and Rousseau. The book, which had the working title *La véritable tradition matérialiste* [*The True Materialist Tradition*], was never completed (Althusser 1992a, p. 234; Althusser 1993c, p. 241; see also Corpet 1993, pp. 72–3).

figures than Marx in Althusser's writings from the 1980s, the critique of philosophical idealism as well as the essentialism and teleologism it contains are still strongly evident. One could also say that, in these late writings, Althusser attempts to define more precisely and further develop the critique of essentialism, teleologism and philosophical idealism that he developed in his earlier writings, such as *Lire 'Le Capital'* (1965) or *Pour Marx* (1965).

One central consequence of Althusser's critique of Hegelianism – namely, that Hegelian philosophy is unable to define the possibility of political action in a *theoretically* valid way – has particular relevance from the point of view of Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli. Althusser's own alternative for understanding political practice, elaborated in his writings from the 1960s and 1970s, was formulated around concepts such as *overdetermination* and *underdetermination*. Althusser's analysis of the 'revolutionary leader Lenin' in his article 'Contradiction et surdétermination' (1962) (in *Pour Marx*) is also particularly relevant from the point of view of the problematic of political practice. Even though Althusser only briefly mentions Machiavelli in this text,[7] it is obvious already at this point that his analysis of Lenin's actions in the Russian conjuncture of 1917 was to some extent influenced by his reading of Machiavelli.[8]

The same applies to Althusser's so-called *self-criticism* from 1966 onwards, which includes viewpoints that are more or less parallel to his interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. For example, the idea in his self-criticism about the revolutionary nature of theory refers to his thesis – also put forward earlier by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) – regarding the revolutionary nature of *The Prince*.

It is important to keep in mind that Althusser's writings about Machiavelli were not all written at the end of the 1970s or in the 1980s. Even though there are few references to Machiavelli in the writings published during his lifetime, he nevertheless stated that he 'discovered' Machiavelli already in the summer of 1964, when on holiday in Italy.[9] According to François Matheron, the editor of the posthumously published works, Althusser lectured on Machiavelli for the first time in 1962 at the École Normale Supérieure

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[7] Althusser 1986, p. 93; Althusser 1979, p. 94.
[8] Cf. Chapter 2.4.
[9] Althusser 1993a, p. 90.

(ENS), as part of his classics lectures, and again in 1972.[10] Althusser kept modifying the manuscript of the 1972 lecture up until 1986. As Matheron states, it is impossible to determine the exact dates of the corrections, additions and cuts to the manuscript. Probably a large part of the corrections was made between 1975 and 1976, and the references (of which there are almost twenty) to 'aleatory' and 'encounter [*rencontre*]' were added during the 1980s.[11] This, however, does not necessarily indicate an abrupt change in Althusser's thinking.[12] Matheron indeed refers briefly to Althusser's notes and letters from the 1960s and 1970s in which he already used the expressions *rencontre* and *conjonction*.[13] For example, the notes dating from 1966 – that is, those notes made almost immediately after the publication of *Lire 'Le Capital'* – include the following comments:

> 1. A theory of encounter or conjunction (= genesis) (cf. Epicurus, clinamen, Cournot) chance, etc., precipitancy, coagulation. 2. A theory of conjuncture (= structure) … philosophy as a general [*générale*] theory of conjuncture (= conjunction).[14]

The background to these comments is probably the analysis in *Lire 'Le Capital'* of the conception of the modes of production and the transition from one mode of production to another, which Étienne Balibar developed in his part

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[10] Matheron 1995, pp. 12–13. Althusser's claim that he 'discovered' Machiavelli in the summer of 1964 (even though he had already lectured about him in 1962) is justified, in the sense that he wrote a new manuscript for the 1972 lecture series whose interpretation differs from the 1962 version. Listing all the differences between the lecture notes would require studying the manuscript for the 1962 lecture series, which is kept at the IMEC Althusser archives in Caen (l'Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine). With regard to the previously mentioned article, 'Contradiction et surdétermination', it is perhaps significant to note that Althusser wrote it the same year (1962) as he gave his first lecture on Machiavelli.

[11] Matheron 1995, pp. 39–41.

[12] The expression 'the aleatory character of the formation of states [*le caractère aléatoire de la formation des Etats*]' also occurs in 'Solitude de Machiavel', that is, Althusser's public lecture from 1977 (Althusser 1990a, p. 36; Althusser 1988, p. 476).

[13] Matheron 1994, pp. 21–2.

[14] Cited in Matheron 1994, p. 21. Antoine Augustin Cournot (1801–77) was a French philosopher, mathematician and economist who developed probability theory and mathematical economics. His works include *Exposition de la théorie des chances et des probabilités* (1843) and *Considérations sur la marche des idées et des événements dans les temps modernes* (2 parts, 1872). As far as is known, Althusser does not comment on Cournot's works, but only refers to this 'great but neglected thinker' in connection with his discussion of aleatoriness (Althusser 1994c, p. 566; Althusser 2006a, p. 193).

of their collaborative book.[15] Thirty years later, Balibar self-critically stated that, at the time of writing his contribution to *Lire 'Le Capital'*, he had not understood much about the nature of historical transition.[16] Althusser's notes show that the problems of historical transition had occupied his mind, too. The debate and critique generated by *Lire 'Le Capital'* were also perhaps a reason for this. It seems that it was in response to these problems that Althusser devised his theories about 'conjunctions' and 'conjunctures'. A systematic development of such theories, however, is not included in Althusser's writings published at the end of the 1960s or during the 1970s. Instead, at the end of 'Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre', written in the 1980s and published after his death, there are a couple of page-long sections, separate from the rest of the text, in which Althusser tries to demonstrate that it is possible to find in Marx's writings both an 'aleatory' and 'essence-materialistic' teleological notion of the conception of the capitalist mode of production; Althusser roundly criticises the latter.[17] On the last page of the manuscript, Althusser refers to *Lire 'Le Capital'* and to the notion that the analysis of the 'double combination' of the means of production and relations of production contained in Balibar's section of their book should be developed further.[18]

On the basis of the above examples, one can surmise that, in the 1980s, Althusser aimed to develop further themes and questions that had been on his mind already much earlier but which he had not spoken about, at least not publicly. Assessed in this light, his writings from the 1980s provide no evidence of any abrupt change in his thinking. Instead, his later writings can be seen as attempts to identify and resolve the questions that had arisen already in his earlier writings.[19]

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[15] Cf. e.g. the chapter 'De la périodisation aux modes de production' in Althusser et al. 1996a, pp. 432–53; Althusser and Balibar 1997, pp. 209–24.

[16] Balibar 1996, p. 115.

[17] Althusser 1994c, pp. 569–76; Althusser 2006a, pp. 196–203.

[18] Althusser 1994c, p. 576; Althusser 2006a, p. 203.

[19] The questions of political theory and practice interested Althusser already in the 1950s, as shown by his study *Montesquieu. La politique et l'histoire* (Althusser 1959). In his 'Soutenance d'Amiens' thesis of 1975, Althusser states that in around 1949–50 he submitted to Jean Hyppolite and Victor Jankélévich an outline for a *grande thèse* on *Politique et philosophie au XVIIIe siècle français* and a *petite thèse* on the *Second Discourse* of J.-J. Rousseau. He also states that he never really abandoned the project (Althusser 1976a, p. 128; Althusser 1990b, p. 205). Furthermore, Althusser says that, already at that time, he was a communist and believed that studying eighteenth-century

One 'perennial question' that occupied Althusser's thought is that of political practice. The working note cited above does not directly refer to the question of politics, but, rather, to the problematic of historical transition in general: how historical conjunctures are conceived and 'coagulate' to form structures and, on the other hand, how history can be understood as conjunctural processes of transition in structures.

Besides Lenin, it is Machiavelli who initiates Althusser into the 'inner' questions of conjunctures and political action as well as the conjunctural problematics of political class struggle. In his autobiography, *L'avenir dure longtemps suivi de Les faits* (1992), Althusser writes that he always had a 'keen and intuitive understanding of the "conjuncture" and its consequences'.[20] Machiavelli's texts – in which the *segretario fiorentino* analyses the conditions for changes in his highly aleatory Italian conjuncture – were of inspiration in the theoretical reflections about such an intuitive understanding:

> Machiavelli was a later discovery, and in my view he went *a lot further than Marx* on a number of issues, for example *in trying to conceive the conditions and kinds of political action in its pure form, that is to say at the conceptual level*. What struck me again was the radical manner in which he took into account the aleatory nature of every conjuncture. In addition, he revealed that what was needed, if Italian national unity was to be achieved, was for a nobody starting with nothing and from nowhere in particular, but outside the framework of an established State, to bring together the fragmented elements of a divided country, without any preconceived notion of unity which might have been formulated in terms of existing political concepts (all of which were bad). We have not yet, I believe, explored all the implications of this piece of political thinking, the first of its kind and sadly without sequel.[21]

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philosophy and politics would provide an introduction to understanding Marx. In his autobiography, Althusser explains how during his incarceration in a German Stalag XA in Schleswig in northern Germany he came to understand how one had to 'come to terms with the imponderables of the situation' as well as gaining an understanding of '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. . . . Machiavelli'. Althusser's theoretical reflections on these rules indeed became a life-long project, in which Machiavelli rose to a central position (Althusser 1992a, p. 95; Althusser 1993c, pp. 103–4).

[20] Althusser 1992a, p. 158; Althusser 1993c, p. 166.
[21] Althusser 1993c, p. 220; my emphasis, translation modified.

For Althusser, Machiavelli is indeed the analyst and theoretician *par excellence* of the conditions and forms of political action. In addition to his opinion that Machiavelli goes beyond Marx in his analysis of political action, Althusser states that he considers Machiavelli 'much more fascinating' as a writer than Marx.[22] In Althusser's opinion, Machiavelli is indeed 'the greatest materialist philosopher in history – the equal of Spinoza'.[23] Machiavelli's appeal for Althusser is further due to 'the radical manner in which he took account of the aleatory nature of every conjuncture [*la prise en compte radicale de la factualité aléatoire de toute conjoncture*]'.[24]

In the case of Machiavelli, however, the terms 'materialism' and 'philosophy' do not allude to any philosophical *system* in which 'material' would be defined as the substance of reality, as opposed to the 'spirit' of idealistic systems; that is, as either materialism or idealism. On the contrary, Machiavelli's materialism, so to speak, lies in the fact that he did *not* construct a philosophical system. He is a writer who, according to Althusser, reopens the *Epicurean tradition* in philosophy.[25] The world of Epicurus was conceived (or 'fixed') in the collision of atoms, as one of them accidentally swerved from its course running parallel to that of other atoms. The world is not the result of the creation of the gods, who are at any rate not interested in what happens in the world. The world has no deeper purpose or *telos* that philosophers could discover and define. With the word 'aleatory' – which refers to dice (Latin: *alea*) and dice-throwing, as well as adventure – Althusser refers to the unpredestined nature or 'arbitrariness' of the collision of atoms. An emphasis on the primary nature of the aleatory is a factor shared – albeit in very different ways – by philosophers of the Epicurean tradition, from Epicurus to Machiavelli and Rousseau through to Marx, Heidegger and Derrida.[26]

The history of philosophy has not, however, been signposted with Epicurean figures. While Sophism had to give way to Platonism, Epicureanism had to

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[22] Althusser 1993a, p. 91.

[23] Althusser 1995a, p. 161; Althusser 1999, p. 103. On the other hand, Althusser states in his autobiography that it was specifically Marx who taught him that 'nominalism was the royal road to materialism' (Althusser 1992a, p. 95; Althusser 1993c, p. 217; cf. Althusser 1992a, p. 203; Althusser 1993c, p. 211).

[24] Althusser 1992a, p. 213; Althusser 1993c, p. 220; translation modified.

[25] Althusser 1993a, p. 99.

[26] Jacques Derrida tells of how Althusser 'flirted' with Heidegger, even though he never referred to him publicly (Derrida 1993, pp. 188–91; see also Spiegel 1997).

give way to philosophical 'storytellers', those who *pictured* different justifiable principles and bases for the world, human beings, and societies:[27]

> 'Principles' should be understood in every sense of the world: first principle or cause or essence, whether these principles are ontological (as in Aristotle or St. Thomas) or moral (as in Saint Thomas when he discusses politics). It is, above all, this total break with all the moral principles of politics that is blinding in Machiavelli; but the transition from moral causes or principles to the ontological causes and principles that presuppose them is an easy one, because one and the same mode of thought is involved.[28]

Machiavelli's materialism, as well as its *philosophical subversiveness*, is based on the notion that he does not invent any moral, juridical or theological origins for the state, but presents in *The Prince* and his other writings

> … an empirical-factual description, a conjunctural description in the full sense of the word, of the really existing state of all the Italian principalities and republics.[29]

For the very reason that the question is only about the empirical-factual definition of *a single* conjuncture, Machiavelli is able to detach himself from the terrain of philosophy and move towards the terrain of political practice. Machiavelli 'theorises political practice', as Althusser states, referring to Gramsci. However, Machiavelli did not theorise practice in general, build a generally applicable theory, or propose a practical philosophy regarding what 'practice' *is*. Instead, he focused and posited his writings within the political conjuncture of his own time and place, of sixteenth-century [*cinquecento*] Italy. Machiavelli was not primarily interested in 'practice' in general, but, rather, the practice of his own time and place, the Italian conjuncture in its uniqueness.

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[27] Althusser states that he had to reconcile his experience as a practising philosopher with his view that philosophy is 'ideologically fraudulent': 'my objective: never to tell myself stories …'. That is, Althusser saw traditional idealist philosophy as a system inventing stories about the original causes, the laws of history, goals, essences, etc. (Althusser 1992a, p. 161; Althusser 1993c, p. 169; cf. also Althusser 1992a, p. 203; Althusser 1993c, p. 211).

[28] Althusser 1993a, pp. 99–100.

[29] Althusser 1993a, p. 100.

1.2. Althusser's contribution to Machiavelli scholarship

In the present study, I strive to show that Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, as the theoretician of the political conjuncture, contains noteworthy contributions both to Machiavelli scholarship and to political theory and philosophy in general.[30] In the following section, I will demonstrate the grounds for such a claim, and outline my analysis of Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli and the *materialism of the encounter*.

1.2.1. The general and the particular

Althusser shows in his interpretation of Machiavelli that the latter's importance, which transcends his own time, does not lie primarily in having proposed universally-valid and effective 'general rules [*regole generali*]' of political practices, but, rather, that he teaches his reader – including also Althusser – to analyse the *particular characteristics* of each political conjuncture at any given time. This does not mean, however, that Machiavelli did not present generalisations about political practice. As I will show later (in Chapter 4.2), the point is whether the *status* of such generalisations is substantially different in scholarship emphasising the connection between Machiavelli and 'modern' science. Machiavelli's general rules are not laws contained in a theoretical system, but rather *constants* recurring from one case to another; knowing what these are may be of use to the political actor when planning a strategy of action. The constants can also be a drawback when one blindly trusts that the present or the future is like the past, thus bringing disaster to the political actor. The reason for this is that the position of 'constants' varies from one case to another; that is, in each case, the 'general' and 'particular' form in a unique way a conjuncture with each other. Likewise, it does not follow that if certain laws prevailed in some earlier case that they would necessarily prevail or have a similar influence also in the actor's own case.

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[30] For example, in the works of Mansfield 1996 and Masters 1996 there are no references at all to Althusser's views, even though 'Solitude de Machiavel' had been published in English already in 1988. The only book on Machiavelli I have come across which refers to Althusser is a French translation of *The Prince* published in 1996. Even then, however, in the beginning of the Foreword, probably written by the book's translator, Jean Vincent Périès, it only cites Althusser's autobiography (Périès 1996, p. 7).

The political situation is indeed characterised by uncertainty. In Machiavelli's texts, the 'odd logic' of political practice – as Althusser characterises it – is encapsulated by the concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna*.[31] Althusser defines *virtù* as a concept through which Machiavelli outlines the political actor's aim to reconcile his deeds in the conditions of the conjuncture characterised by the whims and fluctuations of *fortuna*.

As one can see from the final chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli appeals to an anonymous new prince who would 'raise a banner and unite Italy into an extensive and centralized state'.[32] The new prince was indeed, for Machiavelli, a political actor *par excellence*. Machiavelli's texts open the viewpoint of the '*man of action*' to the political conjuncture. With the expression 'man of action [*homme d'action*]', Althusser refers to the political actor who strives to arrange the matters of the conjuncture so that the latter would promote the implementation of his own goals.[33] Because a *man of action* cannot through his deeds *and* knowledge ever perfectly 'control' the conjuncture, he is forced to take risks. Althusser indeed compares the *man of action* to an adventurer, for instance the typical hero of the American Western film, who arrives in town from nowhere, puts things to right and then exits the stage (see Chapter 4.5.). (One must remember that, in the so-called Wild West, there were also female adventurers, such as Calamity Jane. Nevertheless, I shall stick to the more common phrase *man of action* as this is consistent with Althusser's usage.)

1.2.2. The political praxis of a prince

Althusser shows that *The Prince* is not only a text about the political practices of princes but also a *political act* in itself. Even though the subject of the political action (the agent) presented in the text is the prince, the criteria for this activity are established from the point of view of the 'people' or the 'many' or 'multitude' (*popolo, multitudine, molti*, etc.). This is a question of an alliance

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[31] Althusser 1992a, p. 234; Althusser 1993c, p. 241; and Althusser 1993a, pp. 99–101.

[32] Machiavelli 2004, p. xxvi.

[33] With the expression 'man of action', Althusser also refers to 'real men [*les hommes véritables*]' (Althusser 1992a, p. 94; Althusser 1993c, p. 103) who efficiently organise practical matters, such as those among his fellow prisoners in the German prison camp, where he was a prisoner of war from 1940 to 1945 (cf. Althusser 1992a, Chapter 10 and Althusser 1992b).

between the prince and the people against the 'few', the nobles (*grandi, pochi*, etc.) who oppress them. In the present study, I will show how Machiavelli carries out this subversive political act and what its consequences are.

The radical nature of Machiavelli's political act also shows that *The Prince* is not just some *textbook for how to be a prince* among similar works in this old genre (known as 'a mirror for princes'), but a work that elevates the 'people' as a central factor – although not yet quite the central actor – in political practice.[34] Althusser shows the one-sidedness of both 'Machiavellian' and 'democratic' interpretations of *The Prince*. 'Machiavellian' interpretations are one-sided because, according to them, *The Prince* is merely an amoral *textbook for princes* and rulers generally. This view, however, hides the fact that this is also a question of a 'revolutionary political manifesto', where the political practice of the prince is defined through a political objective as seen from the viewpoint of the people. 'Democratic' interpretations, on the other hand, are also one-sided because, according to them, *The Prince* is a 'republican book', which, by cleverly utilising the textbook genre, reveals to the people the secrets of the amoral practice of princes, so that the people could be liberated from the princes' yoke (as argued by Rousseau) or so that the people would 'moralistically' condemn the politics of princes (as argued by Ugo Foscolo). Such interpretations, however, do not take into account the viewpoint – raised by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* – that, according to Machiavelli, the people need as their leader a 'new prince' who has the necessary political skills.

1.2.3. Aleatory dynamics

Althusser manages to open up Machiavelli's 'dynamic' conception of political practice. The picture that emerges of Machiavelli's thinking is rather different from that found, for instance, in Quentin Skinner's interpretation, which has received much attention in recent decades. According to Skinner, Machiavelli's 'political dynamics', circling around the notions of *virtù* and *fortuna*, remain in the shadow of a sort of 'political statics' concerning 'republicanism', which in

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[34] For the history of the genre 'Mirrors for the Princes' in Renaissance Italy, see Skinner 1978, pp. 33–41 and pp. 116–38; see also Skinner 1990, pp. 121–41, in which he to some extent revises his earlier interpretation of Machiavelli's relationship to the humanist-republican tradition.

itself is meritorious but formalistic.[35] Even though Skinner pays attention to the notion that it is not possible to found a republic in a state of advanced corruption but, rather, being liberated from corruption requires the autocratic action of a single person, he does not analyse the logic of political practice linked with the problematics of corruption and liberation from it. Instead, he concentrates mainly on the 'end result' of the process, namely, the republic (and in Machiavelli's republican ideas), which, according to him, is Machiavelli's preferred form of government.[36]

Althusser manages better than Skinner in getting to grips with the 'dynamics' of political action.[37] This happens specifically with the help of his Epicurean 'aleatory logic'. In his interpretation, the most essential question does not concern, for instance, whether or not Machiavelli supported 'republican' or 'monarchist' forms of government or perhaps a combination of the two. It is more important to analyse the logic of the actions of political actors and groups of actors than such already 'fixed' forms, because they try to use the aleatory situations to their advantage and cope within them. As I try to show in the final chapter, this aim to govern the aleatory reality can be characterised as 'taming chance'.[38] One historical response to a highly aleatory situation has been to found a republic, or, alternatively, a monarchy or a mixed form of gov-

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[35] For Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli, cf. Skinner 1978 and Skinner 1979.

[36] Skinner 1978, especially p. 124; cf. also Skinner 1979, pp. 64–79.

[37] My critique may seem strange in relation to Skinner's emphasis on concepts and concept changes in political struggles. However, I agree with Kari Palonen, who shows how 'Skinner's interest, even in concept changes, is primarily on the rhetorical level, in other words, concerned with the legitimisation rather than the explication of conceptual novelties and conflicts, and rather on the level of established language use than the construction of profiled conceptions' (Palonen 1997, p. 140). To this I would add that Skinner's interest is directed at the conceptual-rhetorical manifestations of political conflicts and not other kinds of 'less rhetorical' functional dimensions of conflicts and their logic. By this, I do not mean that rhetoric would not be an essential part of political activity or that rhetoric would not also exist 'materially', but rather that political action is not merely a question of rhetoric, nor must the history of political thinking be analysed only by means of a research method concerned with rhetoric or conceptual history.

[38] The expression the 'taming of chance', comes from Ian Hacking (cf. e.g., Hacking 1990 and 1991). His central argument is that the erosion of classical Laplacian determinism in the nineteenth century did not lead to an emphasis on freedom, but rather to the taming of chance, which was evident in both theory and social practice. This meant, for instance, an alliance between statistics and the control of the population (cf. Hacking 1991, p. 185).

ernment. Even though not even Althusser denies that Machiavelli's thinking would not include republican elements and preferences (cf. the viewpoint of the people in *The Prince*), it is more important to pay attention to the conditions of each historical conjuncture (cf. the necessity of the arrival of the new prince in *The Prince*), during which the political action occurs and becomes possible.

For Althusser, the point is to elaborate the aleatory and case-specific nature of political practice, for instance, in the founding of a new state or form of government. In Althusser's interpretation, Machiavelli's *The Prince* and his other works are theoretical analyses of aleatory situations and series of events. Understood this way, the problematics of *virtù* and *fortuna* refer to political action with no guarantee of success (it is in this sense that we can understand aleatoriness as adventure). Even though the republican form of government would be the ultimate political goal, the conjuncture does not necessarily offer realistic opportunities for such an 'attachment'. For instance, in Machiavelli's own historical context, the new prince and the principality led by him – the foundation of a kind of monarchy – was also a weak aleatory possibility. Not a single existing city state, prince or principality had what it took to be a model for the new principality, and there was no new prince looming on the Italian horizon. One opportunity had opened and closed, namely Cesare Borgia and his troops. But even his aleatory adventure, which had begun successfully, culminated in disaster due to the fateful whims of *fortuna* (cf. Chapter 5.5).

1.2.4. 'Verità effettuale della cosa' – 'The effective truth'

According to Althusser, one of the main reasons why Machiavelli can be defined as a *theoretician of the conjuncture* is that he studied the conjunctures of both the past and his own time from the point of view of the 'verità effettuale della cosa', that is, 'the effective truth'. As already mentioned, according to Althusser, Machiavelli presents 'empirical-factual' descriptions of conjunctures. This is an important observation because it enables the critique and surpassing of antagonistic dualisms such as 'real'–'imaginary', 'authentic'–'artificial' or 'moral'–'political'. The problematic of the *effective truth* of Althusser's materialistic interpretation is evident, for instance, in relation to the prince and the people. Althusser characterises the prince as 'the first

ideological state apparatus',[39] which functions by means of the effective truth. The prince's apparatus materialises in his institutions and practices as well as in the strategies through which he influences such materially existing institutions (such as the Church) that produce and renew moral-religious beliefs and fantasies.

As is well known, Machiavelli argued that there are two ways of fighting, by law or by force, and that the first way is natural to men and the second to beasts. This led to his well-known argument that a prince must understand how to make use of both the beast and the man. In terms of beasts, he gives the specific examples of the fox and the lion: one must be a fox in order to recognise traps and a lion in order to frighten off wolves.[40] According to Althusser,[41] the prince requires the 'instinct of a fox' in order to realise when to appear honest in the eyes of the people and when to appear cruel, when to appear virtuous or whatever. He emphasises that Machiavelli's prince has no 'essence'; he *is* not 'good' or 'bad', but, rather, his 'essence' lies in the notion that he can appear the way that he should in each situation in order to achieve what he wants.

1.2.5. Morals and politics

It follows from the above argument that the thesis repeated in the standard politics textbooks, namely that 'Machiavelli separated politics from morals', is problematic.[42] In the light of Althusser's interpretation of the practice of the prince, one can see that Machiavelli by no means separated politics from morals but rather, on the contrary, that he *'politicised' morals*. In other words, he studied morals, as well as religion and justice, from the point of view of the effective truth. He assesses and teaches others to assess moral, religious and juridical principles, discourses or doctrines according to their effective truth. It becomes evident from Machiavelli's correspondence, for example, that he

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[39] Althusser 1993a, p. 106.
[40] Machiavelli 2004, p. xviii.
[41] Althusser 1993a, p. 93.
[42] The thesis goes back at least to Benedetto Croce, in his writings about Machiavelli from the end of the 1920s (Croce 1981, p. 205; for other examples see Cochrane 1961, pp. 113–36).

was deeply interested in what makes people believe that there are 'deeper' moral-religious principles behind the existing world.

Seen in this light, Skinner's interpretation – according to which Machiavelli only abandons Christian morals and virtue ethics but not morality as such – remains incomplete. According to Skinner, the question is not about the contrast between 'a moral view of politics' and 'a view of politics as divorced from morality', but 'the essential contrast is rather between two different moralities'. Machiavelli is not without morality, that is, 'immoral', but his morality is contained within the admonition that the prince must by any means available 'maintain his state [*mantenere lo stato*]'.[43] However, Skinner does not take into account the other side of the matter, namely, specifically in what way Machiavelli is interested in the Christian morals of his time as the effective truth. The problem with Skinner's viewpoint – apart from being anachronistic – is that he understands morality, like philosophy itself, as a question about good and evil, and not as an essential dimension of the *political* practice established from the viewpoint of the effective truth, as does the object of his research – namely, Machiavelli.

1.2.6. Materialist political theory

Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli and his concept of the aleatory are significant contributions to political theory. He outlines his notion of an 'aleatory Machiavelli' and, with the help of the Epicurean tradition, also a theory of materialist politics that opens up a view of politics as an action occurring in a conjuncture where each actor aims to organise and govern the *effective truth*, but where no single party can ever be certain about their victory. And each victory can only be temporary. Even every 'fixed' political form of organisation rests on an uncertain aleatory foundation. Aleatory logic, indeed, refers to the fact that there is a struggle at the centre of politics, whereas the state of peace is a displaced form of struggle. Therefore, the Althusserian theory of politics is the theory of struggles and conflicts characterised by displacements and condensations within the effective truth.

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[43] Skinner 1978, pp. 134–5.

This does not mean, however, that political action could not strive for a world better than the existing one. On the contrary, Althusser was interested in how the revolutionary political movement should operate in order for its strategy to be both effective and 'utopian'. As he shows in the case of Machiavelli, 'utopia' does not, however, refer to the construction of an abstract ideal society but to a political goal, the attainment of which requires a theoretical analysis of the historical conjuncture and the political action that effectively utilises and adapts the conditions of the conjuncture.[44]

1.3. The approach of the present study

The present study can be described as a philosophical-theoretical conceptual analysis of Althusser's interpretation of an 'aleatory Machiavelli'. Additionally, the aim, particularly in the last main chapter (Chapter 5) is to further develop certain viewpoints in Althusser's interpretation, such as his analysis of the relationship between the prince and the 'people' in *The Prince*.

In the first main chapter (Chapter 2) I focus on those writings published during Althusser's lifetime. Of these, I give particular emphasis to those theoretical viewpoints that create a basis for understanding his posthumously-published writings on Machiavelli. I will pay less attention to the historical context of Althusser's own writing, the French political conjunctures and debates from the 1940s to the 1980s, so that the study can remain a sufficiently compact conceptual-theoretical introduction to Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli (I will look at Althusser's intellectual-political battles in Chapter 2.3, as an introduction to his self-criticism). Instead, the last main chapter (Chapter 5) contains sections clarifying Machiavelli's historical and

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[44] Unlike his contemporary Francesco Guicciardini, Machiavelli is not content with studying only the *internal relationships* between the social groups in power, that is, the relationships between the nobles and the *actual* political actors (the actual 'citizens'), but, instead, focuses on the relationships between the rulers and those being ruled. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Neal Wood's interpretation of the difference between Machiavelli's thinking and the political theory of classical antiquity. According to Wood, the difference lies specifically in the fact that Machiavelli brings to the theory of politics a new potential group of actors, the 'many' (Wood 1990, pp. lvii–lix).

conceptual-historical context. This is necessary so that the theoretical analysis of the relationship between the prince and the 'people' does not become anachronistic.[45] This latter interpretation will be presented and analysed in Chapters 3 and 4.

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[45] Typical of the use of language of the time, in Machiavelli's writings there are several definitions for the various groups of people. *Not* among them, however, is the word *nazione* [nation] in the sense of a 'nation-state'. The word 'people' here refers to Italian expressions such as *popolo*, *molti* (or many) and *multitudine*. I will discuss these questions in more detail in Chapter 5. Mostly, however, I will use the expressions 'few [*pochi*]' and 'many [*molti*]' when referring to the struggles between the aristocratic and lower classes of the city-states.

Chapter Two

A Critique of Hegelianism

The following critique of Hegelianism is based primarily on the section of 'Soutenance d'Amiens' (a text containing the main arguments with which Althusser presented his submission for the degree of *doctorat d'État* at the University of Picardy) entitled 'La dernière instance . . .' ['The Last Instance . . .']. In this text, first published in *La Pensée* in 1975, Althusser summarises the critical starting points and goals of his interpretation of Marxism. The 'Soutenance d'Amiens' was later republished in the collection titled *Positions*, which contains Althusser's writings from 1964 to 1975. It was first published in English in 1976 with the title 'Is It Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?' in *Essays in Self-Criticism*.

Dating from this same period is Althusser's *Éléments d'autocritique* from 1972,[1] which I will also discuss in the following critique. *Éléments d'autocritique* is relevant in the present study because, amongst other things, it is here that Althusser discusses the question of the 'revolutionary nature of theory', which is an essential element in his interpretation of Machiavelli. This very issue also arises in Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which he calls a 'revolutionary political manifesto'.

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[1] Althusser 1974; English translation: Althusser 1976b.

2.1. A critique of Hegelian dialectics

Althusser's starting point in 'La dernière instance ...', as the title indicates, is the much-debated formulation by Engels in his letter to Joseph Bloch in September 1890.[2]

> According to the materialist conception of history, the determining element in the last instance in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit [...] – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.[3]

According to Althusser, Marx and Engels's modest-looking expression that *the economy determines in the last instance*, 'in fact upsets the whole ruling conception of society and history'.[4] Furthermore,

> Not enough attention has been paid to the figure or metaphor in which Marx presents his conception of a society in the Preface to the 1859 *Contribution*. This figure is that of a *topography*: that is, of a spatial apparatus which assigns positions in space to given realities.

> Marxist topography presents society in terms of the metaphor of an edifice whose upper floors rest, as the logic of an edifice would have it, on foundations. The foundation is in German *die Basis* or *die Struktur*, which is tradition-

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[2] Cf. also Engels's letter to Conrad Schmidt (27 October 1890) (Engels 2005a, p. 57 et sqq).
[3] Engels 2005b, pp. 33–6.
[4] Althusser 1976a, p. 138; Althusser 1990b, p. 213.

ally translated as *base* or more often *infrastructure*: it is the economy, the unity of the productive forces and relations of production under the dominance of the relations of production. From the base of the ground floor rise the upper floor or floors of the *Überbau*, in translation the legal-political and ideological superstructure.[5]

The point here is not that the topography of the base and the superstructure has not been researched and interpreted,[6] but rather that the *epochal subversive* meaning of the topography in relation to thinking about society and history has not been understood. Thus, the decisive difference of the topography (presented by Marx) in relation to the notion of history and society in Hegel's dialectics has also not been understood. In his own interpretation of Marx, Althusser sets himself the task of defining this decisive difference as well as showing the epochal meaning of this difference: he strives 'to understand what Marxism *means* [*de comprendre ce que marxisme* veut dire]'.[7]

As Althusser sees it, one central difference between Hegelian and Marxist dialectics is that 'Hegel thought of society as a *totality* [*totalité*], while Marx thought of it as a complex *whole*, [*tout*] structured in dominance'.[8] The concepts of *totality* and *whole* differ decisively:

> If I preferred to reserve for Marx the category of the whole rather than that of the totality, it is because within the totality a double temptation is always present: that of considering it as a pervasive essence which exhaustively embraces all of its manifestations, and – what amounts to the same thing – that of discovering in it, as in a circle or a sphere (a metaphor which makes us think of Hegel once again), a centre which would be its essence.[9]

According to Althusser, in Hegel's philosophical system, society and history manifest themselves as an 'expressive totality [*totalité expressive*]':

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[5] Althusser 1976a, p. 138; Althusser 1990b, pp. 213–14, Althusser's emphasis.

[6] When Althusser refers to *topique* (topography), he probably had in mind Freud, who spoke of topological expressions and concepts when 'locating' psychological phenomena (see, e.g., Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, pp. 503–9).

[7] Althusser 1976a, p. 127; Althusser 1990b, p. 205. Althusser's emphasis.

[8] Althusser 1976a, p. 144; Althusser 1990b, p. 219; Althusser's emphasis.

[9] Althusser 1976a, pp. 144–5; Althusser 1990b, p. 219.

> … in which all the elements are total parts, each expressing the internal unity
> of the totality which is only ever, in all its complexity, the objectification-
> alienation of a simple principle. […] And borrowing from Montesquieu
> the idea that in a historical totality all concrete determinations, whether
> economic, political, moral or even military, express one single principle,
> Hegel conceives history in terms of the category of the expressive total-
> ity.[10]

Even though Althusser does not deny that Hegel took into account, for in-
stance in his *Philosophy of Right* [*Rechtsphilosophie*] (1821), political, moral and
military definitions, it inevitably – 'logically' – follows from the *general nature*
of his philosophical system that the internal and mutual differences and
contradictions between such *concrete definitions* are, in the last instance, merely
apparent and not actually *real*: 'these differences are always affirmed only to be
denied and transcended in other differences … [*les différences ne s'affirment que
pour se nier et se dépasser dans d'autres différences*]'.[11] In the *Philosophy of Right* and
in the introduction to *History of Philosophy*, this is manifested in the process of
the negation of the negation, where different circles unfold, each in turn 'so as
to find their truth in the State [*pour trouver leur vérité dans l'État*]'.[12]

In Hegel's dialectical system, history becomes an enclosed circle:

> A circle is closed, and the corresponding notion of totality presupposes that
> one can grasp all the phenomena exhaustively, and then reassemble them
> within the simple unity of its centre.[13]

The apparent nature of differences means that the basis of the Hegelian
dialectic is *conservative*. The mutual conflicts between the differences and
spheres are 'justified' only by participating in the development of the totality.
No single part or sphere of the system has its 'own' autonomous history and
modus of logic. Another way to characterise this is to say that, despite the
multitude of spheres and differences, there exists only 'Universal History',[14]

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[10] Althusser 1976a, p. 145; Althusser 1990b, p. 219.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.; cf. Althusser 1986, p. 107; Althusser 1979, p. 108.
[13] Althusser 1976a, pp. 145–6; Althusser 1990b, p. 220.
[14] Althusser 1986, p. 180; Althusser 1979, p. 178.

which is the history of the totality or 'self-development of the Spirit', which, in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, takes the form of world history.

The internal and mutual differences and contradictions of parts or spheres are not *real*. Their development expresses 'one and the same basic principle', the history of *totality* and its law of development. This is a question of the endless but *teleological* movement of theses, antitheses, and syntheses towards a centre, towards a State or Absolute Spirit, where 'the harmony of a higher degree' is realised. In this way, the centre of the totality becomes the immanent goal [*telos*] of Universal History, which affects all events of history. Thus Hegel's dialectic is *teleological*, as Althusser argues in his essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', referring to the idea of the *Ruse of Reason*:

> For Hegel, material life (civil society, that is, the economy) is merely a *Ruse of Reason*. Apparently autonomous, it is subject to a law outside itself: its own Goal, which is simultaneously its condition of possibility, the State, that is, spiritual life.[15]

Seen from a different angle, this means that understanding some sphere and the modus of logic of its parts requires their *derivation* from the basic principles of the law of development of the totality. Whatever happens, this is ultimately explained through the history of the totality. No matter how surprising or exceptional some event may seem, any surprise or exception can *in principle* be derived from the law of development of the totality.

Even though, in Hegel's dialectic, the question is indeed about the *spontaneous* self-development of Spirit (something which, Althusser notes, Marx guards himself against)[16] – i.e. an *immanent* process – the totality cannot have an 'outside'. Irrespective of this, due to the logic of the expressive totality, the Hegelian dialectic ends up with *theoretical* anomalies with regard to the problematic of freedom. Even though the process as a whole (the self-development of Spirit) is characterised by freedom, the parts of the process nevertheless have no real freedom at all. The contradictions are apparent contradictions because they are solved in a synthesis at a higher level, which, in regard to civil society, is represented by the state.

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[15] Althusser 1986, p. 107; Althusser 1979, p. 108; Althusser's emphasis.
[16] Cf. Althusser 1976a, p. 139; Althusser 1990b, p. 215.

Interpreted *logically*, this means that it is not possible to interfere with the course of history because it is determined by the law of development of the whole and the *telos* of history that this describes.[17] From this goal of history, which has an influence already at the beginning of history – as Althusser later characterises the issue[18] – it follows that the Hegelian dialectic cannot theoretically justify the actual possibilities of political practice, as Althusser states, sounding somewhat like Baron von Münchhausen:

> I made the point in passing: no politics have ever been seen in the world which were inspired by Hegel. For where can you get a hold on the circle when you are caught in the circle?[19]

Thus, the Hegelian dialectic contains the thought of *necessity*. From the point of view of the parts of the totality, this means that the solution offered by the Hegelian dialectic to the problem of freedom is *idealistic* and *speculative*.[20]

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[17] One must note that Althusser acknowledges that to his merit Hegel rejected 'every philosophy of the Origin and of the Subject' (Althusser 1976a, p. 141; Althusser 1990b, p. 216). Althusser sees a connection between Hegel and Marx in that each realised that the subject is not its own origin: '. . . that you must never judge someone on the basis of his own self-conscious image but on the basis of the whole process which, behind this consciousness, produces it [. . . *qu'il ne faut jamais juger quiconque sur sa conscience de soi, mais sur le procès d'ensemble qui, dans le dos de sa conscience, produit cette conscience*]' (ibid.). Admittedly, Althusser adds the remark that Marx was close to Hegel just in respect to those features which Hegel had openly borrowed from Spinoza. However, when freeing himself from the subject-centred philosophies, Hegel produces a new subject. This new 'great subject' is 'Spirit', which ties together the histories of its parts into one Universal History.
[18] Althusser 1995a, p. 561.
[19] Althusser 1976a, p. 146; Althusser 1990b, p. 220.
[20] Wallis Suchting poignantly characterises the determinism, teleology and conservativeness of Hegel's dialectics as follows: 'First, for Hegel the field of the dialectics is, in the final analysis, that of ideas, of essences. The unities in question are the unity of the aspects of an essence. Second, since development is basically the unfolding of the nature of these essences, it is necessary and characterized by an immanent goal or *telos*. So, in Hegel, Spirit is essentially rational freedom and the source of the dialectical development the conflict between the necessity for Spirit to attain its *telos* and the various successive inadequate conditions for this to occur. Third, insofar as the system has an immanent *telos* the development envisaged is one towards reconciliation of conflicts in a larger harmony; hence the Hegelian dialectic is conservative in its very foundations and not merely as a consequence of certain historical and personal factors. . . . Fourth, since the field can be achieved *a priori* as regards basics if not as regards all empirical details' (Suchting 1983, p. 181).

That does not mean, however, that, in Althusser's opinion, the dialectic should be abandoned *tout à fait*, but, rather, that for Marx its *status* must be other than in Hegelianism.[21] With Marx, the dialectic does indeed receive its meaning only through the fact that its basic principles are materialistic:

> In submitting the dialectic to the constraints of the topography, Marx is sub-mitting it to the real conditions of its operation, he is protecting it from spec-ulative folly, he is forcing it into a materialist mould, forcing it to recognize that its own figures are prescribed by the material character of its own con-ditions.[22]

The danger is that the dialectic becomes a mystical, speculative and idealistic historical-philosophical *system* that takes the place of reality, as occurred in the actual object of the Hegelian critique proposed by Althusser, namely Hegelian-Marxism (see Chapter 2.3).[23] There one ends up on a theoretical ground where the dialectical system begins to 'decide' the reality: 'Thinking, Spirit, produces this world literally from itself, and thus itself as this world' as W.F. Haug states critically, referring to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.[24]

In order to avoid idealistic temptations, it is not enough, however, that the Hegelian 'spirit' be replaced by 'materia'. This in itself does not yet lead to a different kind of theoretical ground. Even in its materialistic variant, the dialectical system remains primary in relation to its 'materiality'; in other words, the movement on the ground of idealism continues.

The often repeated statement from Marx, that in order to de-mystify Hegel's dialectic it is enough to 'stand it on its feet' is, indeed, according to Althusser, just a figure of speech.[25] It is does not tell the whole truth about the deci-sive difference between the dialectics of Hegel and Marx.[26] Understanding this

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[21] During the last years of his life Althusser seems to have thought that all dialectics – even Marxist dialectics – were very problematic (Althusser 1994b, pp. 128–9). On the other hand, he emphasised already in his writings from the 1960s that dialectics was inferior to materialism.

[22] Althusser 1976a, p. 140; Althusser 1990b, p. 215.

[23] Althusser 1976a, pp. 141–2; Althusser 1990b, p. 215.

[24] Haug 1984, pp. 32–3.

[25] Althusser 1976a, p. 143; Althusser 1990b, p. 218.

[26] According to François Matheron, the notion of 'turning Hegel on his feet' is insufficient for Althusser, because 'an inversion does not modify the *structure* of a relationship' (Matheron 1995, p. 15; my emphasis). In other words, the metaphor of turning something on its feet is on its own insufficient for emphasising the theoretical

decisive difference requires that one traces 'a line back [in Marx] from the conclusions to the materialistic premises of the dialectic [*aux prémisses matérial-istes*]'.[27] Marx himself did not theoretically explicate such premises but, according to Althusser, the 'new categories' that follow the materialist premises are in a 'practical state' in both *Capital* and Lenin's writings.[28]

But what are these 'materialist premises' if the criteria of materialism is deemed insufficient when 'Spirit' is replaced by 'materia'?

According to Althusser, the answer is hidden specifically in the *change of terrain*, which occurs when one moves from the logic of the expressive totality of the Hegelian philosophical system – irrespective of whether its content is 'spirit' or 'materia' – to a 'new philosophical practice', as he argues in his lecture 'La transformación de la filosofia',[29] held at the Universidad de Granada in 1976. The central theme of the lecture is the critique of existing philosophies, to be replaced by a 'new kind of philosophical practice'. The lecture also offers an interesting angle on how Althusser defines both materialism and materialistic dialectics.

Althusser begins his lecture by stating that the term 'Marxist philosophy' presents an internal paradox because 'Marxist philosophy exists, yet it has not been produced as "philosophy"'.[30] When dismantling this paradox, he refers to the fact that all philosophies up to the present have been produced as 'philosophies'. The existence of such philosophies is justified (at least in the new era) in rational and theoretical systems 'that generate discourses, treatises and other systematic writings, which can be isolated and identified as "philosophy" in the history of culture'.[31] Thus, philosophy differentiates itself from other discourses and bodies of writing, above all from

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change of terrain from philosophy to social practices. For a discussion of this change of terrain from the philosophical meaning to the ideological-theoretical meaning, cf. Haug 1984, pp. 9–95; Koivisto and Pietilä 1997.

[27] Althusser 1976a, p. 143; Althusser 1990b, p. 218.

[28] Ibid. Cf. also Althusser 1990b, p. 261. For example, in *Lire 'Le Capital'* (written 1964–5), *Lénine et la philosophie* (written 1968) and 'Marx et Lénine devant Hegel' (written 1968), Althusser aims to theorise the conceptual and theoretical starting points that are in a 'practical state' in Marx and Lenin's writings (cf. also Althusser 1976a, p. 144; Althusser 1990b, p. 230).

[29] Althusser 1990b, pp. 241–65.

[30] Althusser 1990b, p. 243.

[31] Ibid.

science.[32] However, this is not only a matter of differentiation but also of philosophy placing itself above the sciences as a 'highest science' or 'science of sciences':

> … declaring that it alone possesses their truth, installs itself in power over the sciences, which supply the model of its own rational and systematic discourse.[33]

Producing philosophy as 'philosophy' thus leads to philosophy placing itself in a position from where it argues that it can subject all human ideas and human practices to a 'radical "philosophical form"'.[34] Philosophy also argues that it can tell the truth about all human ideas and practices. Thus *truth* and, furthermore, differentiating the truth from the untruth or right from wrong becomes a characteristic feature of the philosophical discourse.[35] In regard to Hegel's philosophy, this means, as Althusser puts it, that 'philosophy thinks the whole'.[36] He continues:

> In fact, all the social practices are there in philosophy – not just money, wages, politics and the family, but all social ideas, morality, religion, science and art, in the same way that the stars are in the sky. If everything is there, if everything is perfectly collected and united in the interior of philosophy, where is its exterior space? Is it perhaps that the real world, the material world, does not exist for all philosophies?[37]

This, of course, is not even the case in the view of the solipsistic idealist, but 'Bishop Berkeley was a man like any other'.[38] The question is about a conjuror's trick, which, by using philosophy, takes the 'outside' into control by sucking it 'inside' itself:

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[32] Althusser 1990b, p. 244. When including Heidegger in the underground current of the materialism of the encounter, Althusser argues that he has often been subjected to idealistic interpretations, along with other aleatory materialists, which has meant covering up and rejecting the radical nature of his philosophy (cf. Chapter 3).

[33] Althusser 1990b, p. 245.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Althusser 1990b, p. 249.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

> In truth, philosophy's exterior space must be sought within philosophy itself, in this appropriation of extra-philosophical space to which social practices are subjected, in this operation of exploitation, and hence deformation, of social practices that permits philosophy to unify such practices under the Truth.[39]

Along with this 'absorption', philosophy is turned into an ideological practice. Philosophers do indeed argue that they deal with 'eternal questions', even though at the same time they understand that they deal with questions that, while being 'eternal', also have an importance in their own time. When telling the 'truth' about eternally burning questions, the latter simultaneously position themselves in the field of existing ideologies:

> Philosophy is neither a gratuitous operation nor a speculative activity. Pure, unsullied speculation indulges its self-conception. But the great philosophers already had a very different consciousness of their mission. They knew that they were responding to the great practical political questions: how could they orientate themselves in thought and in politics? What was to be done? What direction should they take? They even knew that these political questions were historical questions. That is, although they lived them as eternal questions, they knew that these questions were posed by the vital interests of the society for which they were thinking. But they certainly did not know what Marx enables us to understand and which I should like to convey in a few words. Indeed, it seems to me that one cannot understand the task, determinant in the last instance, of philosophy except in relation to the exigencies of the class struggle in ideology – in other words, the central question of hegemony, of the constitution of the dominant ideology. What we have seen occurring in philosophy – *that reorganization and ordered positioning of social practices and ideas within a systematic unity under Truth* – all this, which apparently transpires very far from the real, in philosophical abstraction, we can of course see being produced in a comparable, almost superimposed (but not simultaneously), form in the ideological class struggle.[40]

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[39] Althusser 1990b, p. 250.
[40] Althusser 1990b, pp. 258–9; my emphasis.

Seen in this light, the Hegelian system turns out to be an *imaginary* and speculative solution to contradictions occurring in real material practices. From the point of view of understanding the materialism of the Marxist dialectic, it is important to note that the base and superstructure are not components of the philosophical system with the help of which Marx would have aimed to build his own system as an alternative 'social philosophy' or 'philosophy of history'. This, in turn, makes it understandable why Althusser, in several instances, emphasises the primacy of materialism in relation to dialectics. It is no longer a question of the internal 'materiality' of the philosophical system but that the *social practices* (social praxis) are primary in regard to theory and the dialectic.[41] Fulfilling this demand requires developing a new type of science that can *theorise those practices*, that can deal with the differences and contradictions occurring in them as *real* differences and contradictions instead of them being solved 'philosophically':

> Marx was the first to show us the way by putting philosophy into practice in a new and disconcerting form, refusing to produce a philosophy as 'philosophy' but practising it in his political, critical and scientific work – in short, inaugurating a new, 'critical and revolutionary' relation between philosophy and the social practices, which are at one and same time the stakes and the privileged site of class struggle. This new practice of philosophy serves the proletarian class struggle without imposing upon it an oppressive ideological unity … but rather creating for it the ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices.[42]

In other words, one must develop a 'philosophical' theory that does not represent imaginary solutions or political dogmas for those people battling with practical problems, but instead one must offer theoretical support to those

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[41] In a letter to Fernanda Navarro, dated 8 April 1986 (Althusser 1994b, pp. 128–9; Althusser 2006a, p. 242), Althusser states that 'the dialectic … is more than dubious; indeed it is harmful, that is, always more or less teleological'. Althusser also states that he would like to demonstrate this, if he has enough energy to do so. It seems more than likely that he never undertook such a task, as the posthumously published writings end in 1986 and they contain no such critique of dialectics. On the other hand, one must note that, in his texts from the 1980s, Althusser does not mention dialectics, but instead aims to develop a *materialist* philosophy that would detach itself from all kinds of teleological and (in their teleological nature) idealistic ways of thinking.

[42] Althusser 1990b, p. 265.

actually solving those practical problems.[43] This approach, which subjugates theory to practice, yet at the same time retains the requirement of high quality scientific theory, also characterises Althusser's theoretical aims, particularly his self-criticism, which I will discuss later (Chapter 2.3).

2.2. Althusser's Marxism

In this chapter, I will discuss certain concepts concerning Marxism that Althusser put forward in the 1960s and 1970s: overdetermination, underdetermination, the revolutionary nature of theory, the nature of the actions of the political actor and the question of the 'last instance'. The discussion will prepare the basis for an understanding of the problematics of Althusser's aleatory materialism.

In 'Soutenance d'Amiens', Althusser characterises Marxist theory as follows:

> Marx says only that you must distinguish, that the distinctions are real, irreducible, that in the order of determination the share of the base and that of the superstructure are unequal, and that this inequality or unevenness in dominance is constitutive of the unity of the whole, which therefore can no longer be the expressive unity of a simple principle all of whose elements would be the phenomena.[44]

The task of Marxist theory is to make a theoretical distinction in order to understand the differences existing in real social practices – in Lenin's words, 'the concrete analysis of a concrete situation [*l'analyse concrète d'une situation concrète*]'.[45] However, Althusser does not claim that the 'base' or the 'superstructure' as such exist in reality. As mentioned earlier, it is a question of a metaphor, 'the theoretical-practical apparatus of a topography, a means of practically grasping the world [*le dispositif théorico-pratique d'une topique, le moyen d'une*

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[43] As will become clearer later, the question of the *positioning* of Marxist theory and philosophy is particularly emphasised in Althusser's self-critique.

[44] Althusser 1976a, p. 146; Althusser 1990b, p. 220.

[45] Althusser 1976a, p. 158; Althusser 1990b, p. 229; cf. also Althusser 1986, pp. 212 and 224; Althusser 1979, pp. 206 and 218.

prise pratique sur le monde]'.[46] Topography must not take the place of reality, but present society in terms of the '*metaphor* of an edifice whose upper floors rest, as the logic of an edifice would have it, on its foundation [*dans la métaphore d'un édifice, dont les étages reponsent, en bonne logique d'édifice, sur sa base*]'.[47]

In order to understand Althusser's theoretical aims, it is indeed important to note that he attempted to develop the theoretical means to open the way to the empirical phenomena on which theory is based, and which are manifested for active subjects at the level of perceptions. From this premise, however, it does not follow that paying attention to the notion of determination by the economy 'in the last instance' would mean that a 'pure' or 'real' economy or 'primary contradiction' could be found somewhere beneath the surface, but, rather, that the prevailing relations of production in capitalism (the antagonistic contradiction between labour and capital) influence, for instance, the articulation of events that manifest themselves in the empirical reality as everyday political disputes.[48]

One must also note that Althusser uses the concept of 'whole [*un tout*]' instead of 'totality [*une totalité*]', or more specifically 'a differentiated, therefore complex and articulated whole [*un tout différencié, donc complexe et articulé*]'.[49] By the term 'whole', he refers to the *social formation*, which, apart from the base and superstructure, contains different 'incidental costs and their failures [*faux frais et de leurs déchets*]'.[50]

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[46] Althusser 1976a, p. 147; Althusser 1990b, p. 221; cf. Machiavelli 2004, pp. 88–9, Althusser 1971, pp. 141–2 (see also Althusser 1995b, pp. 275–6).

[47] Althusser 1976a, p. 138; Althusser 1990b, pp. 213–14; my emphasis. According to Gramsci, it is obvious to everyone that the skeleton constitutes the basis of man's anatomy, but nobody assumes that man's skin is merely an illusion. With a tone of irony, Gramsci declares that no woman (sic.) falls in love with a mere skeleton (Gramsci 1975, p. 1321).

[48] Althusser writes that, with the term 'Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)', he refers to 'a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialised institutions' (Althusser 1976a, pp. 82–3; Althusser 1971, pp. 136). He goes on to say that while it is clear that there is one Repressive State Apparatus, there is a plurality of ISAs, but that 'even presupposing that it exists, the unity that constitutes this plurality of ISAs as a body is not immediately visible' (ibid.).

[49] Althusser 1976a, p. 140; Althusser 1990b, p. 215.

[50] Althusser 1976a, p. 146; Althusser 1990b, p. 220. In regard to 'surpluses [*déchets*]', Althusser states: 'Nor does he [Marx] say that everything must fall into these categories, but everything is either infrastructure or superstructure. You could even argue for the idea, essential to *Capital*, that the Marxist theory of societies and of history implies a whole theory of their incidental costs and their failures' (Althusser 1976a, p. 146; Althusser 1990b, p. 220). In his autobiography, Althusser refers to the same thing when

Even though the whole is characterised by differentiation and complexity, the question is about an *articulated* whole that has certain structural and relatively established properties. The question is, in other words, not about a chaotic and structureless formation. Despite differentiation, the parts of the whole are not isolated from one another or arbitrarily organised, nor are they as such the result of pure accident, but, rather, different interactive relationships prevail between them. The social whole is indeed characterised *simultaneously* by both diversity and unity: unity because the parts affect one another; diversity because the effect is not a mechanical determination:[51]

> The mention of the last instance in determination thus plays a double role: it divides Marx sharply off from all mechanistic explanations, and opens up within determination the functioning of different instances, the functioning of a real difference in which the dialectic is inscribed. The topography thus signifies that the determination in the last instance by the economic base can be grasped only within a differentiated, therefore complex and articulated whole (the '*Gliederung*'), in which the determination in the last instance fixes the real difference of the other instances, their relative autonomy and their own mode of reacting on the base itself.[52]

The dialectic between the economic level or 'the last instance' and different particular instances refers to both the interaction of the instances and their *relative independence*. The interaction and relative independence together open a view to the complex *social formation*,[53] which cannot be perceived through a mechanical cause-and-effect model or the Hegelian metaphor of the circle and its centre, which would be its essence.[54] Instead, Althusser attempts, from the

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stating that for a long time he has been of the opinion that 'there existed everywhere and at all times what Marx called "the incidental costs of production" or "expenses", losses without right or reason' (Althusser 1992a, p. 179; Althusser 1993c, p. 187). Althusser says no more about this issue, but seen in the light of his posthumously published writings on the aleatory, he was clearly interested in the kinds of *surprising* turns that no economic theory can explain or predict.

[51] Althusser's notion of the 'whole [*tout*]' is directed not only against the concept of the 'totality [*totalité*]' but also against social notions characterised by an atomistic or individualistic methodology, where, for instance, the levels of the superstructure (e.g. politics and culture) are isolated or autonomised both from the economy and from each other (cf. e.g., Althusser 1979, p. 11).

[52] Althusser 1976a, pp. 139–40; Althusser 1990b, p. 215.

[53] Althusser 1976a, p. 146; Althusser 1990b, p. 220.

[54] Althusser 1976a, p. 144; Althusser 1990b, p. 219.

points of view of over- and under-determination, to understand contradictions and the relationships between them that influence social formations.

2.2.1. Overdetermination and underdetermination

Althusser states that he himself did not invent the concept of *overdetermination* but borrowed it from other disciplines 'in the absence of anything better',[55] specifically from psychoanalysis and linguistics.[56] As Althusser himself notes, in studying the 'mechanisms' and 'laws' of dreams, Freud reduced their variants to two: 'displacement [*Verschiebung-Verstellung*]' and 'condensation [*Verdichtung*]'. In turn, 'Lacan recognised these as two essential figures of speech, called in linguistics *metonymy* and *metaphor*'.[57]

> I did not invent this concept [overdetermination]. As I pointed out, it is borrowed from two existing disciplines: specifically, from linguistics and psychoanalysis. In these disciplines it has an objective dialectical 'connotation', and – particularly in psychoanalysis – one sufficiently related formally to the content it designates here for the loan not to be an arbitrary one. A new word is necessarily required to designate a new acquisition. A neologism might have been invented. Or it was possible to 'import' (in Kant's words) a concept sufficiently related to make its domestication (Kant) easy. And in return, this 'relatedness' might open up a path to psychoanalytic reality.[58]

Althusser does not attempt to define or use the concepts he borrowed from psychoanalysis in exactly the same way as Freud did. He does not attempt to be more loyal to Freud than is necessary for his own theoretical aims. Complete loyalty would, of course, not even be possible, because, for Freud, the problematics of overdetermination are part of his theory of the interpretation of dreams, whereas the object of Althusser's interests lies in social mechanisms

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[55] Althusser 1986, pp. 85–128; Althusser 1979, pp. 87–128. 'I am not particularly taken by this term *overdetermination* (borrowed from other disciplines), but I shall use it in the absence of anything better ...' (Althusser 1986, p. 100; Althusser 1979, p. 101).

[56] In his article 'Freud et Lacan', Althusser states: '... Freud studied the "mechanisms" and "laws" of dreams, reducing their variants to two: displacement and condensation. Lacan recognised these as two essential figures of speech, called in linguistics metonymy and metaphor' (Althusser 1976a, p. 23; Althusser 1971, p. 191).

[57] Althusser 1971, p. 191.

[58] Althusser 1986, p. 212, fn. 48; Althusser 1979, p. 206, fn. 46.

and practices and the contradictions that have an influence in these.[59] Further-more, in those of Freud's writings dealing with the interpretation of dreams, there is an explicit use of the concept of overdetermination but not its coun-terpart, underdetermination, which Althusser makes explicit. Étienne Balibar has indeed remarked that, for Althusser, overdetermination is never separate from underdetermination.[60] However, most of the studies on Althusser refer only to overdetermination. The only place where Althusser actually explains the connection between overdetermination and underdetermination is in the 'Soutenance d'Amiens', and, even there, he does it rather briefly:

> I am deliberately stressing underdetermination, because while certain peo-ple easily accepted a simple supplement to determination, they could not accept the idea of underdetermination – that is, of a threshold of determina-tion which, if it is not crossed, causes revolutions to miscarry, revolutionary movements to stagnate or disappear, and imperialism to rot while still devel-oping, etc.[61]

The concepts of underdetermination and the threshold of determination have a central role in Althusser's analyses of, among other things, the reason why in concrete social formations the antagonistic – that is, irreconcilable – pri-mary contradiction[62] between the levels of the relations of production of the working class and capitalist class did *not* after all cause a revolutionary situa-tion – or why the primary contradiction did not after all lead to a revolution, but, rather, the 'irreconcilable' contradiction was 'reconciled' and controlled as an 'internal' question within the capitalist system by means of actions that did not concern the 'last instance' or 'the most essential' – to quote Gram-sci.[63]

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[59] See, for example, Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1965), Chapter VI 'Dream-work [*Die Traumarbeit*]', especially the sections 'Condensation [*Die Verdich-tung*]' (pp. 312–15) and 'Displacement (*Die Verschiebung*)' (pp. 340–4).

[60] Balibar 1996, p. 115.

[61] Althusser 1976a, p. 150; Althusser 1990b, p. 223.

[62] Althusser defines primary or general contradictions as, among other things, '... the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes [... *la con-tradiction entre les forces de production et les rapports de production, incarnée essentiellement dans la contradiction entre deux classes antagonistes*]' (Althusser 1986, p. 97, Althusser 1979, p. 99).

[63] Gramsci 1975, p. 1591.

Furthermore, it must be noted that, even though Althusser's studies, almost without exception, are focused on the over- or underdetermination of contradictions, the question can be about the over- or underdetermination of 'any constitutive element of a society [*de tout élément constitutif d'une société*]'.[64] Other 'constitutive elements' are, for instance, political forces within particular social formations and the relationships between them, as well as their aims to adapt and change these relationships. The reasons why Althusser concentrated on studying specifically contradictions are crystallised in the basic Marxist propositions that 'contradiction is the motor of all development',[65] and 'the class struggle is the motor of history',[66] as he puts forward when referring critically to Hegel's thought on the negativity of positivity. Combining the previous statements: contradiction is the motor of history.[67]

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[64] Althusser 1986, p. 115; Althusser 1979, p. 115. Althusser names 'nature' and the 'relation to nature' as the 'conditions of existence' of every human society (Althusser 1986, p. 214, Althusser 1979, p. 208).

[65] Althusser 1986, p. 223; Althusser 1979, p. 217; cf. Althusser 1976a, p. 149; Althusser 1990b, p. 222.

[66] Althusser 1986, p. 221; Althusser 1979, p. 215.

[67] Althusser ends his reply to John Lewis as follows: 'History really is a "process without a Subject or Goal(s)" where the given *circumstances* in which "men" act as subjects under the determination of social *relations* are the product of the *class struggle*. History therefore does not have a Subject, in the philosophical sense of the term, but a *motor*: that very class struggle' (Althusser 1976b, p. 99; Althusser's emphasis). For Althusser, the lack of a subject in history is the theoretical starting point of research. From this follows that concepts must be developed with which it is possible to approach those social and historical contradictions and relationships in which people and groups of people become subjects. Thus the specific analysis of contradictions and their mutual relationships becomes the main point in Althusser's Marxism. In the case of the class struggle, one must note, however, that the question is about a *theoretical* concept with which Althusser aims to understand the social relationships that prevail in society and which for the subjects always manifest themselves as displaced or condensed social relationships. Thus class struggle does not exhaust itself as political class struggle. The political class struggle is the displaced and/or condensed form of the economic class struggle, and not the crystal-clear political project of a uniform class which is transparent to itself: '... we know ... that the class struggle is never crystal-clear, and that the proletariat, which fights its own class struggle, a different one from the struggle of the bourgeoisie, is not transparent to itself, a composite class, always engaged in forging its unity. It is in the class struggle that the proletariat comes to disentangle and confront the relations of forces in which it is enmeshed, and succeeds in defining the "line" of its struggle. None of this resembles the clarity of the case in which a pure consciousness confronts the pure objectivity of a situation. For the whole process is constituted and dominated by contradictory relations which are only realized and discovered little by little, and may later reveal some surprises, either of anticipation (overdetermination) or of retardation (underdetermination)' (Althusser 1977b, pp. 9–10). Marxist theory must not present ideological slogans or philosophical 'truths' in support of this process, but rather it must develop theoretical tools by means of which

In order to ground the historical meaning of over- and underdetermination and the problematics linked with social relationships, it is useful to first look at the general 'morphology' of these concepts. After this, I will substantiate my own viewpoints on the concrete, contents-related issues of contradictions which have a real influence on social formations, and which are also the actual objects of Althusser's analysis.

The 'morphology' of the over- and underdetermination of contradictions

In the 'Soutenance d'Amiens' Althusser states:

> ... if you take seriously the nature of the Marxist whole and its uneven-
> ness, you must come to the conclusion that this unevenness is necessarily
> reflected in the form of the *overdetermination* or of the *underdetermination* of
> contradiction. Of course, it is not a question of treating overdetermination or
> underdetermination in terms of the addition or subtraction of a quantum of
> determination, a quantum added or subtracted from a pre-existing contradic-
> tion – that is, one leading a *de jure* existence somewhere. Overdetermination
> or underdetermination are not exceptions in respect to a pure contradiction.[68]

By over- and underdetermination, Althusser refers to the fact that, in social formations, the contradictions (or even usually its constitutive elements)[69] are not clearly differentiated from each other, but are 'originally' 'impure'. The primary contradiction of the economy cannot be differentiated within other secondary contradictions, 'as a person a head taller than others in the crowd', nor can the primary contradiction of the economy or the 'economic dialectic' be found anywhere in a 'pure' state. There will never be a 'lonely hour of the "last instance"' [*l'heure solitaire de la "dernière instance"*]'.[70] Stephen Cullenberg characterises this as follows:

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contradictory relationships that constitute and dominate the process can be analysed and made visible for subjects of the class struggle. On the other hand, this means the critique of the ideological explanations and 'masks' – including also those going under the name of 'Marxism' – that control these conflicts.

[68] Althusser 1976a, p. 147; Althusser 1990b, p. 221.

[69] When I refer later to the over- and underdetermination of contradictions (or over- and underdetermination generally), I also refer to 'other constitutive elements', though I do not mention any specific examples.

[70] Althusser 1986, p. 113; Althusser 1979, p. 113.

> For Althusser, all the contradictions comprising the totality mutually deter-
> mine one other. The contradictions are conditions of existence of each other,
> as well as the conditions of existence for the complex totality.[71]

Contradictions do not exist independently of one another, but become con-
tradictions and receive their concrete content in the same *interactive process* in
which they influence one another.[72] This can be outlined as follows: the *con-
crete* existence of some particular contradiction (here called contradiction y)
requires other contradictions (here called contradiction x1-xn). From this fol-
lows that contradiction y is *overdetermined* by contradiction x1-xn. Seen from
the other angle, one of the x1-xn contradictions participating in the process of
overdetermination, or a kind of subgroup of them, is not sufficient *on its own* to
produce contradiction y. Contradiction y is *underdetermined* in relation to any
sub-group of x1-xn. For instance, the primary contradiction of the economy
is the central overdetermining factor in the evolution of secondary contradic-
tions, but none of these secondary contradictions can be explained merely by
means of the primary contradiction, that is, by being reduced to it. Rather, the
secondary contradictions are *underdetermined* in relation to the primary contra-
diction; that is, the primary contradiction *underdetermines* the secondary con-
tradictions. The social formation has no 'centre', but, on the other hand, the
'total structure of the social body [*la structure du corps social tout entire*]' is the
precondition for the existence of each contradiction:

> … the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body
> in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and
> even from the *instances* it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining,
> but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the
> various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be
> called *overdetermined in its principle*.[73]

Naming contradictions with symbols (x, y) may, however, direct one's
thoughts towards the notion that the contradictions influencing any overde-
termination would be clearly differentiated from each other or would influ-
ence one another as they are, as if the question would only be that instead of

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[71] Cullenberg 1996, p. 137.
[72] Althusser 1976a, p. 139; Althusser 1990b, p. 215.
[73] Althusser 1986, pp. 99–100; Althusser 1979, p. 101; Althusser's emphasis.

one influential reason there would be several or even very many reasons (here contradictions x1-xn) *together* producing a certain effect (here contradiction y).

Even though the conceptions of over- and underdetermination are concerned with the critique of such mechanistic and reductionist cause-and-effect explanations (for instance, the critique of economism), where, for each effect, a single 'origin' is sought (for example: 'x1 causes y' or 'y is the effect or expression of x1'),[74] complexity on its own is not sufficient to differentiate the *differentia specifica* of over- and underdetermination. In order to understand this, one must ask *in what way* these contradictions influence one another, *how* they are the preconditions for the existence of each other and *what quality* of processes the question is about in the processes of over- and underdetermination.

With regards to the processes of over- and underdetermination, it is important to keep in mind that the contradictions overdetermining each contradiction present themselves each time in an overdetermined contradiction as *displaced* and/or *condensed*.[75] Contradictions x1-xn are not clearly differentiated from one another within contradiction y because they are manifested in its 'appearance' specifically in a displaced and/or condensed form. They are not differentiated from one another in the same way as, say, the wall elements of a prefabricated building or the people pushing a car in the process of pushing. Freud does indeed describe *dream-work* as a process by which the appearance of the dream – that which is 'seen' as a dream (the symbols, episodes, etc. of the dreams) – is the sometimes even seemingly absurd end result of the displacement and condensation of a few hidden elements of countless dream thoughts that have broken through the *dream censorship*. In the same way, contradiction y can be seen as the end result of the displacements and condensations of the contradictions x1-xn participating in the overdetermination, from which one cannot immediately 'see' or deduce the specific overdetermining effect of each specific contradiction x. Just as with dreams, where many latent elements are condensed as a single revealed element, one can think that the contradictions x1-xn participating in the overdetermination of contradiction y are condensed as contradiction y, or some elements of contradictions x1-xn are displaced or condensed in contradiction y.[76]

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[74] Cf. Althusser 1976a, p. 147; Althusser 1990b, p. 221.

[75] Cf., e.g., Althusser 1986, p. 222; Althusser 1979, pp. 215–16.

[76] In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud presents the following outline of the relationship between dream-content [*Trauminhalt*] and dream-thoughts [*Traumgedanken*]: 'Not

When describing the contradictions that overdetermine contradiction y with the symbols x1-xn, one must not think that contradiction y would be a kind of union or sum of x1-xn. Contradiction y (like other contradictions) has its own and specific (but not separate) identity and dynamic (such as, for instance, the educational institution).[77] Even though the existence of contradiction y does indeed require the existence of contradictions x1-xn, on the other hand contradiction y's own dynamic, like dream censorship, *actively* affects what kind of elements can be displaced and condensed into it from contradictions x1-xn. This means that one must not assume with regard to the condensation and/or displacement of the contradiction – just as you must not in the case of a dream – that contradiction y would simply passively receive displacements and condensations from contradictions x1-xn.

In order for contradictions x1-xn to produce together through overdetermination a realistically existing contradiction y, specific displacements and condensations must occur in the whole material regarding contradictions x1-xn, as Freud proposed with regards to dreams.[78] It follows from this that it is very problematic, even impossible, to speak of over- and underdetermination if one fails to understand that it is a *question of a process characterised by displacements and condensations*. Displacement and condensation are indeed the core aspects in the theory of over- and underdetermination for both Freud and Althusser.[79]

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only are the elements of a dream [dream-content] determined by the dream-thoughts many times over, but the individual dream-thoughts are represented in the dream by several elements. Associative paths lead from one element of the dream to several dream-thoughts, and from one dream-thought to several elements of the dream. Thus a dream is not constructed by each individual dream-thought, or group of dream thoughts, finding (in abbreviated form) separate representation in the content of the dream – in the kind of way in which an electorate chooses parliamentary representatives; a dream is constructed, rather, by the whole mass of dream-thoughts being submitted to a sort of manipulative process in which those elements which have the most numerous and strongest supports acquire the right of entry into the dream content – in a manner analogous to election by *scrutin de liste*. In the case of every dream which I have submitted to an analysis of this kind I have invariably found these same fundamental principles confirmed: the elements of the dream are constructed out of the whole mass of dream-thoughts and each one of those elements is shown to have been determined many times over in relation to the dream-thoughts' (Freud, 1965, p. 318).

[77] Cf. Althusser 1976a, pp. 73–4; Althusser 1971, p. 128.
[78] Freud 1965, p. 318.
[79] Althusser points out that Jacques Lacan recognised (Althusser 1976a, p. 28; Althusser 1971, p. 191) displacement and condensation as two essential figures of speech, called in linguistics metaphor and metonymy, which, as theoretical concepts, go back at least to Aristotle's *Poetics*: 'Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs

For instance, Cullenberg's otherwise consistent interpretation remains incomplete because it does not take into account the importance and role of displacement and condensation in the problematics of over- and underdetermination (it is notable that Cullenberg does not mention even once displacement and/or condensation, nor even underdetermination).[80]

In the case of displacement and condensation, one must further emphasise that the question is not only about the overdetermining effect of numerous contradictions (contradictions x_1-x_n) on contradiction y, but specifically about *interaction*. Each contradiction overdeterminedly *affects back* towards the contradictions that overdetermine it, and, in this way, affects what and how the elements of these contradictions 'manage' to affect it. Displacements and condensations occur in several directions (and also in other contradictions: e.g. in contradictions z_1–z_n, etc.).[81] In this sense, it would indeed be misleading to call contradiction y the overdetermined 'end result' of contradictions x_1-x_n, because contradiction y in a corresponding way participates in the overdetermination of contradictions x_1-x_n; which, again, means that contradiction y 'actively' affects which and what kind of overdetermining elements is condensed in it from contradictions x_1-x_n. And so forth: when affecting back on contradictions x_1-x_n these influence back on contradiction y.[82]

Thus it is also possible to think that when participating in the overdetermination of x_1-x_n (also) certain elements are displaced and/or condensed from y into x_1-x_n, elements that stem from y or x_1-x_n and vice versa. These elements

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to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or on grounds of analogy' (Aristotle 1973, 1457b7–9). Aristotle also pays attention to how metaphors produce impressions of unfamiliarity and barbarism, which are specifically due to the transference and condensation of meaning and not a change in 'the matter itself': 'By unfamiliar usages I mean loan-words, metaphors, expanded forms and anything close that is out of the ordinary. However, the exclusive use of forms of this kind would result either in a riddle or in barbarism – a riddle if they were all metaphorical, barbarism if they were all importations' (Aristotle 1973, 1458a20–30).

[80] Cf. Cullenberg 1996.

[81] In the case of Freud's interpretation of dreams, one may indeed ask how and in what way the elements of the appearance of the dream – the dream being seen – that have been worked upon in the dream-work influence back on to the hidden elements that overdetermine them. Is this a question of transference and condensation – and what would they be in this case?

[82] Cf. Althusser 1986, pp. 99–100; Althusser 1979, p. 101.

do not, however, even in this case, 'return' as they stand to contradictions x1-xn, but, rather, as displaced and condensed into elements overdetermined by these contradictions.

This means that some particular solution regarding contradictions is not 'reflected' back as it stands into the contradictions that overdetermine it; that is, it does not produce a corresponding solution in the latter:

> So, in Marxist theory, to say that contradiction is a motive force is to say that it implies *a real struggle, real confrontations, precisely located within the structure of the complex whole*; it is to say that the locus of confrontation may vary according to the relation of the contradictions in the structure in dominance in any given situation; it is to say that the *condensation* of the struggle in a strategic locus is inseparable from the *displacement* of the dominant among these contradictions; that the organic phenomena of *condensation* and *displacement* are the very existence of the 'identity of opposites' until they produce the globally visible form of the *mutation* or qualitative leap that sanctions the revolutionary situation when the whole is recrystallised. Given this, we can explain the crucial distinction for political practice between the distinct moments of a process: *'non antagonism'*, *'antagonism'* and *'explosion'*.[83]

For example, the 'reformistic' solutions concerning the relations of production carried out in the institutions of the political system do indeed transform the historical nature and expression of antagonism, even though they do not remove their antagonistic nature – as the following section will make clear.

The reality of contradictions

Even with regard to Althusser's views on over- and underdetermination, one must keep in mind his basic starting point in materialism. The key issues in the materialist interpretation of the social formation are the *real* social practices and the contradictions and struggles occurring within them. Theory must be developed in order to understand them.[84] In the case of the over- and under-determination of contradictions, it should not be thought that the contradictions would merge to form one large, unresolved cluster of contradictions (this

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[83] Althusser 1986, p. 222; Althusser 1979, pp. 215–16; Althusser's emphasis.
[84] Cf., e.g. Althusser 1976a, p. 159; Althusser 1990b, p. 231; Althusser 1986, p. 212 and p. 224; Althusser 1979, p. 206 and p. 218.

would lead back to the idea of an expressive totality; for instance, thoughts of a 'sphere' and 'spheres of spheres', and consequently to idealism, where the *real* and *material* character of social practices, as well as their *irreducibility* to each other, is denied), or that, in the case of the processes of the over- and underdetermination of contradictions, it would be a matter of some sort of functionalistic system.[85]

Althusser did not attempt to build a general and generally applicable philosophical theory of over- and underdetermination – he specifically criticised such system-building and *world-view activity* in regard to both Hegelian Marxism and philosophy in general – but rather to *interpret* through these concepts the complex and non-expressive character of the social formation. In other words, he was trying to understand those real, social institutions and practices that are primary to theory, yet which transcend the 'immediate observation', where people and groups of people act as individual or class subjects.

It, indeed, should be emphasised that contradictions exist or are 'situated' in very different social practices and historical situations[86] – for instance, in families, workplaces, educational institutions, collective bargaining, the market, parliaments, courts of law, states, between states, and so on – and that they have their own dynamics and development history which differ from other contradictions.[87] However, contradictions and their developments are linked

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[85] Althusser thinks similarly about the case of ideology. 'Ideology has no history' but rather – and, here, Althusser draws a parallel to Freud's proposition that the *unconscious is eternal* – 'ideology is eternal', 'i.e. omnipresent in its immutable form throughout history (= the history of social formations containing social classes) [... *sous sa forme immuable, dans toute l'histoire (= l'histoire des formations sociales comprenant des classes sociales)*]' (Althusser 1976a, p. 101; Althusser 1971, p. 152). On the other hand, however, he claims that 'there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects' (Althusser 1976a, p. 109; Althusser 1971, p. 159). Like contradictions, ideology also exists solely in concrete, really existing ideological apparatuses and their practices (see Althusser 1976a, pp. 122–3; Althusser 1971, p. 159).

[86] In the same way, also ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) 'present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialised institutions', and Althusser presents an 'empirical list' of these (Althusser 1976a, p. 82; Althusser 1971, p. 136). However, the differentiation of ideological apparatuses does not mean that they are isolated phenomena. On the contrary, they each have some kind of historical role (albeit differing from each other) in the reproduction of the means of production, even though 'the unity that constitutes this plurality of ISAs as a body is not immediately visible' (Althusser 1976a, p. 83; Althusser 1971, p. 137).

[87] In regard to ideology, Althusser states: '... the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology; but at the same time ... the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects [... *la catégorie de sujet est constitutive de toute idéologie,*

and interconnected in many but varied ways, which is something that specifically the concepts of over- and underdetermination, as well as condensation and displacement, aim to describe theoretically.

In order to concretise the problematic of over- and underdetermination and to understand its concreteness, it is necessary to pay attention to the argument: 1) that the question is about realistically existing contradictions or contradictions that have existed and their complex over- and underdetermined relationships; and that 2) displacements and condensations only and solely occur between these real contradictions. One must indeed ask what is displaced between the contradictions and/or what is condensed.

Answering this question requires that, in the case of the problematic of over- and underdetermination, one also emphasises Althusser's views on reproduction, ideology, ideological state apparatuses and the struggles in society. Thus, the problematic of over- and underdetermination is concretised and its content in relation to Althusser's thinking becomes clearer.

Displacements and condensations in ideological apparatuses – ideological apparatuses as the displacements and condensations of contradictions

It should first be noted that social apparatuses and practices in which displacements and condensations are realised are specifically Ideological State Apparatuses (henceforth ISA) and their ideological practices. The ideological nature of the apparatuses means that each ISA in some way also participates in the reproduction of the relations of production that have an influence at the level of the means of production of society. ISAs cannot, however, be reduced to the viewpoint of reproduction. Such a functionalistic and reductionistic viewpoint would, of course, point back to the thought patterns of an expressive totality: each ISA would be a mere primary expression or function of the primary contradiction of the economy. But if, instead, one thinks that the displacement and concentration of contradictions occur specifically in ISAs or are conveyed by them, then one can further deduce that the overdetermining effect in ISAs of the primary contradiction is *a displaced and/or condensed effect*.

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mais en même temps ... la catégorie de sujet n'est constitutive de toute idéologie, qu'en tant que toute idéologie a pour fonction (qui la définit) de "constituer" des individus concrets en sujets]' (Althusser 1976a, p. 110; Althusser 1971, p. 160). From this it is evident that ideology is 'located' in *different* places and times.

Freud defined *dream censorship* as a factor due to the effect of which all latent elements of the dream do not 'get' into the appearance of the dream. In turn, Althusser directs his attention towards the struggles for the control of the *struggles* in the ISAs, as well as the opposition and alternative 'ideological calls' occurring within these. This means that not all factors come to influence to the same extent the content of the contradiction and the ISA. This does indeed reveal the other dimension in the overdetermination of contradictions: there are already a number of factors that aim to overdetermine a contradiction 'above' the amount that 'gets' to determine the contradiction and influence it. Here, the dynamics and history of ISAs influence in what form and in what way elements from other contradictions and ISAs are displaced and or condensed into them. Althusser refers to this when talking about their 'relative autonomy' and, for instance, about the possibility of resistence.[88]

ISAs are not monolithic, and not a single ISA is a seamless, homogeneous whole in which only one kind of ideological call would be heard. As Althusser notes, ideology and ISA do not exclude the possibility of the discord from resistance, 'bad subjects [*mauvais sujets*]' or different ideological calls:[89]

> The Ideological State Apparatuses are multiple, distinct, 'relatively autonomous' and capable of providing an objective field to contradictions which express, in forms which may be limited or extreme, the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle, as well as their subordinate forms.[90]

Put briefly, in the case of contradictions and the ISAs within which they are contained, the question is not that these would only *passively* receive those 'elements' that are displaced and condensed into them from elsewhere. Instead, contradictions and ISAs have, on the basis of their own dynamics, an *active* influence on what kinds of elements of other contradictions and other ISAs are displaced and/or condensed into them and how this occurs.

The influence of several overdetermining factors explains why no actor can completely 'control' or 'hegemonise' (intellectually or functionally) a situation; rather, the actor's own deeds and actions are overdetermined by other actors,

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[88] Althusser 1976a, pp. 86–7 and p. 93; Althusser 1971, pp. 139–40.
[89] Althusser 1976a, p. 120; Althusser 1971, p. 169.
[90] Althusser 1976a, p. 88; Althusser 1971, pp. 141–2.

contradictions and so forth in society. It also follows from this that contradictions must not be understood in a subject-centred way, but, on the contrary, subjects must be understood through the struggles occurring and being fought in these contradictions.[91]

Even though ISAs are relatively independent, nevertheless 'no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses'.[92] This does not mean, however, that implementing such hegemony would necessarily succeed:

> The Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle. The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISAs as easily as it can in the (repressive) State apparatus, not only because the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle.[93]

Thus, in the contradictions actually occurring in society, the question is also about the *struggle* for their control and organisation. In other words, contradictions are 'manifested' as different kinds of struggle, which, in turn, can refer to compromises and agreements, and thus do not necessarily lead to an open conflict. In his article 'Sur la dialectique matérialiste' Althusser talks about the 'non-antagonistic', 'antagonistic' and 'explosive' stages of the political struggle.[94] A political struggle is fought, for instance, over the extent to which different political groupings and social classes have opportunities to participate in the organisation, adaptation or 'solving' of contradictions, or to what extent different groups and classes are able, though their own actions, to influence, for instance, *in what way* the political institutions of a society are shaped and how 'solving' or 'handling' the primary contradiction occurring within them takes place. When analysing the modes of production or the relations of production,

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[91] Althusser 1976a, p. 86; Althusser 1971, pp. 139–40.
[92] Althusser 1976a, p. 86; Althusser 1971, p. 139.
[93] Althusser 1976a, p. 86; Althusser 1971, p. 140: Althusser's emphasis.
[94] Althusser 1986, p. 222; Althusser 1979, p. 216.

as well as their reproduction in the ISAs, Althusser does not claim that the former necessarily would be reproduced along with the ISAs, but, rather, that *if* the modes of production and the relations of production are to be reproduced, then it is *necessary* that the conditions for the existence of the primary contradiction can be reproduced to a sufficient degree.

With the concepts of displacement and condensation, as well as over- and underdetermination, Althusser aims theoretically to substantiate why the forms of political class struggle and the aims of the subjects embodied within them do not after all follow the antagonistic modus of logic required by the contradiction of the economy. This refers to the notion that the 'class struggle' or the antagonistic contradiction of the economy do not return to a phenomenon at the level of consciousness; rather, it is a matter of a complex process characterised by over- and underdetermination which constitutes subjects and classes, in which ISAs do not directly express or mask the primary antagonistic structural contradiction of the economy.

Here, the line is also drawn between *economic* and *political* class struggles, as well as between economic and political contradictions: the economic class struggle continues as long as the relations of production characterised by class antagonism continue to be reproduced. However, this antagonism does not necessarily manifest itself or get its meaning for the subjects forming within it as an antagonistic arrangement. (This also means that the economic class does not necessarily have to be a politically organised class.) On the contrary, it is important from the point of view of the ideological reproduction of the relations of production that the antagonistic contradiction does not get its meaning for the subjects as an antagonistic contradiction and political class struggle.

On the other hand, the non-homogeneity of an ISA, which the concepts of over- and underdetermination highlight (*contra* the expressive totality), creates space for the theoretically substantiated understanding of the actual opportunities of the political actions of the subject-individual [*individu-sujet*]. In a letter written in April 1986 to Fernanda Navarro, Althusser proposes that 'the theory of the ISAs is … quite the contrary of a determinist theory in the superficial sense'.[95] He justifies his claim by referring to the plurality of the calls of ideology:

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[95] Althusser and Balibar 1997, p. 128; Althusser 2006a, pp. 241–2.

The interpellation of the individual as subject, which makes him an ideo-logical subject, is realized not on the basis of a *single* ideology, but of *several ideologies* at once, under which the individual *lives* and *acts* [*agit*] his practice. These ideologies may be very 'local', such as a subject in his *family* and at *work*, in his immediate relations with his family and friends or his peers; or they may be broader, 'local' in the broad sense, either 'regional' or 'national'. Such ideologies are, for the most part, always initially inherited from the past, the tradition. What results is a *play and a space* of multiple interpellations in which the subject is caught up, but which (as contradictory play and space) consti-tutes the 'freedom' of the individual subject, who is *simultaneously* interpel-lated by several ideologies that are neither of the same kind nor at the same level; this multiplicity explains the *'free' development of the positions adopted by he subject-individual*.[96]

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[96] Althusser and Balibar 1997, pp. 127–8; Althusser 2006a, p. 241; Althusser's empha-sis. The quote in which Althusser comments on the interview manuscript by Fernanda Navarro raises the question, however, of whether Althusser himself ends up with a *pluralistic interpretation* of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) in which the sensitivity towards the order of determination of contradictions and ideologies, the hegemonic relations and the ultimate over- and underdetermining influence of the primary con-tradiction of capitalism in other conflicts and different ISAs disappear. Althusser him-self wants to justify how the displacement of subjects from one political-ideological position to another (e.g. the bourgeois Marx and Engels going over to the ideological positions of the working class) is possible (Althusser 1994b, p. 128; Althusser 2006a, p. 241). This correct attempt to justify theoretically, among other things, the possibil-ities for resistance and political intervention is, however, not sufficient to bring out those ideological calls which attain a hegemonic position. The beginning of the cited letter (8 April 1986) shows that Althusser acknowledges the question of the hegemony and the ruling ideology when he states that 'historical periods marked by a dominant ideology that is truly one and truly unified are rare: the dominant ideology is always more or less contradictory, tending toward a controlling [*dominateur*] unity, but attain-ing it only very rarely and with great difficulty. It would be preferable to speak, as you do elsewhere, in terms of the (contradictory) tendency of an ideology which seeks to constitute itself as a (non-contradictory) *unity* and aspires to domination over ide-ological elements inherited from the past, elements which it never succeeds in truly *unifying* as a unique, dominant ideology' (Althusser 1994b, pp. 125–6; Althusser 2006a, p. 239; Althusser's emphasis). Yet even this does not raise the question of the relation between the 'ruling ideology' and the economy. Unlike in his articles from the 1960s and 1970s, in his letter Althusser does not refer to questions regarding the 'last instance' of economic conditions in the formation of the dominant contradictions. This may be a symptom of the fact that, towards the end of his life, Althusser abandoned the thesis of the 'last instance' of the economy, even though it had formed an essential *Marxist* theoretical starting point in his thinking. The interpretation of ideology that Althusser presents in the letter to Navarro indeed comes close to Foucault's views in which the *dominant* discourse formations are the object of the analysis, yet not much attention is

For example, in the case of the political ISA, in which Althusser includes the political system and its political parties, the primary contradiction can manifest itself as the internal solution to the system, by means of which the parties strive for solutions characterised by arbitration and compromise. One may think that these also affect the relations of production, but in a way that reproduces the capitalist mode of production by transforming its historical form. At the same time, these compromises, like the other 'non-antagonistic'

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paid to the connections between these and the capitalist means of production and the relations of production. It is perhaps no coincidence that, in his letter, Althusser refers specifically to Foucault, praising his 'materialist' view of the ideological apparatuses (Althusser 1994b, p. 126; Althusser 2006a, p. 240). Stuart Hall, however, has criticised Foucault's views on power and resistance as being 'thin' in comparison to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, with which he can highlight *both* the connections from the ideological struggles to the organisation of the relations of production *and* the dimensions of these struggles which are not reducible to the economy (Hall 1988, especially pp. 50–7). On the other hand, Althusser's letters as well as the manuscripts linked with the article on ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1995b [*Sur la reproduction*]) show that he aimed to emphasise the non-functionality of his ideological – theoretical approach – for which Hall has also criticised him (see Hall 1988, pp. 48–9). However, in the letter to Navarro, the problem would not seem to be that of 'functionalism'; rather, on the contrary, Althusser seems to slide towards pluralism. Though one should not assess Althusser's ideological-theoretical views from the 1980s on the basis of a single letter, it is nevertheless clear that his analyses of the historical mechanisms and forms of ideologies remain more abstract compared to those put forward by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (which Hall emphasises). Instead of being criticised for being functionalist, Althusser's theory of ideology can indeed be criticised for its abstractness or universality, as has indeed been done within the German Projekt Ideologie-Theorie (PIT). The target of PIT's critique is Althusser's 'neutral' view of ideology, according to which there is no difference between ideological and non-ideological practices, in which case the individual subjects are 'forever doomed' to the ideological. Though ideology would not be a functional system, but would rather be a matter of the struggle or competition between different ideological interpellations, nevertheless ideology or the ideological becomes the universal definition characterising the existence of the individual. Two important contributions of PIT in the ideological-theoretical debate have been in making an analytical difference between ideological and non-ideological socialisation [*Vergesellschaftung*] and in emphasising the analyses of concrete and specific ideological powers and their historical genealogy. In this conception, the term 'ideological' refers to the *historically-developed* forms of *vertical* socialisation, of which the most central independent ideological power is the state. In Althusser's thinking, on the other hand, the history of the origin of ideological powers is easily covered over by the idea of ideological universality. The merit of the PIT viewpoint is that it enables the concretisation and historicisation of issues concerned with the critique of ideology and resistance, which, in turn, makes possible the theoretical and political critique of ideological powers and their practices which limit the ability of the subject to function. For a discussion of the PIT contribution to the ideology-theoretical debate, see Koivisto and Pietilä 1993, pp. 233–46, and Koivisto and Pietilä 1997.

events of the political system, have ideological effects when these events increase the actors' faith in the non-antagonistic nature of the society.[97]

The metaphoric nature of the topographic

If one does not stick to the metaphorical understanding of the concepts of base and superstructure, there is a danger that the base and the primary contradiction become the 'transcendent' metaphysical starting points for the over- and underdetermination of contradictions. When Ernesto Laclau and Chantal

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[97] Gramsci describes the compromises between classes and the hegemonic aspirations within them as follows: 'The fact of hegemony presupposes that account is taken of the interests and tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain balance of compromise is formed – in other words, that the leading group makes sacrifices of an economico-corporative kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic; it must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1591; my emphasis). Even though the ruling groups in capitalist society indeed have to make compromises in order to retain their hegemony within the economic sphere, as long as they intend to reproduce their position in society the compromises will not affect the capitalist means of production and relations of production in themselves. This, of course, does not mean that such upheavals could not happen. The question, then, would be of a serious organic crisis in an already existing means of production and economic system (for more on cyclical and organic crises, cf. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1579–80). Gramsci's idea of cyclical and organic crises can be interpreted through the notion of the 'last instance', in this case that the means of production and the relations of production are the 'last instance', such that if these were to change radically it would bring about a crisis or even collapse of the capitalist system itself. In other words, the reproduction of the capitalist system is ultimately dependent on the reproduction of 'the last instance'. Seen from yet another viewpoint, the struggles must take on displaced forms so that they do not condensate into a battle that seriously endangers the capitalist means of production and relations of production. This is a question of a reciprocal process in which, due to displacement, the economic antagonism is manifested as non-antagonistic political disputes and solutions. These solutions, however, do not solve the economic antagonism itself but, through overdetermination, influence its concrete, historical content. As a consequence of displacements and condensations, the events in one conflict are not as such reflected in another conflict (cf. also Althusser 1986, p. 221; Althusser 1979, p. 215, in which Althusser characterises the relationships of the economic and political class struggle). Gramsci analyses more precisely than Althusser the persuasive solutions to these relations of production. There are examples of this in, for instance, his essay 'Americanismo e fordismo' (Gramsci 1990, pp. 51–78; Gramsci 1978, pp. 441–62) as well as in his *Prison Notebooks* under the heading 'High Salaries'. Both Gramsci and Althusser mention that the working-class struggle plays a part in any compromise. On the other hand, a struggle that has moved towards these forms of class compromise can also be analysed as an historical displacement of class antagonism that takes place within the framework of the capitalist mode of production, albeit adapting the framework.

Mouffe, for example,[98] criticise Althusser for holding on to the thesis of the determination in the last instance by the economy because it leads to metaphysical essentialism and economic determinism, they assume that Althusser himself fell for what he criticised in others, that is, mystifying and hypostasising an economistic interpretation of the base.[99] Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation, however, is problematic, because in their rather abstract philosophical explications they lose sight of the difference Althusser makes between theoretical and empirical concepts. The 'base', 'superstructure' and 'primary contra-

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[98] Laclau and Mouffe 1985, especially pp. 97–105; and Laclau 1991, especially pp. 115–18.

[99] Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 99. Laclau and Mouffe also argue that 'the concept of overdetermination tended to disappear from Althusserian discourse, and a growing closure led to the installation of a new variant of essentialism' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 98). In their opinion, Althusser's 'essentialism' is crystallised in the concept of the 'last instance', which is incompatible with the concept of overdetermination. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this incompatibility is due to the fact that overdetermination always refers specifically to the overdetermination of *meanings* (cf. Ricœur 1994, p. 47) – in other words, to the symbolical level, and therefore cannot be compatible with the *essentialist* 'last instance' thesis. In their opinion, it was because of this incompatibility that the problematic of overdetermination disappeared from the 'Althusserian discourse' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 97–8). Laclau and Mouffe are undoubtedly correct in saying that the conceptual-historical roots of the concept of overdetermination are to be found in symbols, that is, in the analysis of meanings, as Aristotle's observations on metaphor and metonymy already demonstrate. Althusser does not claim, however, that he would use the concepts of over- and underdetermination in their 'original' meaning. Instead, 'for the lack something better', he strives with these terms to criticise *economistic* determinism – criticised also by Laclau and Mouffe – and to understand the dynamics of societal relationships and contradictions as well as the relation of these dynamics to the ideological practices of the ideological state apparatuses, where and only where these contradictions are manifested and become meaningful for the subjects acting within them. Instead of thinking that such an emphasis on the dimensions linked with the 'economy' of *material* practices would be an expression of an 'essentialism' that would be incompatible with the concept of overdetermination, one could think that it is a question of emphasising the 'material starting points' of the symbolic level or the formation and displacement and/or condensation of meanings. Thus, the 'last instance' thesis is perhaps not after all incompatible with the concept of overdetermination but rather links the contradictions that in a certain way become meaningful for the subjects as part of the dynamics of the capitalist society that transcends the 'level of observation'. In other words, it is also possible to consider Althusser's materialist interpretation of the overdetermination of meanings as a *positive contribution* to the problematics of overdetermination and not as an irrelevant attempt at an application of this concept. Furthermore, the claim that the concept of overdetermination starts to disappear from the 'Althusserian discourse' and that already in the mid-1960s with the 'last instance' thesis there is a return to essentialism is strange when seen in the light of, for instance, the 'Soutenance d'Amiens' (1975). Indeed, in that text, the concepts of over- and underdetermination have a central role, as Althusser distances himself from the idea of the Hegelian expressive totality and presents his own alternative interpretation of Marxism.

diction of the economy' are not notions for which a direct or immediate equivalent in reality could be empirically observed. ISAs and their practices are manifested and 'present themselves to the immediate observer [*qui se présentent à l'observateur immédiat*]' as a motley assortment of different social practices and institutions.[100] When Althusser states that 'the economic dialectic is never active in the pure state', or that 'the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes',[101] he means that 'economy', 'economic base', 'modes of production', 'relations of production', 'the primary contradiction of the economy' and so forth, are central theoretical concepts of Marxist theory, and by developing and adapting these it is possible to understand and to perceive the complex processes of over- and underdetermination which hide beneath the empirical 'surface' of contradictions.[102]

If one does not differentiate between the empirical and the theoretical, the danger is that one ends up with a critique like the theorisation of Laclau and Mouffe, which takes place within a philosophical form but appeals to a theoretical reality: first, it is established that a base and economic instance cannot be 'found' in empirical reality; then, on the basis of this 'observation', they are labelled as metaphysical concepts.[103] In this instance, however, Laclau and Mouffe have not paid attention to the fact that Althusser's critique is aimed at both transcendent metaphysics *and* empiricism.[104] As becomes

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[100] Althusser 1976a, pp. 96–7; Althusser 1971, pp. 136–7.
[101] Althusser 1986, p. 113; Althusser 1979, p. 113.
[102] Althusser 1976a, p. 83; Althusser 1971, p. 137.
[103] Carl Boggs claims, based on E.P. Thompson's aggressive critique of Althusser, that the latter's theory is so schematic that it 'obscures the rich empirical reality of everyday social relations, culture, and consciousness formation that is the essence of living historical change; without this, there can be few insights into counter-hegemonic processes leading to social transformation' (Boggs 1993, p. 131). Without going any further into either Boggs's or Thompson's critiques, one can nevertheless state that nothing in Althusser's theories prevents one from performing a concrete analysis of everyday relationships and studying the possibilities of an everyday counter-hegemonic activity. On the contrary, Althusser's theory can well be used as a theoretical starting point for such empirical analyses.
[104] In the 1987 article 'Post-Marxism without Apologies' (published also in Laclau 1990, pp. 97–132) Laclau and Mouffe respond to the critique by Norman Geras (Geras 1987) of their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In responding to Geras, they defend the view that 'the economic space itself is structured as a political space, and the "war of position" is not the superstructural consequence of laws of motion constituted outside it' (Laclau 1991, p. 115). According to them, in the analysis of capitalist societies one can well give up the 'last instance' thesis. Even though capitalist society indeed establishes basic structural limits to what is possible within it, these limits do not prevent the effective political actions of the working class.

evident, for instance, from the critique Althusser aims at Hegelianism, the *concrete* is not identified with the empirical; rather, it is a question of the theoretically-substantiated aim to understand the complex tendencies and processes that produce the empirical appearance of a concrete situation.[105]

Even though Laclau and Mouffe admit that capitalist society can indeed contain basic structural limits, they nevertheless do not pay attention to the fact that despite 'even brilliant' results and benefits, these are the achievements of those who do not own the tools of production or decide about their control, but rather only use them. In Laclau and Mouffe's 'post-Marxist' interpretation – which rejects the notion of the 'last instance' – the relations of production and the ownership of the means of production become a single condition of political struggle amongst others, in which case the analysis is no longer sensitive to the unique characteristics of the capitalist mode of production (in this sense Laclau and Mouffe's 'post-Marxism' can be considered convergent with Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' ideology. Cf. Fukuyama 1992). Stuart Hall has argued that Laclau and Mouffe's analyses, which operate on a high level of abstraction, 'produce the concrete philosophically', in which case also the 'structuring force, the lines of tendency stemming from the implementation of capital, for example, simply disappears' (Hall 1986, p. 58).

[105] In the 1965 article 'Marxisme et humanisme', Althusser states as follows regarding the theoretically subversive critique of the category of the subject: 'By rejecting the essence of man as his theoretical basis, Marx rejected the whole of this organic system of postulates. He drove the philosophical categories of the *subject*, of *empiricism*, of the *ideal essence*, etc., from all the domains in which they had been supreme. Not only from political economy (rejection of the myth of *homo œconomicus*, that is, of the individual with definite faculties and needs as the *subject* of classical economy); not just from history (rejection of social atomism and ethico-political idealism); not just from ethics (rejection of Kantian ethical idea); but also from philosophy itself: for Marx's materialism excludes the empiricism of the subject (and its inverse: the transcendental subject) and the idealism of the concept (and its inverse: the empiricism of the concept). This total theoretical revolution was only empowered to reject the old concepts because it replaced them by new concepts. In fact Marx established a new problematic, a new systematic way of asking questions of the world, new principles and new method' (Althusser 1986, p. 235; Althusser 1979, pp. 228–9; Althusser's emphasis). The new questions and concepts in Marx's texts (from *The German Ideology* onwards [written 1845 / 6]) are still in a 'practical state'. Thus they have to be extracted from the texts and set out within an anti-humanist research programme. In the quoted article, published in 1965, Althusser emphasises the subversive *theoretical* importance of Marx's thinking, whilst the *revolutionary* importance of the Marxist theory for the *political* practice of the working class remains unformulated. In his self-critique Althusser indeed states that at that point he and his students still did not properly understand the political importance of Marx's theoretical revolution. When challenging the traditional theoretical categories, such as that of the humanist category of the subject, Marx also challenges the ideologies that govern the subjects of bourgeois society. In doing so, he develops theoretical tools by means of which it is possible to take a position that helps the working class 'man' perceive his own class position in the system of social relationships, a position which *differs* markedly from the 'man' of the capitalist class.

When Althusser refers to the primary contradiction of the economy, it is a question of a theoretical attempt to outline the central characteristics of the capitalist mode of production, which influence the empirical reality *both* directly in the sphere of production and economic activity *and* in a more displaced way, for instance, in the institutions of representative democracy. What sorts of influences take place in the case of each practice and its conflicts, and the types of displacements and condensations by which it is conveyed, are questions requiring a theoretical analysis that is concrete yet transcends the immediate appearance of the empirical cases.[106]

Another counter-argument that can be made against Laclau and Mouffe's claim of determinism has to do with Althusser's view of the nature of the over- and underdetermination of contradictions. Earlier (2.2.), I quoted Althusser's viewpoint that

> it is not a question of treating overdetermination or underdetermination in terms of the addition or subtraction of a quantum of determination, a quantum added or subtracted from a pre-existing contradiction – that is, one leading a *de jure* existence somewhere. Overdetermination or underdetermination are not exceptions in respect to a pure contradiction.[107]

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[106] However, those of Althusser's writings published during his lifetime do not include concrete historical analyses of how, for example, the primary antagonistic contradiction in relations of production influence the ISAs or how these influence back on the organisation of the relations of production. In the case of Gramsci, an excellent example of such an analysis is 'Americanismo e fordismo', where he presents a historical analysis of the historical changes in the capitalist mode of production in the early twentieth century (Gramsci 1990, pp. 51–78). In the case of Althusser, the analysis of Christian religious ideology contained within 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état' is an exception. This text, which was first published as an article in *La Pensée* in 1970 (and then included in the anthology *Positions* [1976]; cf. also Althusser 1971), is, however, as its subheading 'Notes pour une recherche' suggests, only a part of a more extensive study, the other parts of which were only published in 1995 in the anthology *Sur la reproduction* (Althusser 1995b). The 300-page manuscript contains chapters in which Althusser analyses the historical development of the French political and trade-union ISAs. In comparison to these analyses, the presentations of ISAs published during Althusser's lifetime seem more concretised and less 'functionalistic' or abstract than has been thought on the basis of the variant published in 1970. It becomes evident from Althusser's autobiography that at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s he planned and to some extent also had time to organise a fairly extensive multi-disciplinary project to study, with the help of comparative sets of data, amongst other things, the history, ideologies and theoretical doctrines of the organisation of new social movements (Althusser 1992a, pp. 238–9; Althusser 1993c, pp. 245–6).

[107] Althusser 1976a, p. 147; Althusser 1990b, p. 221.

Contradictions are 'originally' 'impure'. Because all contradictions are or have been real contradictions they also are or have been overdetermined contradictions. When, furthermore, it is it taken into account that over- and underdetermination are characterised by displacement and condensation, one notices that all contradictions are or have been displaced and/or condensed contradictions. Again, displacement and condensation, like overdetermination generally, are possible only if elements from some other contradiction or contradictions are displaced and/or condensed into the contradiction, and vice versa.

This means that contradictions *only exist* when they are in an interactive relationship with each other. The contradictions' processes of displacement and condensation do not have an 'Origin' or 'Centre' from which the overdetermination of contradictions would then begin to 'radiate'. Thus the interaction of contradictions exists 'already at the beginning'; or the 'beginning' is also characterised by interaction and 'impurity'. The processes of over- and underdetermination must therefore not be characterised as linear cause-and-effect processes or even as multi-linear cause-and-effect processes, because already the starting point has many beginnings and is complex; the processes of change are 'from the beginning' complex processes of over- and underdetermination.[108]

Specifically, it is the idea of the *complexity* of reality and its contradictions that forms the core point in Althusser's argumentation. At the same time, it reveals the specific point of the critique he aims at mechanistic and deterministic *schemata*. From the point of view of analysis or *cognition* in general, the question is about the fact that contradictions always appear as underdetermined to the subject analysing them. On the other hand, from the point of view of *action*, there are *insufficient conditions* for some *desired* consequence – such as the revolutionary working-class viewpoint, according to which contradictions would condense into revolution. In other words, the desired or intended consequence is underdetermined, and instead some other alternative consequence – for instance, a reform or compromise to be carried out within the framework of an existing political system – is realised. In regard to the

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[108] Freud states with regard to dreams that the connections between the dream-content and dream-thoughts are distinguished by 'the specially ingenious interweaving of their reciprocal relations' (Freud 1965, pp. 318–19).

latter functional viewpoint, Althusser uses the term *threshold of determination* [*seuil de la détermination*].[109]

Russia 1917

The connection between the viewpoints of cognition and action also reveals the fact that Althusser tried to develop a Marxist theory of over- and under-determination as well as a critique of ideology specifically for the needs of the political practice of the labour movement, so that it could be liberated from abstract dialectic *schemata* (for instance, Hegelian Marxism or economism), in the light of which both the failures of revolutions in developed capitalist societies and the realisation of revolutions in the 'undeveloped' peripheral areas of the capitalistic world economy appeared as exceptions. In his article 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', first published in 1962, Althusser writes:

> Let us return to Lenin and thence to Marx. If it is true, as Leninist practice and reflection prove, that the revolutionary situation in Russia was precicely a result of the *intense overdetermination* of the basic class contradiction, we should perhaps ask what is *exceptional* about this 'exceptional *situation*', and whether, like all exceptions, this one does not clarify its rule – is not, unbeknown to the rule, *the rule itself*. For, after all, *are we not always in exceptional situations?* The failure of the 1849 Revolution in Germany was an exception, the failure in Paris 1871 was an exception, the German Social-Democratic failure at the beginning of the twentieth century pending the chauvinist betrayal of 1914 was an exception, exception of the success of 1917 … exceptions, but *with respect to what*? To nothing but the *abstract*, but comfortable and reassuring idea of a pure, simple 'dialectical' schema, which in its very simplicity seems to have retained a memory (or rediscovered the style) of the Hegelian model and its faith in the resolving 'power' of the abstract contradiction as such: in particular, the 'beautiful' contradiction between Capital and Labour.[110]

Thus, when Althusser analysed the conditions and prerequisites of the October Revolution and other revolutions, he argues that all cases are exceptions. The 'exceptional' does not refer, however, to the complete uniqueness of the case,

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[109] Althusser 1976a, p. 150; Althusser 1990b, p. 223.
[110] Althusser 1986, p. 103; Althusser 1979, p. 104; Althusser's emphasis.

but to the fact that the capitalist world system at the turn of the century and all the tendencies typical of it were articulated differently in different states and societies. A 'pure' ideal-type of capitalism or imperialism could not be found anywhere. The beginning of the twentieth century can be characterised as the imperialist stage of capitalism. From such a general definition, one cannot, however, infer how the effects of capitalism were manifested in, for instance, Russia. The history and dynamics of Russian society also influenced how and in what way the international and global overdetermining influences were displaced to Russia and condensed there. According to Althusser, the revolutionary leader Lenin well understood in his own analyses and strategies of action the problematic of the uniqueness of the conjuncture:

> Lenin knew perfectly well that he was acting on a social present which was the product of the development of imperialism, otherwise he would not been a Marxist, but in 1917 he was not acting on Imperialism in general; he was acting on the concrete of the Russian situation, of the Russian conjuncture, on what he gave the remarkable name, 'the current situation', the situation whose currency defined his political practice as such.[111]

As the starting point for his own alternative explanation for the success of the October Revolution (and the failure or underdetermination of Western revolutions), Althusser takes Lenin's theory of the '*weakest link*' and the comparison contained therein: 'the chain is as strong as its weakest link [*une chaîne vaut ce que vaut son maillon le plus faible*]'.[112] According to Althusser, also Marx, like Lenin, emphasised 'the concrete analysis of the actual situation':

> … when Marx (and the whole Marxist tradition) explains, with the aid of a thousand examples, that such and such a contradiction will dominate according to the case, etc., they are appealing to a concept that might appear

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[111] Althusser 1986, p. 180; Althusser 1979, p. 178. In the preface to the first edition of *The State and Revolution*, dated August 1917, Lenin claims: 'The question of the state is now acquiring particular importance both in theory and in practical politics. The imperialist war has immensely accelerated and intensified the process of transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism. … The question of the relation of the socialist proletarian revolution to the state, therefore, is acquiring not only practical political importance, but also the significance of a most urgent problem of the day, the problem of explaining to the masses what they *will have to do before long* to free themselves from capitalist tyranny' (Lenin 1952, p. 1; emphasis).

[112] Althusser 1986, p. 93; Althusser 1979, p. 94.

> to be *empirical*: the 'conditions', which are simultaneously the existing con-
> ditions and the conditions of existence of the phenomenon under considera-
> tion. Now this concept is essential to Marxism precisely because it is not an
> empirical concept: a statement about what exists. … On the contrary, it is a
> *theoretical* concept, with its basis in the very essence of the object: the ever-
> pre-given complex whole. In fact, these conditions are no more than the very
> existence of the whole in a determinate 'situation', the '*current situation*' of
> the man of politics, that is, the complex relation of reciprocal conditions of
> existence between the articulations of the whole.[113]

The term 'existing conditions' does not here refer only to Russia's national 'cir-
cumstances' but also to the international 'conditions of existence' that overde-
termine them. Only these together produced the conditions for the 1917 Rus-
sian Revolution. The Russian *case* consisted of both Russian national and his-
torical conditions as well as global conditions. From the international view-
point, the Russian national conditions were 'undeveloped' or 'underdevel-
oped'. But this lack of development[114] means, at the same time, that Russia was
the 'weakest link' in the capitalist world system. It was on this weakest link
that the self-destructive effects of capitalism, along with imperialism, could be
displaced and *condensed*, so that the October Revolution could become possible.
According to Althusser, Lenin understood this when he organised revolution-
ary activity, such as the Bolshevik Party:

> How was this revolution *possible* in Russia, why was it *victorious* there?
> It was *possible* in Russia for a reason that went beyond Russia: because
> with the unleashing of imperialist war humanity entered into an *objectively
> revolutionary* situation.[115]

Underdevelopment was not at all an obstacle for the success of the revolu-
tion, but the condition for exceeding the determination threshold of the revo-
lution.[116] Even though the effects of the war were visible as revolutionary stir-
rings around Europe (such as the revolutions in Germany, Finland or Hungary

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[113] Althusser 1986, pp. 212–13; Althusser 1979, pp. 206–7; Althusser's emphasis;
translation modified.
[114] Other examples of the collapse of the 'weakest link' mentioned by Althusser are
the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions.
[115] Althusser 1986, p. 93; Althusser 1979, p. 95; Althusser's emphasis.
[116] Cf. Althusser 1976a, p. 150; Althusser 1990b, p. 223.

or the general strikes in France and Italy), it was only in Russia that events condensed during the course of 1917 into a successful revolution. The reason was that in the '"system of imperialistic states" [to use Lenin's term] Russia represented the weakest point'.[117]

Althusser refers to a fairly large group of varying contradictions and other factors, the combined overdetermining effect of which produced this revolutionary condensation:

> Contradictions of a regime of feudal exploitation ... Contradictions of large-scale capital and imperialist exploitation in the major cities and their suburbs, in the mining regions, oil-fields etc. Contradictions of colonial exploitation and wars imposed on whole peoples. A gigantic contradiction between the stage of development of capitalist methods of production ... and the medieval state of the countryside. The exacerbation of class struggles throughout the country, not only between exploiter and exploited, but even within the ruling classes themselves ... The detailed course of events added other 'exceptional' circumstances, incomprehensible outside the 'tangle' of Russia's internal and external contradictions. For example, the '*advanced*' character of the Russian revolutionary élite, exiled by Tsarist repression; in exile it became 'cultivated', it absorbed the whole heritage of the political experience of the Western European working classes (above all, Marxism); this was particularly true of the formation of the Bolshevik Party ...; the '*dress rehearsal*' for the Revolution in 1905, which, in common with most serious crisis, set class relations sharply into relief, crystallized them and made possible the 'discovery' of a new form of mass political organization: *the soviets*. Last, but not the least remarkable, the unexpected 'respite' the exhausted imperialist nations allowed the Bolsheviks for them to make their 'opening' in history, the involuntary but effective support of the Anglo-French bourgeoisie, who, at the decisive moment, wishing to be rid of the Tsar, did everything to help Revolution.[118]

Very specific national factors – such as the 'developed' and 'civilised' revolutionary doctrines upon which the Russian intellectuals in exile drew, thus

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[117] Althusser 1986, p. 94; Althusser 1979, p. 95.
[118] Althusser 1986, pp. 94–5; Althusser 1979, pp. 96–7; Althusser's emphasis.

making their exile worked against those who had expelled them – actually made it possible for the Russian situation to condense into a revolution.

I will return to the theme of the Russian Revolution at the end of the present chapter. There, however, the viewpoint will not be that of the actor 'after the event', as in Althusser's analysis, but, rather, of the actor at the 'present moment', which Althusser assesses in the light of the revolutionary leader Lenin's political analysis of the situation. In preparation, however, it is worth summarising the interpretation of Althusser's Marxism that has been essayed thus far.

2.2.2. Summary: complexity and chaos

Etienne Balibar has presented the interesting observation that along with the viewpoint of the over- and underdetermination of the contradiction

> conjunctures can no longer be studied as brief moments in the life of the structure or displacements from one stage of the structure to another, because the structure is nothing else than the unforeseeable consequence of the conjunctures; and vice versa, the conjuncture determined by a specific general framework of the structure.[119]

Balibar refers to the fact that the economic base and its primary contradiction or the imperialist stage of capitalism are not homogenous or total structures, 'on top' of which the secondary contradictions or national circumstances of the superstructure would be attached in a manner akin to political cycles or conjunctures in the narrow sense of the word 'attached'. Instead, the bases and superstructures or national and international factors *together* form the complex conjuncture at any moment.

In 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', Althusser proposes that the concept of the overdetermination of the contradiction refers specifically to the fact that the effect of the economic structure *in the last instance* occurs in a real and complex circumstance formed by national traditions and international and national conjunctures.[120] Thus, the conjunctures describe that real terrain

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[119] Balibar 1996, p. 115.
[120] Althusser 1986, pp. 112–13; Althusser 1979, p. 113.

where the influence of the economic instance becomes evident. Balibar, however, does not claim that conjuncture would be the same as structure. Structures can be understood as dispositions that generally characterise a conjuncture – such as the capitalist means of production, its tendencies, the contradiction of the relations of production, and so forth – but these structures do not live their own separate lives; they exist and receive their concrete historical appearance only and always in conjunctures or 'conjuncturally'.[121] Balibar refers only cursorily and provisionally to the fact that this giving up of the antagonism of the structure and conjuncture 'has a potential consequence: it leads to a complete transformation in the traditional problem of historical "transition" (and more profoundly, of historical time, which can no longer be represented as a successive order with uniform duration)'.[122]

The question is about a change in viewpoint. Instead of studying the 'all-encompassing' linear, forward displacement of the 'structure' or social formation, attention is directed towards those conjunctural processes of over- and underdetermination where the displacements and condensations of the con-

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[121] Balibar 1996, p. 115.

[122] Ibid. The question of the extent to which Althusser himself at that time understood such consequences better than his students is certainly problematic. Perhaps he really did have a better understanding than his students due to the fact that, already at the time of *Lire 'Le Capital'*, he had read and studied Machiavelli's writings, in which specifically the conjuncturality of history takes on a central position. As mentioned earlier, however, Althusser did not include Machiavelli in his interpretation of Marxism, except for a few individual remarks, such as the following short but interesting statement in the article 'Contradiction and Overdetermination': 'Lenin gave this metaphor [the weakest link] above all a practical meaning. A chain is as strong as its weakest link. In general, anyone who wants to control a given situation will look out for a weak point, in case it should render the whole system vulnerable. On the other hand, anyone who wants to attack it, even if the odds are apparently against him, need only discover this one weakness to make all its powers precarious. So far there is no revelation here for readers of Machiavelli and Vauban, who were as expert in the arts of the defence as of the destruction of a position, and judged all armour by its faults' (Althusser 1986, p. 93; Althusser 1979, p. 94). What could have been in Althusser's mind when writing these lines was Machiavelli's words of warning to those heads of states and commanders of armies which led their troops into battles, into narrow passes and thus placed the whole *fortuna* of their state or army on a single strategy (see Machiavelli 1950, I.23; III.12 and III.37). To generalise, the whole system may end up in chaos because a 'small' and 'unimportant' factor failed at the critical moment. (Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (later Marquis de Vauban) [1633–1707] was a soldier, economist and the foremost French military engineer of his age. He wrote a number of influential military treatises, such as *Traité de l'attaque et de la défense des places*, on the defence and siege of fortresses and developed a fortifications system that was in use in France until the nineteenth century).

traditions occur and in which the structure receives its historical form. Balibar states that, when Althusser's students attempted 'despairingly' – as Balibar himself did in *Lire 'Le Capital'* – to apply Althusserian overdetermination in their research of 'transformations' or 'passages' from one structure to another, they in fact followed the classical model of periodisation: 'without understanding hardly anything' about what it means to abandon the antagonism of structure and conjuncture.[123]

Balibar's self-critical statements can be interpreted to mean that at least Althusser's students were still tied to the thought patterns of the Hegelian totality. They had perhaps not completely understood after all the theoretical consequences of the distinction between the Marxist complex whole and the Hegelian expressive totality.[124]

As Balibar states, Althusser's interpretation of the concept of historical time was perhaps, already at the time of *Lire 'Le Capital'*, something else than time measuring the 'historical transition' of the structure.[125] This difference can be characterised as the difference between the viewpoints of 'universal history' and the 'many histories'. The time of conjunctures is not that of the 'general time' of history: in fact, history does not have a 'general time'. Each conjuncture and its development have their own timetable, which is manifested in them in the processes characterised by over- and underdetermination, where contradictions are condensed and displaced, or in which the conjuncture is articulated in a particular direction.

Relinquishing the antagonism between structure and conjuncture does not mean that Althusser pays attention 'only' to conjunctures. The issue is at the same time also about a new kind of theoretical interpretation of *conjuncture*. As Balibar argues,[126] a conjuncture is no longer merely a 'factional' or insignificant matter 'in the world history of structures'. Now, the nature of history itself is 'conjunctural', it has nothing but 'factions', 'insignificant' matters and 'exceptions'. These 'factions', 'insignificant' matters or 'exceptions' – or 'borders and edges' as they were termed in Althusser's writings from the 1980s – are not,

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[123] Balibar 1996, p. 115.
[124] Perhaps a symptom of Hegelianism is that Cullenberg uses the term 'totality' when describing Althusser's views on overdetermination (Cullenberg 1996, p. 137).
[125] Balibar 1996, p. 115.
[126] Ibid.

that is to say, 'isolated neighbourhoods' or 'islets'; rather, other conjunctures over- or underdetermine the timetable and direction of a national conjuncture and its development.

The capitalist world economy does not have a despotic centre that would have determined how matters developed in, for instance, Russia. Instead, the 'capitalist world economy' or 'imperialism' was a general framework or disposition for the complex and multifaceted whole formed by national and international conjunctures.

Following on from this, it could be argued that the 'lack of a centre' also does not mean that there do not exist even very strong overdetermining factors and dominating tendencies in the capitalist world order. Seen from the viewpoint of conjunctures, the development of capitalism is not about a single history of a capitalist 'world order', but of different and differently levelled national and international conjunctures, which together form what, with a certain degree of abstraction and generalisation, can be characterised as the capitalist world economy or the imperialist stage of capitalism. Thus the question is not about whether capitalism exists or not but about what kind of historical form 'capitalism' receives in each specific place and time.[127]

If, in over- and underdetermination, the question is about complex series of events in which there are unique and unrepeatable features, then instead of mechanical models of causality and totalities with a single centre, there is a temptation to arrive at opposite conclusions: that reality is an impenetrable chaos, in which innumerable different reasons, contradictions and chains of events have an influence, where the birth processes of emerging contradictions are, by their very nature, a unique and contingent series of events in which cannot be found any structural, 'permanent' factors and tendencies, on the basis of which contradictions and influential factors could be typified and identified.

Althusser sought answers to the questions of chance, necessity and contingency. These were addressed in particular in his posthumously published writings dealing with the notion of the aleatory. However, already before then (for instance in an appendix to the English translation of the article 'Contra-

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[127] For a succinct presentation of the dependency relationships and unique features of the capitalist world system (e.g. the global division of labour and relationships of dominancy) see Wallerstein 1983 (cf. also Wallerstein 1979).

diction and Overdetermination', published for the first time in 1969),[128] while criticising Engels' interpretation of determination by the economy 'in the last instance', Althusser refers to the problematics of chance and necessity.[129]

2.2.3. Engels and individual will

In the appendix to 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', Althusser continues his analysis of Engels' letter to Joseph Bloch (dated 21 September 1890). Althusser pays particular attention to those characterisations by Engels 'that I deliberately ignored in the preceding article'.[130] One such characterisation by Engels is the following:

> The various elements of the superstructure … in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements (the superstructures) in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events, whose inner connexion is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.[131]

According to Althusser, Engels here proposes a theoretical outline or model based on the dualism of chance-necessity: on the one hand, the microscopic infinity of events has an influence in society; on the other hand, there exists an 'economic movement' which, in the last instance, clears the way through these 'innumerable accidents'. Althusser states that such a model can have a 'heuristic' value but it does not explain why and how the economy manages to prevail.

The inexplicability is due to Engels having only two alternatives to chose from: 1.) Explaining the development of society with microscopic events. In this case, however, the explanation remains void because we are 'epistemologically helpless' in front of this infinity of events. And, to reiterate – as Engels himself also states – the 'inner connexion' of the 'things and events … is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as

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[128] Althusser 1979, pp. 117–28.
[129] The appendix is also included in the 1986 edition of *Pour Marx*, which I have used here (Althusser 1986).
[130] Althusser 1986, p. 117; Althusser 1979, p. 117.
[131] Engels cited in Althusser 1979, pp. 117–18.

negligible'. That leaves a second alternative: 2.) An economic movement that pushes its way through an opaque chaos characterised by accidents. According to Althusser, this explanation resembles the Marxist explanation – but only resembles it, because it does not explain *how* 'the economy picks its sovereign way'.[132] An appeal to the economy as the 'last instance' is insufficient as an explanation, for it is the very thing that needs to be explained. This, however, Engels does not do, for the role of the economy 'in the last instance' has only to be taken in good faith.[133]

According to Althusser, there is, however, yet another alternative, one that can be proposed in the analysis of the *historical forms* of the base and superstructure. And this indeed is what Marx does, for instance, in his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852). Unlike Marx, Engels passes over the historical forms, instead of taking them as the starting point of his analysis:

> It is astonishing to find Engels in this text presenting the *forms of the superstructure* as the source of a microscopic infinity of events whose inner connexion is unintelligible (and therefore negligible).[134]

Althusser does indeed wonder how Engels could pass so rapidly over the issue of the historical *forms* of the base and superstructure, particularly as the idea of Marx's 'Marxist' analysis, as in the above-mentioned *Eighteenth Brumaire*, is specifically that it is aimed at these forms because they are 'perfectly *knowable*, and in this respect they are the transparent reason of the *events* that derive from them'.[135]

Transcending Engels's model based on the dualism of accident and necessity, as well as presenting a historical explanation for it, requires choosing a *conceptual level* that would enable one to grasp the historical forms of the basis and superstructure in which, and only in which, the 'last instance' effect of the economy would be manifested.

In Engels's model the 'last instance' effect of the economy is, however, 'completely external' in relation to the microscopic infinity of events.[136] For Engels, the 'last instance' effect of the economy is defined as a separate

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[132] Althusser 1986, p. 118; Althusser 1979, p. 118.
[133] Althusser 1986, p. 119; Althusser 1979, p. 119.
[134] Ibid.; Althusser's emphasis.
[135] Ibid.; Althusser's emphasis.
[136] Ibid.

'historical event',[137] which emerges from the chaos of microscopic events as a *deus ex machina*. Marx, on the other hand, in his own analysis, does not confuse the 'historical effects of these factors' with their 'microscopic effects':

> The forms of the superstructures are indeed the cause of an infinity of events, but not all these events are *historical* …[138]

Althusser does not deny that a microscopic infinity of events would not continuously influence social formations. These can, however, not function as the theoretical starting point of an analysis. If, in Engels's model, the 'last instance' nature of the economy refers to the notion that the economy 'eventually' redeems its place – and does indeed emerge through the chaos of the microscopic infinity of events – then, with regard to Marx, the 'last instance' refers to the *process* of the evolvement (over- and underdetermination) of the historical and concrete forms of the base and superstructure, and not its assumed and desired 'end result'. Even though Marx uses abstract theoretical concepts, he does not lose sight of the concrete reality, and indeed grasps it specifically through such theoretical concepts. Althusser encapsulates this in his own self-criticism, referring to the concepts of position, function and *Träger* [carrier] as referred to by Marx:[139]

> Marx constantly uses the concepts of position and function, and the concept of *Träger*, meaning a support of *relations*: but this is not in order to make concrete realities disappear, to reduce real men to pure functions of supports – it is in order to make mechanisms intelligible by grasping them through their concept, and beginning with these (since this is the only possible way) to make intelligible the concrete realities which can only be grasped by making a detour through abstraction.[140]

Following Marx's analysis, Althusser emphasises how the economic base and the primary contradiction are in an overdetermining way influencing the historical development and formation of political institutions and what kind of overdetermining repercussions they have, in turn, on the historical form of the modes of production and relations of production at each moment.

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137 Althusser 1986, p. 120; Althusser 1979, p. 120.
138 Althusser 1986, p. 119; Althusser 1979, p. 119; Althusser's emphasis.
139 For the concept of 'Träger', cf. Mepham 1985, pp. 149–55.
140 Althusser 1976b, pp. 129–30; Althusser's emphasis.

The individual will

In the second part of the appendix, the so-called 'second level', Althusser moves on to analyse the end of Engels's letter to Bloch, and starts by quoting Engels at length:

> History is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each again has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant – the historical event. This may again itself be viewed as the product of a power which works as a whole, *unconsciously* and without volition. … Thus past history procedes in the manner of a natural process and is essentially subject to the same laws of motion.[141]

Here, the infinity of microscopic events is defined as 'conflicts between many individual wills'. The individual wills unknowingly participate in the process of history, the 'resultant' of which points towards the 'historical event'. In the model that Engels borrowed from nineteenth-century physics (evident in the comparison to the parallelogram of forces), his actual object turns out to be 'the individual will [*la volonté individuelle*]' familiar from eighteenth-century social and judicial ideologies. This 'revelation' by Althusser is particularly important if one takes into account the historical connection of the bourgeois judicial ideology to the concept of the birth of the modern subject.[142] In other words, Engels's view refers back to the subject-ideological discourses of the eighteenth century, though, on the conceptual level used by Marx, it is possible to criticise such subject-centred viewpoints.

Likewise, it becomes evident that the 'end result' of the conflict between individual wills – a historical event – is no longer external in relation to individual wills but the 'internal essence' of the action of these wills.[143]

Engels's ad hoc-type specification in the contradiction between individual wills does not, however, remove the problem that occurs in the beginning. There are still only two alternatives, even though the presentation method has

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[141] Engels cited in Althusser 1979, p. 120; Engels's emphasis.
[142] Cf. Althusser 1976a, p. 107, Althusser 1972c, pp. 157–8.
[143] Althusser 1986, p. 121, Althusser 1979, p. 121.

been retouched: 1.) The 'intersecting forces' of the innumerable individual wills, which are impossible to analyse due to their number; 2.) The end result of the forces, their resultant.

With the latter alternative, one must continue benevolently to trust that a 'desired' resultant emerges from the innumerable conflicts of individual wills:

> Once again, either we trust to the infinite (that is, the indeterminate, episte-mological void) for the production in the final resultant of *the* resultant we are hoping to *deduce*: the one that will coincide with economic determination in the last instance, etc., that is, *we trust a void to produce a fullness*.[144]

Engels still does not present theoretical reasons why *specifically this* economic last-instance resultant encapsulating the 'harmony' of the wills comes about, and why the result is not something else:

> … what is there to prove that *it will be what we want, the economic*, and not something else, politics, or religion?[145]

As mentioned earlier, Althusser proposed that, instead of the analysis of the microscopic events, the starting point and object – *contra* the epistemological void – must be those forms and events of the historical base and superstructure where the microscopic reasons are manifested. Now, Althusser adds that the core of the problem is located specifically in the concept of the 'individual will':

> But unfortunately this so secure basis establishes nothing at all, this so clear principle merely leads to darkness – unless it withdraws into itself, reiterating *its own transparency* as a fixed proof of all that is expected of it. Precisely what is *this transparency?* We must recognize that *this transparency is nothing but the transparency of the presuppositions of classical bourgeois ideology and bourgeois political economy*. What is the starting-point for this classical ideology, whether it is Hobbes on the composition of the conatus, Locke and Rousseau on the generation of the general will, Helvetius and Holbach on the production of the general interest, Smith and Ricardo (the writings abound) on atomistic behaviour, what is the starting-point if not precisely the confrontation of these famous *individual wills* which are by no means the

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[144] Althusser 1986, p. 123; Althusser 1979, p. 123; Althusser's emphasis.
[145] Althusser 1986, pp. 123–4; Althusser 1979, p. 123; Althusser's emphasis.

starting-point for reality, but for a *representation* of reality, for *a myth* intended to *provide a basis* (for all eternity) in nature (that is, for all eternity) for *the objectives* of the bourgeoisie?[146]

If one chooses the 'individual will' as the conceptual starting point, then explanations again remain epistemologically 'void', or one ends up in 'vertigous' philosophical speculations involving a 'clash of wills':

> … and we find it impossible to distinguish in it between the epistemological void and the philosophical vertigo, since they are nothing but *one and the same thing*.[147]

When fitting the concepts of 'the last instance', 'base' and 'superstructure' into the philosophical concept of the 'individual will', Engels takes a step back to the terrain of philosophy (in fact, to eighteenth-century philosophy-of-law discourses).[148] Marxist concepts become 'non-concepts', which no longer explain historical events, but instead mystify them and make them a matter of belief, in which case the theoretical explanation of historical events turns into ideological mysticism:

> What makes such and such an event *historical* is not the fact that it is an *event*, but precisely its *insertion into forms which are themselves historical (the forms of the structure and of the superstructure)*, into forms which have nothing to do with the bad infinity which Engels retains even when he has left the vicinity of his original model, forms which, on the contrary, are perfectly *definable* and *knowable* (knowable, Marx insisted, and Lenin after him, through empirical, that is, non-philosophical, scientific disciplines).[149]

Althusser's critique of Engels is interesting in many ways. It is clearly evident that the notions of 'the last instance', base and superstructure, are *theoretical concepts* which help one to grasp the historical forms of the base and superstructure in any particular case, as well as their historical processes characterised by over- and underdetermination. Historical forms or events are thus

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[146] Althusser 1986, pp. 124–5; Althusser 1979, pp. 124–5; Althusser's emphasis.
[147] Althusser 1986, p. 127; Althusser 1979, p. 127; Althusser's emphasis.
[148] Althusser 1986, p. 128, Althusser 1979, p. 128.
[149] Althusser 1986, p. 126; Althusser 1979, p. 126; Althusser's emphasis; translation modified.

not manifested merely as the 'unexplainable' or arbitrary chaos of microscopic reasons: rather, this 'chaos' can be sorted out and understood theoretically from the viewpoint of the historical development of contradictions.

Here, 'understanding' refers not only to speculative and belief-based ideological worldviews, such as philosophical systems. The goal is the concrete but theoretically substantiated analysis of social formations. The analysis is targeted at the contradictory processes of over- and underdetermination in which economic factors have a central role, but one which is always and everywhere displaced and/or condensed by other 'impure', time- and place-related factors. The 'last instance' of the economy is not the 'guarantor' of the historical development of social formations: nevertheless, it offers a theoretical starting point from which the development of the social formations and the historical forms of the base and superstructure it received at any instance, can, at least to some extent, be understood and explained. Thus the notion of the 'last instance' also opens the way beyond the political forms of the superstructure and their 'microscopic events' as it directs attention: i) towards those over- and underdetermining effects that economic contradictions have when political institutions and practices are forming, and, ii) towards the question of how the latter, in turn, influence the historical forms of the means of production and relations of production.

Even though reality is characterised by complexity, this does not lead to an epistemological void and/or a faith-based belief that the 'economy' in the last instance 'takes care of things'. With the help of the problematics of over- and underdetermination, it is indeed possible to develop theoretical analyses in which there is no need, as with Engels, to brush aside complexity, for it is still possible to get a theoretical understanding of it.[150]

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[150] In connection with the theory of the 'weakest link', Althusser also presents among his writings from the 1980s on aleatory materialism the following interesting remark: 'If it is theoretically acceptable to talk of the conditions without sliding into the empiricisms or the irrationality of "that's how it is" and "chance", it is because Marxism conceives the "conditions" as the (real, concrete, current) existence of the contradictions that constitute the whole of a historical process' (Althusser 1986, p. 213; Althusser 1979, p. 207). Even though the actual historical situation in Russia was complex and many unique and 'exceptional' factors influenced it, the Revolution was not, however, an 'inexplicable coincidence' or a 'whim of fate'. It is possible to explain the Russian case or series of events from the viewpoint of imperialism or a viewpoint that *combines* the unique circumstances of the country. Instead of *coincidence*, *hazard* or *chance*, Althusser uses the term *développement inégal* ('unequal development') when referring to the *unequal* development of capitalism and the (at least some degree of) *unpredictability*

Althusser does not claim, however – as neither did Freud in his interpretation of dreams – that all contradictions (and other constituting elements) influencing complex processes could be traced and their effects foreseen. He also does not assume that it would be possible to predict with certainty the events of history. The analysis of contradictions always remains incomplete because 'missing' reasons beyond knowledge always influence the contradiction that is the object of analysis at any given moment.[151] Reality is 'opaque' or 'obscure' for the person who analyses it, or for the subject acting within it.[152] However, this does not mean that it would not be possible to say anything exact about these processes (or that dreams should be considered merely mystic nightly phenomena or meaningless 'remnants' of the day, which could be dismissed with the disparaging comment 'but that was just a dream').[153]

Even though it is impossible to fully explain or anticipate how, for instance, the primary contradiction of the economy has an over- and underdetermining influence in some specific contradiction, the 'last instance' thesis, however, *helps* the person making the analysis to get an understanding of the economic factors influencing this contradiction.

Thus, complexity does not refer to the chaotic nature of matter or to microscopic reasons, but to the complex development processes of their historical

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that is linked with it. It is not possible to anticipate the development of some known society in the light of facile dialectical schemes. Prediction instead requires concrete *situational analyses* of a concrete situation. These, however, are not empirical analyses. From the viewpoint of empiricism, the situations seem 'arbitrary' or 'such as they are at this particular moment'.

[151] Cf. Balibar 1996, p. 115.

[152] Freud states about the unconscious: 'It is essential to abandon the overvaluation of the property of being conscious before it becomes possible to form any correct view of the origin of what is mental. In Lipp's words [1897, p. 146f.], the unconscious must be assumed to be the general basis of psychical life. The unconscious is the larger sphere, which includes within it the smaller sphere of the conscious. Everything conscious has an unconscious preliminary stage; whereas what is unconscious may remain at that stage and nevertheless claim to be regarded as having the full value of a psychical process. The unconscious is the true psychical reality; *in its inner-most nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of unconsciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs*' (Freud, 1965, p. 651; Freud's emphasis). As is well-known, Freud did not draw the conclusion that it would be completely impossible to study the conscious and the unconscious but rather that the study of them could not be consciousness-centred research or empirical research, but rather such research must be directed beyond the 'immediately given' to those phenomena which form consciousness.

[153] Cf., e.g., Freud 1965, p. 527, where he dismisses the statements that belittle the meaning of dreams as 'esprit d'escalier' on the part of psychic censorship.

forms in which 'microscopic reasons' appear. However, in the context which the microscopic infinity of events provides, it is also possible to get a theoretical understanding of them which differs from the abstract schemes tied to the way of thinking characteristic of the Hegelian expressive totality. In his article 'On the Materialist Dialectic', Althusser encapsulates these as follows:

> . . . Nevertheless, the fact that the Hegelian type of necessity and the Hegelian essence of development should be rejected does not mean at all that we are in the theoretical void of subjectivity, of 'pluralism' or contingency. Quite contrary, only on condition that we free ourselves from these Hegelian presuppositions can we be really sure of escaping this void. Indeed, it is because the process is complex and possesses a structure in dominance that its development, and all the typical aspects of this development, can really be explained.[154]

Althusser's critique of Engels is also enlightening when it comes to interpreting Althusser's 'aleatory' writings from the 1980s. When Althusser deals (in writings published after his death) with, for instance, the problematics of the 'aleatory' or 'encounter', as well as the problematics of events and conjunctures, the question of the relationship between the 'surprising' and 'fixed' nature of the conjuncture arises. Even though conjunctures are always in a certain way fixed or organised, it does not follow from this that even radical surprises could not occur in the conjuncture, as a result of which prevailing 'regularities' are questioned or could be questioned.

As the following chapters will show, in his writings from the 1980s, Althusser attempted to understand – particularly through Machiavelli – the problematics of change in the conjuncture (e.g., the conditions for political practice) from the point of view of the people or groups of people that live within it. Althusser interprets Machiavelli as the 'theoretician of praxis' but one who does not, however, propose a general theory about practice ('practical philosophy'). Instead, in his writings, Machiavelli positions himself and his work within his own conjuncture in a way that makes it possible for the actor to present problems of political practice from the viewpoint of the goals of his political project.

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[154] Althusser 1986, p. 221; Althusser 1979, p. 215.

Before moving on to Althusser's aleatory materialism and his interpretation of Machiavelli, it is worthwhile discussing: i) Althusser's self-criticism and ii) Althusser's analysis of the revolutionary leader Lenin. Althusser's self-criticism is both temporally and theoretically parallel with his text *Machiavelli et nous*. His analysis of Lenin is also relevant because, already there, Althusser touches on questions linked with the problematic of the 'man of action', which later, in his interpretation of Machiavelli, takes on a central position.

2.3. Althusser's self-criticism

As a way of introducing Althusser's self-criticism, it is worthwhile recalling the theoretical and political opponents from the 1960s and 1970s in relation to which Althusser posited his own theory.[155] From the point of view of the present study, Althusser's main critique is targeted at: i) the previously discussed Hegelian Marxism and its evolutionistic, economic and mechanistic derivatives; ii) the dogmatic doctrines of the French Communist Party (PCF) regarding theory and practice; iii) theoretical humanism and the '"Marxist" philosophical twaddle' based on it.[156]

According to Althusser, what these three positions have in common is that they treat Marxist theory as 'the first available ideology'.[157] Marxist theory is transformed into dogmas and belief-based doctrines or subject-centred philosophies supporting existing humanist ideologies. Such doctrines include viewpoints, drawing on Lukács and young Hegelianism (for example, Roger Garaudy's Marxism), that posit that within the proletariat the essence of humankind itself is manifested as 'alienation'. This essence then 'becomes real', along with the revolution and the discharging of the capitalist relations of production which maintained such 'alienation'. There are also economic doctrines about how capitalism inevitably evolves towards its own destruction.

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[155] A good introduction to Althusser's critique and the critique aimed towards him is contained in the Foreword to the English edition of *Éléments d'autocritique* (Althusser 1976b). Cf. also Sprinker 1987, p. 178, note 2, which lists and briefly assesses the literature dealing with Althusser's political context and other literature that can be placed within that political context; as well as Benton 1984 and Elliott 2006; for the history of the French Communist Party (PCF), cf. Courtois and Lazar 1995.

[156] Althusser 1976a, p. 136; Althusser 1990b, p. 212.

[157] Ibid.

Likewise, Althusser criticises Lucien Sève – who briefly enjoyed a kind of semi-official position in the PCF – for the ultimate subject-centredness of his philosophy. Even though Sève indeed attempted with his thesis about the 'ex-centration of essence [*ex-centration de l'essence*]' to distance himself from the notion of subject-centredness, his attempt remained a compromise. According to Althusser, Sève fails because there is no such 'centre' from which an 'ex-centration' could begin.[158]

In his theoretical critique, Althusser emphasises the political-intellectual problems in the relationship between theory and political practice. These problems had an influence both inside the PCF as well as in its relationship to its opponents. Inside the Party, the problem was condensed in the relationship between the masses and the leadership. In the pamphlet and series of articles Althusser wrote at the end of the 1970s, he did indeed criticise the PCF leadership's relationship with the working class (masses) and highlighted the theoretical starting points influencing the background of this relationship.[159] In his articles, originally published in *Le Monde* then subsequently published as a single volume *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste*, Althusser criticises

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[158] Althusser 1972a, p. 94; Althusser 1976b, p. 96. There is a very long footnote in Sève's monumental work *Marxisme et théorie de la personalité* (Sève 1975, pp. 97–106, note 1) in which he presents his own critique of Althusser (see also Sève 1980, pp. 428–37). Sève attempts to show that the 'mature Marx' does not give up the category of 'man' as radically as Althusser claims. To support his argument Sève refers to the *Grundrisse*, written in 1857–8, but not published in French until 1967, which Althusser, in Sève's opinion, does not take into account in his interpretation. According to Sève, Marx does not give up the idea of 'human essence' but only its abstract interpretation. However, Sève himself does not pay attention to the fact that Althusser by no means denies that real 'people' live and act in societies. The question is rather whether Althusser distances himself from a form of Marxism where man is the centre of theory – as an abstract or non-abstract 'essence'. Instead, for Althusser, the starting point of theory and the object of analysis are those contradictory social relationships in which real human beings live and act in relation to each another. The essential point is thus not whether Althusser can be 'caught out' for not noticing some remnant of theoretical humanism contained in the works of the 'mature' Marx. More important than such 'philological' analyses, favoured by many Althusser critics, is the question of how Althusser furthers the theoretical anti-humanism contained within the thinking of the 'mature Marx'.

[159] Althusser 1978a and 1978b. Althusser had joined the PCF in 1948 but resigned from it only after the death of his wife Hélène Rytman (1910–80) (Althusser 1992a, p. 189; Althusser 1993c, pp. 197–200). In his autobiography, Althusser discusses the question of why he did not resign earlier. The main reason would have been that by resigning he would have lost all opportunities to influence the party line (see Althusser 1994a; Althusser 1993c, especially Chapter 19).

the PCF leadership's notion of both theory and political practice. In his view, the PCF leadership had forgotten the importance of 'the concrete analysis of the concrete situation' emphasised and practised by Marx.[160] Instead, the Central Committee appealed to the 'consciousness' of the masses in order for them to adopt the doctrines of the party programme. This revealed the Party's idealist notion of politics, in which consciousness is defined as the solution to all problems. The party leadership was not interested in what the party members had to say, but assumed that they were the 'external truth' that needed only be conscious of the ideas manipulated by the party leadership. The leadership assumed that, when the consciousness of the members changed in accordance with the party programme, they would finally begin to act in a way as proposed by the programme, and thus the turn towards socialism could begin.[161]

For the opponents of Marxism, such party dogmatism was an easy target and a weak theoretical opponent. Althusser does indeed emphasise that it is necessary to return from history to the science that came about as a result of Marx's developmental work, which began with *The German Ideology* and culminated in *Capital*. One had to return to Marx and rethink what Marx had thought.[162] It is only as a high-standard science able to withstand critique that Marxist theory can be the revolutionary 'weapon' of the proletariat. Althusser set this as the goal of his own research projects. The first fruits of this project were the collection of articles *Pour Marx* and *Lire 'Le Capital'*, both from 1965. The critique in these works is aimed not only at the official Marxism and economism of the PCF but also the young Marx's 'theoretical humanism' drawn from the theories of alienation.

Althusser continued the latter critique, first in an article – a response to a critique of Althusser by the British philosopher John Lewis – published in English in autumn 1972, and then in an extended version of the same theme published in French in 1973.[163] In the article, Althusser criticised the

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[160] Althusser 1978a, e.g. pp. 23–30 and pp. 93–6.
[161] Althusser 1978a, pp. 24–5 and pp. 100–2.
[162] Althusser 1976a, p. 136; Althusser 1990b, p. 212.
[163] John Lewis presented his critique, 'The Althusser Case', at the beginning of 1972 in the journal *Marxism Today*. Its editor-in-chief James Klugmann invited Althusser to respond, and his response was published in the autumn that same year, and as an extended version in French (Althusser 1972a) the following year (cf. Lock 1976, pp. vii–viii).

philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he considered Lewis's mentor. Althusser developed his own views on the relationship between theory and political practice in his self-criticism published the following year.

I will deal with Althusser's critique of Lewis later. In terms of Althusser's critique of Sartre, however, we should briefly note now that Althusser maintained that the *Critique de la raison dialectique* represented a return to the Cartesian subject-centred philosophy that preceded Marxism and Freudianism. Even though Sartre wanted to 'render his services [*rendre des services*]' in the development of Marxist and Freudian theory, he becomes, just like Lewis, a hindrance to their development.[164] In his theory about human freedom and the human situation, Sartre takes a 'petit bourgeois idealistic position'.[165] This is because his theories are based on an individual-society dualism, with man at the centre, and not those historical circumstances and social relationships born as a result of the class struggles, where 'humans' become subjects. Sartre's anthropological and anthropocentric subject-centred philosophy strengthens those dominant ideologies where the 'human' is put at the centre of reality, instead of the 'human' being studied from the viewpoint of the historical development of social relationships. In other words, Sartre's philosophy covers over contradictory relationships, even though one should specifically pay attention to them in order to be able to understand them also in a theoretically reflective way.[166]

In his self-criticism, Althusser further develops his own view of the relationship between theory and political practice, which is encapsulated in the thesis of 'the revolutionary nature of theory'. He states that, at the time of writing *Lire 'Le Capital'* (1964–5), he and his students had not yet fully explored all those *consequences* that the change of terrain – due to the epistemological break in Marx's thinking – had brought forth in regard to understanding practice and theory as well as the relationship between them.[167] Developing such

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[164] Althusser 1972a, pp. 42–5; Althusser 1976b, pp. 60–1.

[165] Althusser 1972a, p. 96; Althusser 1976b, p. 98.

[166] Althusser 1972a, pp. 95–8; Althusser 1976b, pp. 97–9.

[167] Althusser 1976b pp. 102–3, 105–6, 110, 122. Althusser presents his self-critique in a systematic way in *Élements d'autocritique*, written in 1972. Self-critical elements are contained already, however, in the lecture series 'Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants', held in 1967–8 (published 1974; see Althusser 1990b, pp. 69–165), in which he presents his second 'definition of philosophy': 'Philosophy is class struggle in the field of theory'; the work 'Lénine et la philosophie', written in 1968 (Althusser

an understanding required a realisation of what the change of terrain means with regard to the positioning of Marxist theory. In Althusser's own opinion, in 1965 he and his students had continued to assess science (and philosophy) too much from the 'position of bourgeois science'. This had meant falling for the temptation of 'theoreticism' and failing to understand the whole meaning of the 'revolutionary nature of theory' with regard to Marx and Marxism.[168]

The question is not only about the science and theory that revolutionaries can use as a tool in their revolutionary actions (as a mirror image for science and theory which the counter-revolutionaries can utilise), but also about the science 'which they [the revolutionaries] can use because it rests on *revolutionary class theoretical positions*'.[169] For instance, when Marx establishes and explicates in *Capital* the theory of history, he also at the same time implicitly establishes a new philosophical practice. Althusser presented this idea already in his writings from the early 1960s (e.g. *Lire 'Le Capital'*), but it is only in his self-criticism that he delves into the issue of the possible revolutionary importance of *Capital* for the working class movement. Even though *Capital* is a *theoretical* work, and must withstand scientific critique, it is also a *political* work that can

1969; cf. Althusser 1972c, pp. 27–68); and the Preface to the Italian edition of Marx's *Das Kapital*, where he presents critical remarks on his own work *Lire 'Le Capital'*. Furthermore, in his counter-critique of English Marxist philosopher John Lewis (written in 1972, included in Althusser 1973 and in English Althusser 1976b) Althusser uses concepts and applies viewpoints that he had already developed in his self-critique (see Elliott 2006, pp. 178–203). One must also note that the emphasis of the self-critique on the primacy of the class struggle and revolutionary practice are parallel with the events of May 1968. The events of 1968 were indeed central influential contextual factors in Althusser's self-critique and the critique of 'theoreticism' contained within it.

[168] Althusser 1976b, pp. 120, 122, and 130–1.

[169] Althusser 1976b, p. 130; Althusser's emphasis. It is interesting to note that the first known version of *Machiavel et nous* was written in 1972, just a couple of years before his self-critique (published in 1974). This is perhaps no coincidence because in the former lecture manuscript Althusser attempts to show the subversiveness of Machiavelli's position (see Chapter 4.3), which is also a main objective of the self-critique, though the main emphasis is on Marx and not Machiavelli. After the publication of *Machiavel et nous* it is indeed possible to think that it was specifically reading Machiavelli that offered Althusser material for his self-critique. Machiavelli's subversiveness is based on the fact that his writings, such as *The Prince*, were not traditional 'theoretical' texts but rather writings in which he took or produced the revolutionary position in his own context that was characterised by the conflict between the few [*grandi, pochi*] and the many [*moltitudine, molti*].

be of assistance to the working class in understanding, in a theoretically highly sophisticated way, its own social position and the conditions for changing it.[170]

In his self-criticism, Althusser states that the *primary* criterion of 'revolution-ariness' is the relationship of theory (or philosophy) to revolutionary practice and social contradictions. Althusser emphasises that, in Marxism, one must be able to develop theoretical concepts by means of which one emphasises 'the real problems of concrete history'.[171] Otherwise, Marxism would become (and, indeed, had already become) a dogmatic doctrinal structure that covers over such problems or proposes unfounded solutions. Marxism must be a (self-) critical science and not propagandist ideology or belief-based slogans.[172] This science will be a revolutionary science if it succeeds, through its theoretical ideas, to bring forth the real contradictions in social formations and dismantle the dominating forms of thought that obscure them.[173] In 'Soutenance d'Amiens' Althusser states as follows:

> Thus, in opposition to the subversion to which Marx's thought had been subjected, it seems to me indispensable to lay stress on one simple idea: the unprecedented and revolutionary character of this thought. *Unprecedented*, because Marx had – in a work of conceptual elaboration which begins with *The German Ideology* and culminates in *Capital* – founded what we might call, as a first approximation, the science of history. *Revolutionary* because this scientific discovery which armed the proletariat in its struggle caused a complete upset in philosophy; not only by causing philosophy to revise its categories in order to bring them into line with the new science and its effects, but also and above all by giving philosophy the means, in the form of of an understanding of its real relation to the class struggle, of taking responsibility for and transforming its own practice.[174]

When Althusser develops his theoretical antihumanism, the critique of the concept of 'man' involves not only a theoretical critique of theoretical human-

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[170] Althusser 1976b, pp. 117–18; cf. 105–6, 110–11, 130–1 and 146–50.
[171] Althusser 1976b, p. 110.
[172] Althusser criticised the PCF party leadership: instead of seriously discussing the relationship of theory, analysis and ideology to the political practice of the masses, the Party's strategies, ideologies, theories and analyses were, he argued, instruments and tools for the manipulation of its membership (Althusser 1978a, p. 102).
[173] Althusser 1976b, p. 116.
[174] Althusser 1976b, p. 174.

ism but also a critique of 'humanistic' forms of thought, which have a domi-
nant position in society and which are central to bourgeois science and ideol-
ogy. From a political viewpoint, theoretical anti-humanism is indeed a political
intervention where it (i) sets itself in opposition to the world view of human-
istic ideology, and (ii) sets forth the problem of the subject in a way which
enables a theoretical critique of humanistic forms of thought and ideologies.
Althusser emphasises that in this intervention it is not primarily a question of
the abstractly, 'theoreticisingly' set antagonisms between 'structuralism' and
'humanism' – this is just a pseudo-antagonism[175] – but about developing a the-
ory that would highlight the ideological-political dimensions of humanistic
theoretical categories from the class position of the working class.

A concrete example of the critique of the starting points of theoretical
humanism, and an intervention on the 'battlefield' of philosophy, is the pre-
viously mentioned reply from Althusser to Lewis. Althusser criticises Lewis's
thesis 'man makes history' for being an ideological thesis that mystifies both
'man' and 'history'. For all his 'Marxism', Lewis positions himself within the
terrain of philosophy, in the ideological position of bourgeois science, thus ulti-
mately serving those whose interests it is, as a generalisation, to talk about
'man' and not, for instance, classes, class conflicts and class struggles.

> How could one carry on the class struggle on the basis of the philosophical
> Thesis: 'it is man who makes history'? It might be said that this Thesis
> is useful in fighting against a certain conception of 'History': history in
> submission to the decisions of a Deity or the Ends of Providence. But,
> speaking seriously, that is no longer a problem!
>
> It might be said that this Thesis serves *everyone*, without distinction, whether
> he be a capitalist, a petty-bourgeois or a worker, because these are all 'men'.
> But that is not true. It serves those whose interests it is to talk about 'man'
> and not about the masses, about 'man' and not about classes and the class
> struggle. . . . If the workers are told that 'it is men who make history'. You do
> not have be a great thinker to see that, sooner or later, that helps to disorient or
> disarm them. It tends to make them think that they are all-powerful as men,
> whereas in fact they are disarmed as workers in the face of the power which
> is really in command: that of the bourgeoisie, which controls the material

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[175] Althusser 1976b, p. 128.

conditions (the means of production) and the political conditions (the state) determining history. The humanist line turns workers away from the class struggle, prevents them from making use of the only power they possess: that of *their organization as a class* and *their class organizations* (the trade unions, the party), by which they wage *their* class struggle.[176]

Even though, in Marxist theory, one must be able to show in a scientifically valid way the ideological nature of such categories as 'man' and the historical connection to the class interests of the bourgeoisie, one must not develop alternative ideological concepts in their place. Instead, one must develop the theoretical tools that assist in explicating and analysing the conditions of actual struggles in history.

In his self-criticism, Althusser does indeed give up the idea that the distinction between science and ideology could be defined once and for all as well as in a universal way. Such a distinction expresses a rationalist-speculative interpretation, the theoretical basis of which does not take into account the position of Marxist theory in the class struggle, even though it 'correctly' highlights the theoretical-conceptual epistemological break that occurs with the development of Marxist thinking in relation to the logical starting points of bourgeois ideology (e.g. the category of the subject):

> I wanted to defend [in the '60s] Marxism against the real dangers of *bourgeois* ideology: it was necessary to stress its revolutionary new character; it was therefore necessary to 'prove' that there is an antagonism between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, that Marxism could not have developed in Marx or in the labour movement except given a radical and unremitting *break* with bourgeois ideology, an unceasing struggle against the assaults of this ideology. This thesis was correct. It still is correct.

> But instead of explaining this *historical* fact in all its dimensions – social, political, ideological and theoretical – I reduced it to a simple *theoretical* fact: to the epistemological '*break*' which can be observed in Marx's works from 1845 onwards. As a consequence, I was led to give a *rationalist* explanation of the 'break', contrasting *truth* and *error* in the form of a speculative distinction between *science* and *ideology*, in the singular and in general. The contrast

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[176] Althusser 1976b, pp. 63–4.

between Marxism and bourgeois ideology thus became simply a special case of this distinction. Reduction + interpretation: from this rationalist-speculative drama, the class struggle was practically absent.[177]

In relation to class struggle and social conflicts, Marxist science is not, and should not, be a 'neutral' science, but, rather, it must locate itself in the position of the proletariat in the class struggle. This does not mean, however, that Marxist science should have an arrogant attitude towards the achievements of 'bourgeois' science. Instead, Marxist science should aim to make historical reality understandable in a way that withstands theoretical critique, yet also being aware of the fact that it serves the goals of the proletariat in the class struggle and that scientific disputes also include aspects that refer to the class struggle. This is why science, despite its scientificity, is ideological in the sense defined by Althusser after his self-criticism; that is, there is no longer a general opposition between science and ideology.[178] If Marxist science becomes a dogmatic system, it is no longer science but rather ideological propaganda in a sense that is opposite to the word *science*, in which case, amongst others, the intellectuals will reject it as unscientific rubbish, as Althusser stated (in 1976) when referring to Lysenko's and the Stalinist 'doctrine of two sciences'.[179]

In order to understand Althusser's self-criticism, it is important to note that it is not primarily about a change 'within the theory' or a 'theoretical' change in his thinking. Althusser's interpretation of the central concepts of Marxism and the philosophical *differentia specifica* – 'position' – for instance in relation to Hegelianism and theoretical humanism, is essentially the same before and after the self-criticism.[180] Put briefly, Althusser is a theoretical anti-humanist both before and after the self-criticism. Althusser refers to this continuity in his theoretical thinking in the 'Soutenance d'Amiens', which was written after the self-criticism:

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[177] Althusser 1976b, pp. 105–6; Althusser's emphasis.

[178] Cf. Althusser 1976b pp. 119 and 147–8.

[179] Althusser 1977b, pp. 15–16. According to Ted Benton, Althusser emphasised that self-critique must not lead to the rejection of the requirements of the theoretical status of historical materialism (Benton 1984, 1987). However, Benton does not pay adequate attention to the problematic of the relationship between the theoretical and the practical contained within the self-critique, and its importance when, for example, assessing the nature of intellectual action in society.

[180] On the other hand, Benton suspects that simultaneously fulfilling the demands of both the revolutionary nature of theory and the scientific nature of theory may be more difficult than Althusser believed (Benton 1984, p. 92).

No doubt Marx's philosophy is, as Lenin said, contained in *Capital* but in a practical state, just as it is also contained in the great struggles of the labour movement. I decided that it had to be extracted, and basing myself on the available fragments and examples, I tried to give it a form resembling its concept. That is why the question of Marxist philosophy naturally occupied the centre of my attention. I did not make it the centre of the world, I did not raise philosophy to the level of command, but I had to make this philosophical detour in order to grapple with the radical character of Marx's work.

This conviction has always been with me. I would now formulate it differently from in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, but I consider that I made no mistake in locating philosophy as the place from which Marx can be understood, because that is where his position is summed up.[181]

The essential change does indeed concern the way in which Althusser outlines the socio-political and ideological dimensions and consequences of Marxist science (and the epistemological break) as well as the critical and revolutionary positioning of its followers with regard to these practices. In other words, with his self-criticism, Althusser went into more detail than previously on the issues of the political, social and ideological consequences of the philosophical position that Marx had taken. This change has repercussions on Althusser's views on philosophy, science and ideology and the relations between them. As has become evident earlier, with the self-criticism he no longer pitted science and ideology against each other. Instead, the ideological character of science refers primarily to the relationship between science and the class struggle and not a lack of 'scientificity'.

2.3.1. Elliott's 'theoreticist' interpretation of Althusser

Althusser's self-criticism has turned out to be a stumbling block for Althusser scholars. A good example of this can be seen in Gregory Elliott's book *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, which nevertheless is skilfully written. Elliott's interpretation can be called, referring to Althusser's own terminology, 'theoreticist [*théoriciste*]'. Such a description is justified by the fact that Elliott does not pay

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[181] Althusser 1976b, pp. 174–5; my emphasis.

much attention to the problematics of the relationship that emerges in the self-criticism between theory and practice or between philosophy and politics, nor to the theoretical importance of these. Instead, he complains how, in his self-criticism, Althusser 'retreated from the highly sophisticated and original versions of Marxist philosophy and historical materialism of 1962–5 into the schematic Marxism-Leninism of 1968–74'.[182]

Elliott does not, however, take into account that also in Althusser's self-critical-based views about the relation of philosophy and science to political practice and class struggle, the question is about a *theoretical* contribution. The essential importance of this contribution is that it offers theoretical tools and viewpoints with which to analyse the relation of social contradictions in philosophy and science. Additionally, the self-criticism offers starting points for the theoretical analysis of the social conditions of intellectual activity. One must not, as Elliott does, reduce the self-criticism to an expression of the political conjunctures of its time (for instance, Althusser's supposed political move towards Marxism-Leninism). Instead, one should pay attention to the theoretical contribution Althusser's self-criticism makes to the relationship between theory and practice; an important contribution that transcends its own time and is worth developing further. The self-criticism can be used as a theoretical starting point when explicating, for instance, the philosophical concepts that are generally held to be 'perennial' and 'universal', such as 'man' and 'citizen', the connections to the historical contexts of the philosophers and philosophies using these concepts, and the social relationships and contradictions that influence them. In short, Althusser's self-criticism offers the tools and viewpoints by which it is possible to pay attention to the connections between the dominant ways of thinking in philosophy and their historical-social context at any given time, as well as the intellectual role of philosophers in renewing and questioning such ways of thinking.

In the appendix to *Lénine et la philosophie*, Althusser reminds us – perhaps also here self-critically – that teachers of philosophy *are* teachers, in other words intellectuals who are employed by and subjected to servicing a particular educational system. Most philosophers accept this, and settle for working within a practice and position of petty-bourgeois ideology.[183]

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[182] Elliott 2006, p. 222.
[183] Althusser 1972c, p. 46; Althusser 1971, pp. 67–8.

Like Marx and Lenin, Machiavelli is for Althusser a writer whose works' subversive character remains elusive [*insaissable*] if the revolutionary character of their theoretical and political position is not understood. Assessed in this light, the subversive nature of Machiavelli is not based primarily on the radical nature of his 'realistic' theses but on the way in which he *positions* himself and his writings in relation to the theoretical and political conjuncture of the early *cinquecento* Apennine peninsula. The ideas contained in the self-criticism are indeed present in Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli – and one may suspect that Machiavelli, the organic intellectual in the time of the rising city-state bourgeoisie, is present behind the lines or between the lines of Althusser's self-critical texts.

Before moving on to these questions, however, it is worthwhile discussing Althusser's 'Machiavellian' aleatory interpretation, which he presented already in the 1960s, of Lenin's actions in Russia in 1917. This interpretation, contained in the article 'Sur la dialectique matérialiste'[184] in the section titled 'La pratique politique marxiste', is noteworthy, firstly because it encapsulates the political meaning of the critique of the Hegelian *expressive totality*; and, secondly, because it refers to the central question of the next chapters: what is political practice or politics?

Althusser's analysis of Lenin can indeed be considered a kind of agenda that he is drawing up on the problematics of political practice, the question of the contents of which he returned to in those later writings eventually published after his death.

2.4. The 'Machiavellian' Lenin

According to Althusser, it is possible to extract from Marx's writings (such as *Capital*) his philosophy, though it remains in a 'practical state [*à l'état pratique*]'.[185] Correspondingly, it is possible to extract the Marxist political practice from the writings of revolutionary leader Lenin, such as *State*

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[184] Althusser 1986, pp. 161–224; Althusser 1979, pp. 161–218.
[185] Cf., e.g. Althusser 1972c, p. 24; Althusser 1971, p. 46; and Althusser 1986, pp. 176–7; Althusser 1979, pp. 174–5.

and Revolution,[186] which he wrote in August–September 1917.[187] In his writings, Lenin does not present a theoretical answer to the question of what political practice or politics are. 'Political practice' is not the theoretical object of his analyses. Furthermore, he does not present a theory of political practice in general, but, rather, his practical object is his own political practice, the Russian conjuncture of 1917, the topical questions of the day and the solutions to them.

> So they are texts for direct political use, written down by a man involved in the revolution who is reflecting on his practical experience within the field of his experience itself.[188]

In Lenin's writings, it is not, however, merely a question of describing the existing situation, but also presenting a theoretical analysis of the situation. Lenin's writings are theoretical writings, but the object of this theoreticisation is his present situation and not political practice in general. The object of the political practice of Lenin and the Bolsheviks is, in turn, neither 'universal history' nor even the 'general history of imperialism', but imperialism as Lenin encountered it in his concrete present:

> Lenin meets Imperialism in his political practice in the modality of a *current* existence: in a concrete present.[189]

In other words, Lenin studied his political object – the practice in which he himself was involved – theoretically. However, this does not mean a general historical analysis of imperialism in itself, but, rather, a theoretical analysis of how his practical object, opening up as a 'concrete present', is constructed, and what kinds of displacements and condensations occur in this conjuncture.

> Lenin analysed what constituted the characteristics of its [the Russian conjuncture's] structure; the essential articulations, the interconnections, the strategic nodes on which the possibility and the fate of any revolutionary practice depended; the disposition and relations typical of the contradictions in a determinate country (semi-feudal and semi-colonialist, and yet impe-

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[186] Lenin 1993.
[187] Althusser 1986, pp. 177–8; Althusser 1979, pp. 175–6. At the end of Chapter 5, Lenin proposes a transition in his 'utopia': it transcends the Russian conjuncture, from capitalism to the first phase of communist society to its higher phase, 'and with it the complete withering away of the state' (Lenin 1993, p. 474).
[188] Althusser 1986, p. 179; Althusser 1979, p. 177.
[189] Althusser 1986, p. 180; Althusser 1979, p. 178; Althusser's emphasis.

rialist) in the period in which the principal contradiction was approaching explosion. This is what is irreplaceable in Lenin's writings: the analysis of the structure of a *conjuncture*, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that 'current situation' which political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917.[190]

And furthermore:

> For Lenin knew better than anyone else that the contradictions he analysed arose from one and the same Imperialism, the Imperialism that even produced their paradoxes. But knowing this, he was concerned with something else in them than this general historical knowledge, and it was because a tested science had taught him the latter that he could really concern himself with something else, with what it was that constituted the structure of his practical object: with the typicality of the contradictions, with their displacements, their condensations and the 'fusion' in revolutionary rupture that they produced; in short, with the 'current situation' that they constituted.[191]

For Lenin, political practice opened up as an actual situation, as a conjuncture that was indeed overdetermined by different national and international factors. At the same time, however, it was also the writer's own terrain of action. In this field, Lenin is a man of action who reflects on the conditions of his political actions in order to change them. What emerges is the difference in Lenin's position compared to a historian or a Hegelian philosopher of history who looks at the conjuncture in retrospect [*après coup*], when in fact it is already a *fait accompli* and therefore irreversible past.[192]

> He goes on talking to us about something quite simple: about his revolutionary practice, about the practice of the class struggle, in other words, about

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[190] Althusser 1986, p. 181; Althusser 1979, pp. 178–9; Althusser's emphasis.
[191] Althusser 1986, p. 182; Althusser 1979, pp. 179–80.
[192] As will become clear later on (4.4.), the *irrevocability of the past* is a matter different from the *necessary development of historical events*. Althusser criticises the latter notion because, according to it, the events of history are explained after the event as the expression of some deterministic law of development. The former notion, on the other hand, refers to the fact that the historian cannot do anything about the past itself, whereas the man of action, through is own actions, can influence the future, which is specifically due to the fact that history does not develop according to irrevocable laws but is characterised by aleatory encounters.

> what makes it possible to act on History from within the sole history present, about what is specific in the contradiction and in the dialectic, about the specific difference of the contradiction which quite simply allows us, not to demonstrate or explain the 'inevitable' revolutions *post festum*, but to 'make' them in our unique present, or, as Marx profoundly formulated it, to make the dialectic into a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the *fait accompli*.[193]

Lenin's future-oriented analysis differs from both the philosophy of history and historical analysis. The former difference is encapsulated in the following question: 'What enables action in the middle of this one and the same present time of history?' For Lenin, the situation in Russia was not the expression of universal history or the general history of imperialism, but a complex conjuncture in which it is possible to act 'in a revolutionary manner'. The possibility of successful action existed but its timely utilisation required both an apt analysis of the situation and the power to get the revolutionary forces on the move *at the right moment*, so that the determination threshold of the revolution would be exceeded. The concrete situation in Russia was not a 'contingency' where 'necessity is realised', which, so Althusser argued, it would be according to the Hegelian speculative thesis.[194] In other words, the 'contingent' factors in the Russian situation were not expressions of universal history, but referred to those special conditions during which, and by means of their utilisation, a revolutionary turn was possible. Lenin is also not a historian who would have found an *après coup* explanation for the events in Russia. He was a man of action, a revolutionary leader,

> who reflects on the present in the present, on the necessity to be achieved, on the means to produce it, on the strategic application points for these means; in short, on his own action, for he does act on concrete history![195]

Here, 'necessity [*nécessité*]' does not refer to the necessary course of universal history or to the 'necessary' consequences of imperialism, but to such tasks of Lenin's own situation, which *necessarily have to be realised* if one wants to utilise the opportunity that has opened up for revolution.

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[193] Althusser 1986, p. 182; Althusser 1979, p. 180.
[194] Althusser 1986, p. 180; Althusser 1979, p. 178.
[195] Althusser 1986, pp. 181–2; Althusser 1979, p. 179.

2.4.1. Towards a theoreticisation of practice

Particularly from *Essays in Self-Criticism* onwards, Althusser attempted to outline a Marxist theoretical practice by means of questions regarding the positioning of theory. A central point in Marx's writings is to aim for a theoretical understanding of theoretical practice in the practical situation. In the previous section, I discussed Althusser's attempt to perceive Marxist political practice from the viewpoint of the practice of the revolutionary actor, as opposed, for instance, to studying the idea of the Hegelian expressive totality or the *fait accompli* viewpoint of the historian or the general *fait accompli*. In this task, undertaken during the 1960s, Althusser took the particular example of Lenin, the man of action. As is clear from the previous section, as a *revolutionary leader*, Lenin was interested in the specific situation of Russia in 1917, rather than the 'general'. In order to understand the specific situation and, in particular, to be able to carry out strategic decisions for action, having 'general information' about imperialism was not enough, even though such general knowledge, correctly used, might be of help in the tactical and strategic political solutions made in that conjuncture.

As I will try to show in the following chapters, it is specifically Machiavelli who offers Althusser, for instance via *The Prince*, guidance with *both* the political practice of the man of action *and* the positing of theories in theoretical questions.

One must keep in mind, however, that Althusser had acquainted himself with Machiavelli already in the 1960s, and indeed from 1962 onwards lectured several times on the subject of Machiavelli at the École Normale Supérieure. Therefore, it is possible that Machiavelli acted as a dormant influence already in Althusser's writings from the 1960s, and also offered guidance when he wrote his self-criticism and attempted to distance himself from the temptations of theoreticism. When assessed from this point of view, the aleatory or Machiavellian Althusser appearing in the next chapters is not a particularly different theoretician from the Althusser who analysed the theories of Marx and Lenin. On the contrary, assessed in the light of each, a rather consistent whole can be seen in Althusser's posthumously published writings from the 1980s and the earlier writings.

Chapter Three
Aleatory Materialism

3.1. Prologue: Machiavelli's solitude

The only text by Althusser published during his lifetime that focuses on Machiavelli is 'Solitude de Machiavel', originally presented at a conference arranged by the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques in 1977.[1] It was first published in a German translation in 1987,[2] and then in English,[3] and only in the year of Althusser's death, in 1990, in French.[4] Althusser's references to solitude and fatherlessness refer not only to Machiavelli: in an article 'Freud et Lacan', published already in the early 1960s, Althusser writes about the solitude of Freud.[5] The question here is primarily about theoretical 'solitude' or theoretical 'fatherlessness':

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[1] The characterisation 'the solitude of Machiavelli' existed as a definition, 'spirito solitario', already in Francesco De Sanctis's text *Machiavelli* (from 1870): 'The other utopia of Machiavelli was in believing that his ideal world was the act of life of the nation; instead, it was the testament of a *solitary spirit*' (De Sanctis 1979, p. 378, my emphasis). Gramsci, too, refers to the 'solitary thinker' but denies that Machiavelli was merely 'qualche solitario pensatore [some solitary thinker]'. Both Althusser and Gramsci obviously borrow the expression from De Sanctis, since both were familiar with his interpretation of Machiavelli (cf. Althusser 1995a, p. 101; Althusser 1999, p. 53, in which Althusser refers to De Sanctis's influence on Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli).

[2] Althusser 1987; see also O'Hagan 1988, pp. 461–7.

[3] Althusser 1988.

[4] Althusser 1990a.

[5] Althusser 1976a, p. 13; Althusser 1971, p. 182. The theme of solitude manifests itself

> ... search as he might for theoretical precedents, fathers in theory, he could
> find none. He had to cope with the following situation: to be himself his own
> father, to construct with his own craftsman's hands the theoretical space in
> which to situate his discovery, to weave with thread borrowed intuitively left
> and right the great net with which to catch in the depths of blind experience
> the teeming fish of the unconscious, which men call dumb because it speaks
> even while they sleep.[6]

Like Freud, Machiavelli was also theoretically, but often also emotionally,
solitary. Emotional solitude was caused by, amongst other things, the fact
that after the Medicis were restored to power in Florence in 1512 Machiavelli
lost his position as *segretario fiorentino* and, after having undergone brief
imprisonment and even some torture, was forced to retire to his small estate
outside the city walls.[7] He no longer received any important government
positions, and had to live in some degree of economic misery. Of course,
Machiavelli still had friends: during the day he played cards with the peasants
in his local tavern and occasionally visited friends at the Orti Oricellari circle
to discuss practical and theoretical questions.[8]

Though his careers as *segretario fiorentino* and diplomat came to an end
with the return of the Medicis and the exile of his benefactor gonfalonier
Piero Soderini, Machiavelli nevertheless still dreamed even in his last years

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even earlier than this. Already in the preface to his study *Montesquieu: La politique et
l'histoire*, written in 1959, Althusser writes: 'That is why Montesquieu reveals something
of the profound joy of a man who *discovers*. He knows it. He knows he is bringing new
ideas, that he is offering a work without precedent, and if his last words are a salute to
the land finally conquered, his first is to warn that he set out alone and had no teachers;
nor did his thought have a mother. He notes that he really must use a new language
because he is speaking new truths. Even his turns of phrase betray the pride of an author
who illuminates the ordinary words he has inherited with the new meanings he has
discovered. In that moment when he is almost surprised to see its birth and is seized
by it, and in the thirty years of labour which constituted his career, he is well aware that
his thought opens up a *new world*.' (Althusser 1972b, p. 14; Althusser's emphasis. I look
at this issue in more detail in Chapter 4.2). Althusser also refers to how Montesquieu
was very interested in ships and seafaring and, like Machiavelli, compared his own
extensive projects with sailing on the open sea (ibid.).

    [6] Althusser 1976a, p. 13; Althusser 1971, p. 182.
    [7] On Machiavelli's short imprisonment, see De Grazia 1994, pp. 34–40.
    [8] Good biographies of Machiavelli include, amongst others, Ridolfi 1963 and De
Grazia 1994. Also Machiavelli's correspondence (Machiavelli 1981; 1988) sheds light
on his private life.

about returning to 'real action'. In fact, he was given the task of directing the construction of the fortifications of Florence, but burdened by this office he died on 21 June 1527.

In the evenings, Machiavelli wrote and studied intensively, particularly the classical ancient Roman histories. Nevertheless, he felt that he was not living life to the full, when he could only ponder upon and write about what he before had been able to participate in.[9]

Freud borrowed his concepts from the branch of physics dealing with energy as well as from the political economy and biology of his time. The sources of Machiavelli's loans were twofold: on the one hand, men of action from antiquity, such as Tacitus, Livius, Cicero and Sallustius, and, on the other hand, such notions as *virtù* and *fortuna* based on the popular beliefs and mythologies of antiquity and the doctrines of the cardinal virtues of Christianity.[10]

If existing philosophical notions, such as *consciousness*, were more of a disadvantage than an advantage to Freud, the same also applied to Machiavelli. Both princes and the clergy banned his writings, in which old words and concepts often received interpretations that seemed paradoxical: the prince was urged to learn how to act 'wrongly',[11] and the title of the most 'virtuous' of men was given to the most defamed man of his time, Cesare Borgia (1475–1507).

Freud had to be his own, in Althusser's words, 'father in theory', and the same was the case with Machiavelli, living a theoretical solitude. He too had to get by on his own in a situation where the doctrines of the Platonic or Aristotelian tradition of the city-state, the doctrines of the mediaeval scholastics regarding natural law, the great chain of being or the hierarchical order of

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[9] In *The Prince*, Machiavelli differentiates between the majority who judge the actions of the prince with their 'eyes' and the minority who judge the prince's actions with their 'hands': 'Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are' (Machiavelli 2004, p. 76). Perhaps Shakespeare had this passage from *The Prince* in mind when he wrote the following in Hamlet:

> Yet must not we put the strong law on him:
> He's loved of the distracted multitude,
> Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes;
> And where tis so, the offender's scourge is weigh'd,
> But never the offence
> (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene III).

[10] The natural sciences and astrology of the Renaissance era influenced Machiavelli's thinking, as made evident in the studies on Machiavelli by Parel 1993 and Masters 1996.

[11] Cf., e.g. Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 15, pp. 65–6.

things did not offer theoretical tools with which he could outline the conditions for the implementation of a new project, a united 'Italy' covering a large area. Titius Livius's *Ab urbe condita* and other histories, as well as Machiavelli's own experiences as a diplomat and secretary of state, offered him the material about the political practice of the antiquities and his own time, the simultaneously immutable and changing character of which he strived to understand.

If Freud had to be his own 'father in theory', similarly Machiavelli was unable to find a 'father' figure from any earlier theoretical 'family'.

> His solitude first of all consists in this fact, that he seems *unclassifiable*, that he cannot be ranged in one camp alongside other thinkers, in one tradition, as other authors can be ranged in the Aristotelian tradition, or the tradition of natural law.[12]

The fatherless Freud became the father of the psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic tradition, whereas Machiavelli has at times been described as the father of 'modern political science' (from traditional textbook definitions to Benedetto Croce), the father of immoral 'Realpolitik' (from the Jesuits to Leo Strauss), the father of *ragion di stato* (from Giovanni Botero to Friedrich Meinecke), or the Renaissance era representative of the republican tradition (from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner). The problematic nature of such classifications lies in the fact that there is still no consensus regarding what Machiavelli 'represents' or how he should be interpreted.

If the great unknown caught in Freud's net was the unconscious uttering in nightly dreams, what, then, was caught in Machiavelli's net? He also caught something which people believed one should not speak about, namely the political practice of governing and the use of power. The ideological displacements of this matter, which was strange in its ordinariness, were those philosophical and theological doctrines stemming from antiquity and the Middle Ages, where the origin and nature of the state were hidden behind different moral and judicial fictions. Althusser encapsulates this as follows:

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[12] Althusser 1990a, p. 27; Althusser 1988, p. 469; Althusser's emphasis. Cf. Althusser 1993a, p. 103: 'Alone, without a father, like all the great figures, like Machiavelli himself'.

> Instead of saying that the state is born of law and nature, he [Machiavelli] tells us how a state has to be born if it is to last and to be strong enough to become the state of nation. He does not speak the language of law, he speaks the language of armed force indispensable to the constitution of any state, he speaks the language of the necessary cruelty of the beginnings of the state, he speaks the language of a politics without religion which has to make use of religion at all costs, of a politics which has to be moral but has to be able not be moral, of a politics which has to reject hatred but inspire fear, he speaks the language of the struggle between classes, and as for rights, law and morality, he puts them in their proper, subordinate place. When we read him, however informed we may be about the violences of history, something in him grips us: a man who, even before all the ideologists blocked out reality with their stories, was capable not of living or tolerating, but of *thinking* the violence of the birth throes of the state.[13]

For Freud, dreams opened the gate to the unconscious, to those latent mechanisms and elements which, as a result of dreamwork, appeared as symbols that were displaced and condensed into an unrecognisable meaning or as other manifested elements of the dream. Even though everybody has dreams, the real importance of these nightly performances linked with the waking life had not been understood scientifically until Freud. The same was the case with politics. Even though everybody saw performances of the political theatre, and some also acted in them, people nevertheless had not dared or wanted to put into words the real content and importance of these performances. Furthermore, just as Freud's revealing of the world of the unconscious horrified and irritated his contemporaries, also Machiavelli's analysis of those practices and institutions which express the contradictions and struggles between people and groups of people have scared or angered people from one generation to the next.

It is evident from the first pages of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* that 'in spite of many thousands of years of efforts, the scientific understanding of dreams has made very little advance'.[14] Freud knew and also often was made to suffer the consequences of being a pioneer, the founder of a new science.

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[13] Althusser 1990a, pp. 35–6; Althusser 1988, p. 475; Althusser's emphasis. Cf. also Terray 1993, p. 142.

[14] Freud 1965, p. 35.

Machiavelli was also aware of his dangerous and thankless role as a pioneer
or 'explorer', which is evident in the ironic first lines of the first book of *The
Discourses*:

> Although the envious nature of men, so prompt to blame and so slow to
> praise, makes the discovery and introduction of any new principles and sys-
> tems as dangerous almost as the exploration of unknown seas and continents,
> yet animated by that desire which impels me to do what may prove for the
> common benefit of all, I have resolved to open a new route, which has not
> yet been followed by any one, and may prove difficult and troublesome, but
> may also bring me some reward in the approbation of those who will kindly
> appreciate my efforts.[15]

Like his contemporary and fellow countryman Christopher Columbus (1451–
1506), Machiavelli knew he was sailing in dangerous waters through which
he had to open his own fairways to unknown continents. In order to reach
new land, Columbus had to sail for several months and for thousands of
miles, whereas for Machiavelli it was enough that he travelled in his study
through past times. Nevertheless, it took far longer than the discovery of the
new continent for his moral and political goal, a united 'Italy', to be achieved –
and Machiavelli himself was never aware that he had sailed to such a place.
Nor could he know for what kind of purposes his ideas would be used when
a united Italy was finally being forged.

If Columbus left old, known continents and shorelines behind and headed
for the open sea, then Machiavelli left the old moral and legal illusions and
delved into 'things as they are in an effective truth':

> I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in an *effective truth*
> [*verità effettuale della cosa*], rather than as they are imagined.[16]

The consequences of Columbus's voyages of exploration were not only visible,
however, in the new world but, as part of the evolving system of capitalist
world economy and politics, they also influenced the whole of the old world.
Machiavelli, too, did not leave morality and justice untouched when he left
behind the existing moral and judicial discourses, but rather placed them

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[15] Machiavelli 1949, I. 'Proemio', p. 89; Machiavelli 1950, I. 'Introduction', p. 103.
[16] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 15, p. 65; translation modified; my emphasis.

in a new light: their ideological-political effects in the 'effective truth' were revealed, but this naturally did not please those in power, such as the rulers and the Catholic Church (e.g. highly influential groups such as the Jesuits).

3.2. The underground current of the materialism of the encounter

Even though Machiavelli was theoretically 'fatherless' and did not have any 'family tradition' at his disposal, he nevertheless belonged to a family that Althusser described as the 'underground current of the materialism of the encounter' ('Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre' – though Althusser does use this expression in his notes, it was the editors of the published version of the manuscript that lifted it out as a title)[17] or 'aleatory materialism', as he defined it in his later writings. Althusser outlines this 'family chronicle' of a 'materialistic', fatherless family in his notes from the 1980s.[18]

> ... I would like to bring out: *the existence of an almost completely unknown*
> *materialist tradition in the history of philosophy: the 'materialism'* ... *of the rain,*
> *the swerve, the encounter, the take* [*prise*]. I shall develop all these concepts. To
> simplify matters, let us say, just for now, a *materialism of the encounter*, and
> therefore of the aleatory and of contingency. This materialism is opposed, as
> a wholly different mode of thought, to the various materialisms on record,
> including that widely ascribed to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which, like every
> other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and
> teleology, that is to say, a transformed, disguised form of idealism.[19]

In addition to Machiavelli, as part of his idea of the materialism of the encounter, Althusser also referred to Epicurus, Lucretius, Spinoza, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx and Heidegger. In his notes he also mentions how philosophers such

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[17] Cf. Althusser 2006a, p. 203.

[18] With the term 'maternal' I refer to the word *mater* (mother), which is the etymological root for the word *materia*.

[19] Althusser 1994c, pp. 539–40; Althusser 2006a, pp. 167–8; Althusser's emphasis. In the quote it is important to pay attention to the conditional form of the expression: 'je *voudrais* mettre en évidence [I *would* like to bring out ...]'. Althusser's manuscripts from the 1980s dealing with aleatory materialism at times contain very incomplete and sketchy ideas.

as Democritus, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Derrida offered *elements* and *starting points* for the formulation of this materialist philosophy.[20]

The list of names seems surprising, as Althusser himself states,[21] because it contains, for example, Martin Heidegger, who usually is considered more of an idealist than a materialist philosopher. According to Althusser, all the philosophers listed above – even Marx and Democritus – have been subject to idealistic *interpretations*. Their thinking has been 'repressed [*refoulé*]' and 'perverted [*détourné*]' into an 'idealism of freedom' because such a philosophical tradition has been 'too dangerous' for it to be completely neglected.[22]

Why have the philosophers of this tradition been considered so dangerous that their thinking has had to be 'tamed' in the form of idealism? Althusser's reply is concerned with the problematics of freedom and necessity. From their central and dominant positions these philosophers rejected such concepts as essence [*ousia*, *essentia*, *Wesen*], reason [*logos*, *ratio*, *Vernunft*], law [*nomos*], goal [*telos*, *fin*], origin [*origine*], primordial or natural order [*ordre*], original cause [*cause originaire*, *cause antécédente*], whole [*tout*] and centre [*centre*]. Their danger is due to the fact that they question such philosophical-religious, judicial and moral doctrines in which reality, such as the existing social order, is legitimised by presenting it as an expression of the natural or rational order, divine reason or providence, or by claiming that the development of reality follows certain historical-philosophical lines and principles.[23]

In the philosophies of the materialism of the encounter, there is, instead of Order and Law, a void or vacuum [*le vide*], or in the atomic doctrines of Epicurus and Lucretius the atoms, like rain, fall parallel to each other in the 'void', until unforeseen 'swerves [*déviation*]', 'encounters' and 'collisions' occur, the result of which is the birth of the world.[24] If Althusser criticised Hegelian philosophy at the beginning of the 1960s for its idea of expressive totality – according to which the different levels and spheres of reality express the teleological law of the development of history – then his critique is still aimed at such idealistic philosophies and theories about history in which it is thought that things have a certain natural essence and where the development of things follows

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[20] Althusser 1994c, pp. 540–1; Althusser 2006a, pp. 168, 189.
[21] Althusser 1994c, p. 541; Althusser 2006a, pp. 168–70.
[22] Althusser 1994c, p. 540; Althusser 2006a, p. 168.
[23] Althusser 1994c, pp. 542, 561; Althusser 2006a, pp. 168–9, 188.
[24] Althusser 1994c, p. 541, Althusser 2006a, p. 168.

some pre-set conformity to law. Even though Althusser in his 'Le courant' text refers directly to Hegel only briefly,[25] the point of the critique is aimed at teleologism and essentialism,[26] for instance the idea that, in the development of things, an encoded goal would affect things or that the reality would form a single whole [*le tout*] which would wind around a single centre [*le centre*], or, in order to substantiate its existence, one could present some original cause [*la cause originaire*] or some goal where the original cause is 'reflected'.[27]

As a historical and theoretical introduction to the tradition of the materialism of the encounter, or aleatory materialism, Althusser discusses the atomic theory of Epicurus as well as Lucretius's *De rerum natura*. The philosophies of Epicurus and Lucretius are particularly interesting because, according to them, the world has come about by chance.[28] The gods have not created the world nor do they influence its course. Before the birth of the world, there was only an empty space or void in which atoms were falling parallel to each other like drops of rain until one of them swerved slightly.[29] The atom that swerved 'by accident' induced an encounter with another atom, which changed its

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[25] Althusser 1994c, pp. 547, 560, 566; Althusser 2006a, pp. 175, 188, 193, 196.

[26] The Hegel quote, in which Althusser emphasises the 'process of becoming' and the aleatory basis for the necessities that arise within it, is as follows: 'If we must therefore say that there can be no result without its becoming (Hegel), we must also affirm that there is nothing which has become except as determined by the result of this becoming – this retroaction (Canguilhem). That is, instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies' (Althusser 1994c, p. 566; Althusser 2006a, pp. 193–4).

[27] For the relationship between the original cause and the objective see also Althusser 1992a, p. 210; Althusser 1993c, p. 217. Also, in explaining how he came 'to think as a materialist' Althusser refers to 'refusing to believe in the end as an original cause', that is, 'by a mirroring of the origin and the end' (Althusser 1993c, p. 217).

[28] Only a few letters and fragments have remained of Epicurus's texts, which has partly led to Lucretius's philosophical poem *De Rerum Natura* being emphasised in interpretations of Epicurus. For a systematic presentation of the relationship of Epicurus to Lucretius see Clay 1993: see also, for example, Gerson and Inwood 1994, p. 5. Also Marx's doctoral thesis *Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie* and the notes linked with it are interesting documents on the issue of Epicurus (Marx 1975, I.1). Althusser does not refer to Marx's texts directly. It would certainly be interesting to test the hypothesis that this writing by the very young Marx (from 1841) influenced Althusser's development of the materialism of the encounter.

[29] In the English translation of Epicurus by Gerson and Inwood, the expression 'clinamen atomorum' is translated as 'swerve of atoms' (Gerson and Inwood 1994) and similarly also in the English Preface to a Greek language edition edited by Merrill (Merrill 1907).

trajectory so that it collided with a third atom and so forth.[30] Althusser calls this aleatory or dice-like (cf. Latin *alea* – dice, *aleatore* – gambler) and, by its nature, non-necessary process of chance from which a world is born, following Lucretius, the *clinamen* [deviation or swerve]:

> But *the accomplishment of the fact* is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter of the atoms due to the swerve of the clinamen.[31]

In the Epicurean theory of atoms, the 'atoms' themselves are abstract or 'shadow-like [*fantomatique*]' elements which exist only in the *process* of 'swerves' and 'encounters':

> … the *atoms' very existence is due to nothing but the swerve and the encounter* prior to which they led only a phantom existence.[32]

One can indeed say that the world takes place in the collision or that the birth of the world can be 'accomplished [*accomplissement*]' through the collision or that the world, from this point of view, is an *accomplished fact* [*fait accompli*], where certain laws and necessities have an influence *after* the collision. These necessities do not, however, manifest or express generally applicable teleological or causal regularities that predetermine how and where the encounter will occur. Therefore, the world and its necessities are consequences of aleatory encounters [*rencontres*].[33]

There is no *telos* inherent in the atoms of Epicurus or a 'code' determining when and where they will collide: 'we know not where, we know not when [*on ne sait où, on ne sait quand*]', Althusser quotes Lucretius.[34] The birth of the world is a contingent, non-necessary event. Those necessities that influence the world at each moment do not in themselves exist out of necessity.[35]

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[30] Althusser 1994c, p. 541; Althusser 2006a, p. 169.

[31] Althusser 1994c, p. 542; Althusser 2006a, pp. 169–70; Althusser's emphasis.

[32] Althusser 1994c, p. 542; Althusser 2006a, p. 169; Althusser's emphasis.

[33] Althusser terms his materialism as both 'aleatory' and 'the materialism of encounters', which would be regarded as synonymous. On the other hand, the expressions also differ from each another: 'aleatory' is an adjective that defines the non-determined nature of encounters.

[34] Althusser 1994c, p. 564; Althusser 2006a, p. 191; see also Althusser 1994c, p. 541; Althusser 2006a, p. 168, and Lucretius 2007, II.294.

[35]
  Nor can we once suppose
  In any way 'tis likely, (seeing that space

According to Althusser, the Epicurean view is dangerous because the 'necessities' it proposes for the world are 'relativised': that which is, *is* not necessarily as it is; that which happens does not necessarily happen in the way it happens. Undoubtedly, one of Epicurus's motives in developing the atomic theory was the logical justification of the possibility of human freedom and responsibility: because the world is not necessarily as it is, it can also be otherwise. Because no divine reason or order influenced the world and God has not created it,[36] it is also possible and justified to question the existing world and its order. Man is both a free and responsible actor because he has real possibilities to change the existing world and its 'necessities'.[37]

According to Lucretius, atoms have certain kinds of hooks or points[38] that enable them to 'take hold of [*prendre*]' each other and form into series and chains. Althusser purposely uses the term *prendre* or *pris*, making the connection to the German *Begriff*, concept, and to the verb behind it *begreifen*, to grasp, and furthermore its substantive, *Greifen*, understanding or grasping.[39]

    To all sides stretches infinite and free,
    And seeds, innumerable in number, in sum
    Bottomless, there in many a manner fly,
    Bestirred in everlasting motion there),
    That only this one earth and sky of ours
    Hath been create and that those bodies of stuff,
    So many, perform no work outside the same;
    Seeing, moreover, this world too hath been
    By nature fashioned, even as seeds of things
    By innate motion chanced to clash and cling–
    After they'd been in many a manner driven
    Together at random, without design, in vain–
    And as at last those seeds together dwelt,
    Which, when together of a sudden thrown,
    Should alway furnish the commencements fit
    Of mighty things – the earth, the sea, the sky,
    And race of living creatures
    (Lucretius 2007, II.419–31).

[36] Cf. Lucretius 2007, V.156–94, the title of which is 'The world is not created by gods'.

[37] Most often it is the 'hedonistic' views connected with the doctrine of Epicureanism that are emphasised. However, from the viewpoint of the history of moral philosophy, the essential importance of Epicurus and his followers lies not so much with these hedonistic doctrines or the doctrines which emphasise one's peace of mind, but rather the radical consequences entailed by the emphasis on the arbitrariness and the contingency of the foundation of the world.

[38] Lucretius 2007, I.599–634.

[39] Althusser 1994c, p. 562; Althusser 2006a, p. 189.

The taking hold of that occurs with the encounter of the elements 'gives form [*prenne forme*]' to the whole formed by the elements that take hold, which in turn makes it possible to 'take hold' of the form (for Epicurus and Lucretius, the atoms themselves could not be grasped because they were too small or were invisible) and it can be 'comprehended' through some *concept*:

> … in order that this encounter 'take hold', that is to say, 'take *form*', *at last give birth to Forms, and new Forms* – just as water 'takes hold' when ice is there waiting for it, or milk does when it curdles, or mayonnaise when it emulsifies. Hence the primacy of 'nothing' over all 'form', and *of aleatory materialism over all formalism*.[40]

The validity of the concept is limited in two directions: (i) the notions describe only forms that have already been taken hold of, as well as their internal and therefore contingent necessities; (ii) nothing *guarantees* that these forms that have been taken hold of, and their necessities, could not be otherwise or could change, and concepts that were valid before would become invalid.

> Every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins … *but also in its effects*.[41]

The formation of concepts must not lead to formalism, where 'morphology' covers over the aleatory processes that precede *and* follow the taking hold of forms.

3.2.1. Law

In 'Le courant', Althusser indicates how his views on the aleatory nature of 'taking hold' have important consequences from the point of view of understanding the concept of law [*loi*]. If no historical-philosophical law specifies what kind of encounters occur and what kind of forms take hold therein, it means that

> … no law presides over the encounter in which things take hold. But, it will be objected, once the encounter has 'taken hold' – that is, once the stable figure of the world, of the only existing world (for the advent of a given

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[40] Althusser 1994c, p. 564; Althusser 2006a, pp. 191–2; Althusser's emphasis.
[41] Althusser 1994c, p. 566; Althusser 2006a, p. 193; my emphasis.

world obviously excludes all the other possible combinations), has been constituted – we have to do with a stable world in which events, in their succession [suite], obey 'laws'.[42]

When a certain world has taken hold, at *that particular moment* it excludes all 'other possible worlds [*tout les autres possibles*]'. The existing world is not, however, the only possible world.[43] One could at least imagine other kinds of worlds, even though these other worlds would not exist historically. The world that has taken hold and been realised is just a *factum*, as Althusser states, referring to Spinoza and Wittgenstein.[44] According to Althusser, the trust in universal laws is, after all, the naïve belief of the 'honest player' that everybody

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[42] Althusser 1994c, pp. 567–8; Althusser 2006a, pp. 194–5.

[43] For the discussion of the finite age of the world, the non-permanence of its structure and the fleetingness of everything, see Lucretius 1965, V.235–379. It would be interesting to compare the ideas of Epicurus and Lucretius, in terms of the 'principle of plenitude', to better-known ways of thinking, such as that of Aristotle, according to whom each 'possibility' is at some point realised if a 'genuine opportunity' presents itself. The thinking of Epicurus and Lucretius would not seem to agree with this interpretation of the modalities of opportunity, impossibility and necessity, which dominated thinking until the late Middle Ages because, according to them, the realised world could have remained unborn forever because no general law can preordain the set of actualising opportunities. For interpretations of the 'principle of plenitude' see Knuuttila 1993; and, in particular, Weiss 1967 and Hintikka 1977 concerning Aristotle. Simo Knuuttila localises the interpretation of the modalities that govern present-day language use and which differ from the principle of plenitude in the 'radical reinterpretation of the concepts of the possible and necessary that occurred in the fourteenth century' (Knuuttila 1996, p. 18). This claim certainly holds true if it is assessed as a *hegemonic* term in the forms of thinking in Western culture. The example of Epicurus, however, may show that also a different kind of interpretation of the modalities existed already in antiquity, but that it was forgotten with the triumphal march of the principle of plenitude and the 'ideological batteries' that supported it, such as the Roman-Catholic Church. In his book *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy* (Knuuttila 1993) Knuutila does not analyse the views of Epicurus and Lucretius but only briefly refers to the assumption put forward by some scholars, according to which '. . . perhaps Epicurus, as distinct from Lucretius, did not accept the principle of plenitude with respect to types of being (White 1985, pp. 3–4), but neither atomists nor sceptics developed any remarkable theory of unrealized generic possibilities' (Knuuttila 1993, p. 36). Even though Epicurus and Lucretius would have differed in this regard from each other one can at least assume that studying them would bring out such interpretations of the modalities that would, like sophism, lose the philosophical-historical battle of hegemony. Perhaps the defeat was due to the dangerousness of such views (atomists, rhetoricians and sceptics) that relativised the 'necessities' and 'truths' of the existing world, as one may indeed think with reference to Althusser.

[44] Althusser 1994c, p. 568; Althusser 2006a, p. 195; cf. Althusser 1992a, p. 210; Althusser 1993c, p. 217.

plays according to the rules. Belief in the power of laws and authority contains the 'great temptation' to think that these 'laws of order' guarantee absolute protection, and that, while the same laws prevail, these same forms would be repeated indefinitely. Falling for such a temptation, however, would be to deny that order and its laws are the consequence of aleatory encounters; and the aleatory does not disappear, even though certain kinds of worlds that have taken hold are realised.[45]

   With the notion of law, Althusser refers not only to the assumed laws of the natural or historical reality but also to the positive laws created by man, that is, the existing legal, moral or theological principles of law and justice that are meant to describe or legitimise the existing social order. He does not strictly differentiate between these two types of laws. Here, Althusser refers to Marx, who aimed to show that the laws of classical political economy are, in fact, laws linked during a certain historical era to particular class interests. Such laws of the economy are not only 'pure objective science' but also ideological constructions that articulate and legitimise the interests of certain groups of people in a certain era, presenting them as generally applicable laws.[46] Here, Althusser refers to Rousseau, who maintained that

> ... the [social] contract is based on an 'abyss' – by defending the idea, therefore, that the necessity of the laws that issue from the taking-hold induced by the encounter is, even at its most stable, haunted by a *radical instability* ...[47]

As is evident in Rousseau's *The Social Contract*,[48] nothing guarantees that the general will and the social contract could not be abolished and the 'abyss [*abîme*]' would not be opened. The social contract and the uncertainty of the basis of the general will it expresses do not, however, tell about a weakness in Rousseau's thinking. Rather, the ultimate lack of guarantees (the fragility of the social contract) shows that Rousseau understood the aleatory nature of the laws, and did not attempt to deny it by presenting imaginary scenarios. Althusser indeed compares Rousseau's interpretation of the natural state to

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[45] Althusser 1994c, p. 568; Althusser 2006a, p. 195.
[46] Althusser 1994c, pp. 568–9; Althusser 2006a, p. 195; see also Althusser 1959, pp. 28–42; Althusser 1972b, pp. 31–42, in which Althusser presents his analysis of the changes in the interpretation of the 'law' in a new era.
[47] Althusser 1994c, p. 568; Althusser 2006a, p. 195; Althusser's emphasis.
[48] Rousseau 1993, I.6.

Epicurus's theory of the rain of atoms: Rousseau's forest as a metaphor for the 'state of nature' is equivalent to the Epicurean rain of atoms into the void. The human individuals living in the forest wander around in it without any encounters that would produce *lasting* social relationships:

> Of course, a man and a woman can meet, 'feel one another out', and even pair off, but only in a brief encounter without identity or recognition …[49]

According to Althusser, Rousseau radically differs from all other social-contract theoreticians because, unlike him, they understand also the 'state of nature' as something social. They assume that the state of nature contains either peaceful or war-like *social relationships*. Only in Rousseau's conception does 'pure nature' entail a 'radical absence of society [*néant de société*]'.[50] The lack of social relationships or their 'non-naturalness' is the 'nonexistent' starting point of all emerging societies, or the only 'empty' essence of all possible societies. According to Althusser, the thesis that the radical absence of society constitutes the essence of all society is an audacious one, yet its radicality escaped both Rousseau's contemporaries and later critics.[51] The radical nature of the thesis is due to the fact that, for Rousseau, there is no 'transcendent' basis or some natural social order already arising from a state of nature that defines the 'essence' of the society. For Rousseau, the formation of society is simply a matter of a mutual agreement between people, which is undertaken so that, if they were united, they could better avert external threats such as, for instance, natural catastrophes.[52]

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[49] Althusser 1994c, p. 557; Althusser 2006a, p. 184.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Althusser 1994c, p. 557; Althusser 2006a, p. 185.

[52] Ibid. On the other hand, Rousseau presents the following observation: 'But, as men cannot engender new forces, but only unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of preserving themselves than the formation, by aggregation, of a sum of forces great enough to overcome the resistance. These they have to bring into play by means of a single motive power, and cause to act in concert' (Rousseau 1966a, I.6, p. 50; Rousseau 1762, Chapter 6). In other words, the 'social' is not anything completely new but rather a novel way of combining the already existing so that it 'overcomes resistance'. Seen from the Althusserian viewpoint, this part of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* can be interpreted to mean that the social contract does not create anything new that would be permanent, but rather combines old elements in a new way. This combination, however, disintegrates again when the forces disperse, each returning to its own place ('to the forest') and no longer affecting the others in the same way.

3.2.2. Surprises

Despite the 'taking-hold [*prise*]', surprises do occur. It is here that Althusser uses the term 'surprise [*sur-prise*, *sur-prendre*]', which refers both to the 'taking-hold' and something that is taken [*prendre*] from the top of something [*sur*].[53] The 'series of events that break out', the 'turns' and 'the moments of excitement' are surprising moments in history.[54] At that moment the 'blanket' embroidered with the regularities of the world, which is stable and taken-hold of, is removed to reveal radical instability. This entails events where, to the surprise and horror of the 'honest player', 'the dice are thrown back on to the table unexpectedly' or 'the cards are dealt out again without warning'.[55]

The shocks of history nevertheless also open up opportunities for the emergence of new human types and characters. Among the historical individuals who questioned the old procedures of action, Althusser mentions (apart from the already mentioned Cesare Borgia) Napoleon, Hölderlin, Goethe and Hegel.[56] The condition for the birth and action of the latter four individuals was the process of the disintegration of the old conjuncture which occurred with the French Revolution, and which opened up further *opportunities* in new and surprising ways. The shaking to the foundations of the old order and its laws did not necessarily lead to the taking-hold of the new system and its laws. For instance, with the events of May 1968, the old 'harmony' was broken; ahead lay a new and surprising conjuncture, in which there was an encounter [*rencontre*] between the workers and students. They, however, did not 'join up [*joindre*]', conjoining [*conjoindre*], uniting in a unity, a lasting encounter [*rencontre durable*] and conjuncture [*con-joncture*].[57] There was, nevertheless, no return to the old system, and the old laws could not regain possession of their old position.

In this context, Althusser criticises those theoretical systems in which different 'object concepts', 'essences' or 'grand individuals' become the theoretical starting point, because in this case the objects take the place of the processes of aleatory encounters that both precede and succeed them. Instead of object con-

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[53] In sixteenth-century France, 'surprise' also meant, among other things, an unexpectedly enforced tax or an additional tax [*impôt extraordinaire*].

[54] Althusser 1994c, p. 569; Althusser 2006a, p. 196.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

cepts, it is the processes of collision that must be placed in the central position. For Epicurus and Lucretius, this meant giving primacy to the process of collisions in relation to the atomic objects and the 'complete' world formed from their chains. For Heidegger, on the other hand, this meant the primacy of the world and being in it [*Da-sein*] in relation to subjects.[58]

The theoretical understanding of the processes does indeed require the development of *concepts without objects* [*concepts sans objets*],[59] because only through such intransitive concepts can one understand the aleatory nature of the processes.[60] Within the underground tradition of the materialism of the encounter, the *concepts without objects* include, for instance, Epicurus's 'rain [*pluie*]', 'swerve [*déviation*]' and 'nothing [*rien*]' and Heidegger's *Dasein* and *es gibt* ['there is', *il y a*]. Concerning the latter, Althusser states:

> Thus the world is a 'gift' that we have been given, the 'fact of the fact' [*fait de fait*] that we have not chosen, and it 'opens up' before us in the facticity of its contingency, and even beyond this facticity, in what is not merely an observation, but a 'being-in-the-world' that commands all possible Meaning.[61]

For Heidegger, man's situation is characterised by *Dasein*, 'being there'. *Dasein*, in other words, does not refer to the human subject but rather to its situation, from which it follows that *Dasein* can be specifically defined as an objectless concept. It is, in other words, not the same thing as a 'human' that is in the world. But the world is not 'constant': it has no other sense [*Sens*] than the factual meanings it receives at each moment. The world indeed has historical structures (for instance, structures of meaning) but these are just factual structures that have no 'deeper' basis than the process of 'worldification' in which they are born and influence, and no other sense than what they receive in the lives of people which at each moment live in this facticity. The only 'constant [*le constant*]' that characterises being-in-the-world, according to Althusser's interpretation of Heidegger, is the factual constant of *Dasein*.[62]

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[58] Althusser 1994c, p. 543; Althusser 2006a, p. 170.
[59] Althusser 1994c, p. 563; Althusser 2006a, p. 190.
[60] At this point, Althusser repeats his old thesis 'philosophy has no object' (Althusser 2006a, p. 190) ('la philosophie n'ayant pas d'objet'; Althusser 1994c, p. 563).
[61] Althusser 1994c, p. 543; Althusser 2006a, p. 170.
[62] Ibid.

Man himself has not chosen his world. The world and being-in-the-world is for him always an already pre-existing necessity. The contents at each moment of this necessity are factual necessities, not necessities based on some *ousia*, *logos*, *nomos* or *telos*. It is specifically the factual nature of these necessities, the facticity of the necessities, which the materiality *and* dangerousness of the materialism of the encounters encapsulate.

For Althusser, Heidegger is indeed an aleatory *materialist*, for the very reason that, according to him, the world and its structure at each moment have no *other* sense or idea other than what they factually mean at each moment. Idealism, on the other hand, according to Althusser, consists in all such philosophies which find 'behind' the facticity or the factic structures of the world an immanent or transcendent law, principle, or goal that governs them.

As with over- and underdetermination, one could also ask with regard to the aleatory whether the collisions are not the effect of some conformity to law, but instead occur arbitrarily. Are the aleatory and arbitrary synonymous? In the following, it will become evident that Althusser does not give simple yes or no answers to this question. This is because he does not operate with the binary opposites of necessary-arbitrary (or with its further opposites deterministic-indeterministic), but differentiates between two kinds of interpretation of necessity.

In the first interpretation – which Althusser negates – chance, contingency or exception are seen as modalities of necessity; that is, they are some kind of 'exceptions from the rule' or a mist or delusion on the 'surface' of the deep structure of necessity. The point here is similar to the idea of the Hegelian expressive totality; in other words, that it would be possible to find general laws behind the 'autonomy' of expressions.

In the second, aleatory, interpretation of necessity, necessities are seen as modalities of contingency: contingency is primary and the necessities are only the effect of it.

> … instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception
> to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of
> contingencies.[63]

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[63] Althusser 1994c, p. 566; Althusser 2006a, pp. 193–4.

In the former concept, the forms reality receives – for instance, the world of Epicurus that has taken hold – are a consequence of some teleological or causal law, whereas, with the latter concept, such pre-existing laws and the causal or teleological explanations referring to them are questioned. This, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the course of events in history would be arbitrary or remain a mystery. In fact, the concept of the aleatory would be pointless if the only answer it could offer would be that the processes of history are a consequence of an arbitrary process. The fact that the development of history can not be traced to, or 'express', any causal or teleological law of development does not mean that it would be completely impossible to understand the events of history or that human activity would only be characterised by unforeseen encounters.

The explanations or analyses of a situation, however, cannot be *complete*: they remain incomplete. The encounters are complex processes, the complete explanation of which would require describing the entire series of causes for the encounter of two or more beings. Furthermore, each element of the collision is the result of innumerable earlier series of causes.

> There are encounters only between series [*séries*] of beings that are the results
> of several series of causes . . .[64]

Particularly in the case of political action, the problematics of the aleatory have a central role because the man of action cannot, unlike the philosopher, wait for Minerva's owl to take flight, but must – according to his own definition – in every case act in the best *possible* way on the basis of the information he has at hand.

As will become clearer later, nothing, however, absolutely determines how the man of action should act and what principles he should follow in his actions. The aleatory does indeed also offer the man of action opportunities and suitable moments [*kairos*] which he either can or cannot utilise. But these opportunities also contain risks, and in order to control these, the man of action must do something, such as strive to affect that particular aleatory situation which sets the conditions for his action.

The man of action is in a situation in which he cannot clearly be aware of what he is doing or what his actions 'express'. In his present situation, he

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[64] Althusser 1994c, p. 566; Althusser 2006a, p. 193.

cannot clearly see what the future brings and what effects his own actions will have. Moreover, he cannot, on the basis of the past, anticipate the future with certainty, because nothing guarantees that the existing 'laws' or 'rules' would with certainty prevail also in the future. For him, reality is a playing field of conjunctures open in many directions, and where the names of the games or players or the size of the field or the borders between what is legal and illegal have not been defined or completely settled in advance – not to mention that the players would be aware of such rules.

In order to analyse those questions that arose already with his analysis of Lenin as a man of action and revolutionary leader, Althusser sought help from the writings of Machiavelli.

Chapter Four
Althusser's Aleatory Machiavelli

In this chapter, I will analyse Althusser's interpretation of the 'man of action' in the writings of Machiavelli, as well as Machiavelli himself as a man of action, who, by means of his writings, carried out a political action in his own historical conjuncture.

4.1. A preliminary schema: the two dimensions of Machiavelli's *differentiae specificae*

For Althusser, Machiavelli was not only a theoretician of political practice but also a man of action who, through his book *The Prince*, carried out a political intervention in the same conjuncture that he had studied in both this and his other writings. The 'elusiveness [*insaisissable*]' of Machiavelli's texts is due to this very *dual nature*. At the same time, the writings were a shock [*saisissement*] to the way of thinking and writing typical of traditional philosophical thought, in which the general governs the specific:

> It is precisely because he [Machiavelli] is gripping that he cannot be grasped by traditional philosophical thought. He is gripping because – as much as any writing can – his writings 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 political practice in it as a practice; and by the double reflection of political practice in his text and of his text in political practice. Gramsci was the first to appreciate this.[1]

Althusser is thus interested not only in the writings written by Machiavelli about political practice but also in the positioning of Machiavelli and his writings within that political practice in which he wrote. In other words, Machiavelli offers Althusser a lesson in the theoreticisation of political practice not only with his written texts (*The Prince* as a text about the political practice of a man of action) but also with the act of writing (*The Prince* text as an intervention or 'work' of a man of action).

As an introduction to Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, and the important contribution it makes to political science, the present chapter begins with an outline of Machiavelli's two, but closely connected, *differentiae specificae*, the 'theoretical' and the 'political'.

4.1.1. 'Theoretical' *differentia specifica*

Machiavelli's theoretical *differentia specifica* are evident in the following quote from Althusser, in which he also refers implicitly to Machiavelli's political *differentia specifica*:

> What interests him is not 'the nature of *things*' in general (Montesquieu), but (to give the expression all its force) *'la verità effettuale* della *cosa*' [the effective truth], of *the* thing in the singular – the singularity of its 'case'.[2]

As with Lenin, Machiavelli's primary object of interest was not reality in general or politics in general or even political practice in general, but rather a very specific political practice; that is, the practice of his own case, the political conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula at the turn of the *quattrocento* and *cinquecento*. Machiavelli did not attempt to create a general theory about what 'political practice' is or propose *general guidelines* about how to act in a

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[1] Althusser 1995a, pp. 76–7; Althusser 1999, p. 32.
[2] Althusser 1995a, p. 57; Althusser 1999, p. 16; Althusser's emphasis.

specific practice. Instead, he paid attention in his writings to the *specificity* of each practice, conjuncture or case, as well as to the fact that it is not possible to give 'generally applicable' guidelines on how to act in each real conjuncture so as to *guarantee* success.

When Machiavelli in his writings analysed different cases (conjunctures), he was teaching his reader to analyse those *specific features* of each case which no general theory can take into account or anticipate.[3] Althusser wrote about this as follows:

> I believe it is not hazardous to venture that Machiavelli is the first theorist of the conjuncture or the first thinker consciously, if not to think the concept of conjuncture, if not to make it the object of an abstract and systematic reflection, then at least consistently – in an insistent, extremely profound way – to think *in* the conjuncture: that is to say, in its concept of an aleatory, singular case.[4]

4.1.2. 'Political' *differentia specifica*

The following quote leads us towards Machiavelli's political *differentia specifica*:

> He [Machiavelli] devotes all his powers as a writer to the service of the cause for which he declares. He explicitly engages in the ideological battle on behalf of the political party he supports. To put it another way: Machiavelli, who in his text elaborated the theory of the means at the disposal of the Prince set to save Italy, *treats his own text*, *in its turn and at the same time*, *as one of those means*, making it serve as a means in the struggle he announces and engages. In order to announce a New Prince in his text, he writes in a way that is suitable to the news he announces, in a novel manner. His writing is new; it is a *political act*.[5]

Machiavelli is primarily interested in his own case because he wants to make a political intervention in his own conjuncture. His 'tool [*moyen*]' or weapon – his only weapon – in the intervention is *The Prince*. As the end of the above

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[3] See the earlier discussion of Epicurus's idea of the collisions of atoms, and where one cannot predict or deduce *where* and *how* the atoms will collide.

[4] Althusser 1995a, p. 59; Althusser 1999, p. 18; Althusser's emphasis.

[5] Althusser 1995a, p. 66; Althusser 1999, p. 23; Althusser's emphasis.

quote makes clear, in Machiavelli's writing it is a question of a deliberate political act, and producing a text with a high degree of political self-reflexivity. Accordingly, *The Prince* is a passionate, political manifesto, as indeed Althusser claims, referring to Gramsci.[6]

Before looking closer at Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli's new kind of 'political act' or the exceptional character of his political manifesto, it is worthwhile summarising his 'political' and 'theoretical' *differentiae specificae*: Machiavelli is the first 'theoretician of the conjuncture' because he is interested primarily in his own case. On the other hand, he is interested in his own case because he wants to undertake a political intervention in it. However, he cannot undertake this intervention as, for instance, a leader of an army, but rather as an 'unarmed prophet', with only his text to hand.

In the following sections (4.2.–4.4.) these two dimensions of Machiavelli's *differentiae specificae* – the theoretical and the political – are labelled 'praxis of the prince' and 'praxis of *The Prince*' respectively. With the former term, I refer to Althusser's interpretation of the aleatory and the theorisation of aleatory practice in Machiavelli's texts. Because the man of action *par excellence* in Machiavelli's texts is a prince, I will use specifically the expression *the praxis of the prince*.

The *praxis* of *The Prince* refers to Machiavelli's own *praxis* of political writing, to how he, through his work *The Prince*, performed a conscious political act (or intervention) in his own conjuncture.

The political actor that links these dimensions together *historically* is the *new prince*. In Machiavelli's historical situation, a new prince is the desired political subject who, through his praxis – backed by weapons and armies – will solve the political problem of the Italian conjuncture that Machiavelli himself has set forth in his writings. In Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli – which leans on, yet also further develops, ideas from Gramsci – a new prince, or the notion of princes in general, is not merely a literary figure portrayed on the pages of *The Prince*. The text itself is the tool of Machiavelli's own political action or intervention, with which he positions himself in his own conjuncture. Furthermore, it is on the basis of his own text that he sets forth the political problem of his conjuncture to be solved by a possible political actor within that

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6 Althusser 1995a, pp. 65–6; Althusser 1999, pp. 23–4; cf. also Gramsci 1975, pp. 1555–6.

conjuncture, that is, a new prince.[7] Using terminology from literary theory, one could say that *The Prince* is one of those works that lie on the border between text and context, particularly in this case where the difference between them is negligible.

4.2. Machiavelli's *differentia specifica* in the history of political thought

Those who have read Machiavelli's *The Prince* or *The Discourses* know that they contain very general aphoristic characterisations of man and human nature. In fact, it is these very characterisations or 'general rules [*regole generali*]' for which Machiavelli is best remembered, and for which he is both praised and criticised. But the situational analyses of the political conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula are usually quickly bypassed by the critics. Despite initial impressions, *The Prince* is not easy to read. One reason for this is that the text jumps between very general characterisations of human nature and analyses of very specific conjunctures. Even within the same sentence or paragraph, Machiavelli may start off writing about some Florentine episode and then turn to some generally applicable definition of 'human nature'.

No clearly formulated theory (not to mention a philosophical system) emerges from *The Prince*, nor is its structure or argumentation systematic or unambiguous. The text, consisting of twenty-six chapters, is fragmentary and disjointed. As Althusser states:

> … Machiavelli does not have all the 'laws' intervene [in political prac-
> tice], and does not offer a general and systematic exposition, but deploys

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[7] With regard to the different interpretations of Machiavelli which Althusser refers to in *Machiavel et nous*, in addition to that of Gramsci, he also refers to Hegel; Claude Lefort in his book *Le travail de 'l'oeuvre' Machiavel* (Lefort 1986 [1972]); Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Lefort's teacher) in a manuscript that was originally notes for a lecture given in 1949 (Merleau-Ponty 1964); and Augustin Renaudet, in his book *Machiavel* (Renaudet 1956). Even though not stated explicitly, it is possible that it was the publication of Lefort's book that first prompted Althusser to lecture on Machiavelli in the year in question. *Machiavel et nous* does not contain a systematic analysis of Lefort's interpretation, but on becoming acquainted with Lefort's book one may observe that Althusser implicitly comments on Lefort's interpretation, for instance, on Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli (c.f. also Lefort 1988, pp. 237–58).

only the theoretical fragments conducive to clarification of the formulation
and understanding of this singular concrete case.[8]

Even though *The Prince* is a fragmentary work, with no systematic political
theory, Althusser nevertheless defines Machiavelli as the 'the first *theorist* of
the conjuncture'.[9] Machiavelli's text is also and at the same time a 'political'
text. *The Prince* is a unique work because its theoretical goals are intrinsically
linked with its political 'conjunctural' goals:

> In effect, through the examination of a political problem Machiavelli offers
> us something quite different from the examination of a theoretical problem.[10]

Machiavelli's own case is, for him, not merely a 'case study' that would offer
him a 'theoretical problem', for instance, for the development of an inductive
theory of political practice. His own case is, for him, a political problem that
he examines theoretically. Studying a political problem, however, requires a
different theoretical approach from studying a theoretical problem.

Here, one should note that, although the object of Machiavelli's study is
political practice, this does not yet mean that what is being studied would
be a political problem. It is possible to study political practice also as a
theoretical object, 'as a practice in general', striving to develop a general and
systematic theory about political practice or to write 'practical philosophy'.[11]
According to Althusser, Machiavelli's 'practicality' is, after all, not defined in
accordance with his research object, but rather *practicality* is a consequence
of the *viewpoint* from which he approaches practice. He does not study his
conjuncture like a theoretician would, 'from the outside', or a historian would,
as a 'fait accompli', or as a philosopher would, 'post festum', but rather from
the inside ['*dans* la conjoncture'].[12] From the point of view of the theoretical
differentia specifica, this means that Machiavelli's way of looking at conjunctures
from within produces such concepts and their use which makes him the
greatest materialist philosopher in history, 'the equal of Spinoza', as Althusser

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[8] Althusser 1995a, pp. 57–8; Althusser 1999, p. 16.
[9] Althusser 1995a, p. 59; Althusser 1999, p. 18; my emphasis.
[10] Althusser 1995a, p. 58; Althusser 1999, p. 17.
[11] Seen in this way, 'practical philosophy' is still just as 'theoretical' as 'theoretical philosophy' – the difference between them is mainly due to the difference in research objects. On the different interpretations of (practical) philosophy see, for instance, Mehtonen 1983, pp. 20–5; and Mehtonen 1987, pp. 30–9.
[12] Althusser 1995a, p. 59; Althusser 1999, p. 18.

declares at the very end of *Machiavel et nous*.[13] Machiavelli earns such an epithet because he uses familiar expressions (for instance, *fortuna* and *virtù* as well as *occasione* and *necessità*) in such a novel way that it is possible to grasp [*prendre*] the special character of the acute political practice at hand or the strategic problems caused by these.

According to Althusser, Spinoza himself realised this when characterising Machiavelli, in his *Tractatus Politicus* (1676–7), as being most acute [*acutissimus*] in politics.[14] Indeed, Althusser ends *Machiavelli et nous* by comparing Machiavelli favourably to Spinoza:

> Machiavelli is not in the least utopian; he simply thinks the conjunctural case of the thing, and goes *dietro alla verità effettuale della cosa*. He asserts it in concepts which are philosophical and no doubt make him, in his temerity, solitude and scorn for the philosophers of the tradition, the greatest materialist philosopher in history – the equal of Spinoza, who declared him *acutissimus* in politics. He would appear not to have suspected that Machiavelli was also most incisive in materialist philosophy. I shall attempt to demonstrate this in a subsequent book.[15]

Althusser never did write the book that would have brought Machiavelli and Spinoza together, but even in *Machiavelli et nous* it is evident that Althusser believes that Machiavelli was theoretically acute in the approach to his conjuncture. Althusser's early study on Montesquieu, published already at the end of the 1950s, also dealt with this question. With the help of that work, it is indeed possible to explicate Machiavelli's theoretical uniqueness in the history of political thought.

4.2.1. Machiavelli – Montesquieu – Aristotle

Even though Machiavelli's position amongst philosophers has weakened rather than strengthened since Spinoza's day, the practitioners of the theory of politics (and often also the practitioners of political practice) have considered Machiavelli as their great classic and even as 'the founder of modern political science'. It is specifically Machiavelli's *method* that these practitioners have

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[13] Althusser 1995a, p. 161; Althusser 1999, p. 103.
[14] Cf. Spinoza 1951, p. 378.
[15] Althusser 1995a, p. 161; Althusser 1999, p. 103; Althusser's emphasis.

considered as something that 'founded' an independent modern field of science that has entirely distanced itself from philosophy. The epithet 'founder of modern political science' has also been coined, however, for Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755), author of *De l'esprit des lois* (1748). Even Althusser, in the beginning of his study on Montesquieu, approvingly refers to this claim, albeit raising the question of its historical substantiation:

> It is a received truth that Montesquieu is *the founder of political science*. Auguste Comte said it, Durkheim repeated it, and no one has seriously disputed their judgement. But perhaps we should step back a little in order to distinguish him from his ancestors, and to see clearly into what it is that thus distinguishes him.[16]

Could it be that Althusser later changed his opinion, agreeing instead with those who argued that Machiavelli had, already well before Montesquieu, founded modern political science? Althusser's response in 1977,[17] however, indicates otherwise. Machiavelli's theoretical greatness is not due to the fact that he was one of the first moderns. In other words, those who consider Machiavelli as the founder of modern political science are being too hasty:

> It has been too often said that Machiavelli was the founder of political science, and there have been many commentators who have been pleased to discover in him one of the first figures of modern positivity, along with those of Galilean physics and Cartesian analysis, illustrating in all sorts of domains a new *typical rationality*, that of the *positive science* by which the young bourgeois class acquired the ability to master nature in order to develop its productive forces. In taking that road, it is only too easy to find certain passages in Machiavelli's texts, certain forms of mental experiment, certain forms of generalisation established to fix the variations of a relationship to justify this point of view.[18]

Althusser challenges Croce's widely influential thesis, according to which 'Machiavelli has announced the objective laws and rules of politics'.[19] In

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[16] Althusser 1959, p. 11; Althusser 1972b, p. 17; Althusser's emphasis.
[17] Althusser 1990a, p. 36; Althusser 1988, p. 476.
[18] Althusser 1990a, pp. 36–7; Althusser 1988, p. 476; Althusser's emphasis.
[19] Althusser 1995a, p. 56; Althusser 1999, pp. 14–15: cf. Althusser 1990a, p. 36; Althusser 1988, p. 476; cf. Croce 1981, p. 204.

Machiavel et nous, Althusser states that whereas Montesquieu was interested in ' "the nature *of* things" in general' Machiavelli was interested in '*a* certain thing in its singularity, the singularity of his "case" '.[20] Althusser discusses this claim throughout his study of Montesquieu.

The difference between these two classics of political thinking contains the key to perceiving Machiavelli's 'theoretical' *differentia specifica*, and why, furthermore, *The Prince* is not merely a political or theoretical work or even a theoretical work in a classical Aristotelian or modern Montesquieuan sense of the word.

Althusser does not acknowledge Machiavelli to be the founder of modern political science: in order to receive the qualifier 'modern', it is not enough that one is interested primarily and even 'passionately' in one's own case. In order to fulfil the criteria of *modern political science*, one must propose theoretical laws that apply in *all* cases or *unite* all cases.

In fact, already the founder of Western science, Aristotle, was of the opinion that science [*episteme*] can only be concerned with the general: there can be no science of the specific. A science of politics and ethics or even of *praxis* or *poiesis* is not possible because the starting points of the practice or production (*praxis* and *poiesis*) occurring in these sublunary areas that are influenced by human actions are uncertain.[21] In those branches of knowledge concerned with

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[20] Althusser 1995a, p. 57; Althusser 1999, p. 15; Althusser's emphasis.

[21] With regard to chance and spontaneity, Aristotle writes that 'it is necessary, no doubt, that the causes of what comes to pass by chance be indefinite' (Phy. 197a5–10) and that 'no discipline deals with the coincidental' (Met. 1027a20–25). Even though chance and the accidental are, according to Aristotle, 'objective' properties of human reality, a science concerned with them is not possible: '... for every discipline deals either with that [which is] always or with that [which is] for the most part. How else could one learn or teach another?' (Met. 1027a20–25). With his observations concerning chance [*tykhe*] and spontaneity [*automaton*], Aristotle also aimed to avert the deterministic implications that followed from his worldview. However, it has been claimed in Aristotle scholarship that he was not successful in this self-critical objective. The failure was due to the fact that Aristotle's worldview rests on the *principle of plenitude*, according to which every possibility will be realised at some point in one and the same real history if the question is about a 'genuine' opportunity (cf., e.g. Sihvola and Thesleff 1994, pp. 174–5). Aristotle's 'objective' interpretation of chance and the accidental seems to be in conflict or incompatible with his view of history, which relies on the principle of plenitude. It follows from this principle, of course, that 'coincidence' or 'spontaneity' should be so only from the viewpoint of the subject, because those opportunities which occur only once or only occasionally nevertheless still occur (if no external factor prevents it from occurring or if something that prevents it from occurring ceases: this is Aristotle's first attempt at avoiding determinism): 'Though Aristotle sought different ways to conceptualise the unrealised possibility, his attempt led to problems because

practical life, such as ethics and politics, it is not possible to use the requirement of proof which Aristotle proposed in his *Posterior Analytics*, according to which science must be based on secure premises (the deductive method). Such a requirement is not fulfilled because, in ethics and politics, the object of study is human life, which contains contingent aspects. Finnish philosopher Juha Sihvola sums this up as follows:

> Contingent and unforeseeable features are inevitably linked with human and particularly societal activities. Certain activities always have undesirable consequences, for instance, for the reason that from a human point of view it is impossible to take into account all factors influencing the matter when contingent matters concerning the future are considered, and perhaps also for the reason that some matters occur completely without reason, and therefore eliminating factors of uncertainty is impossible, even in principle.[22]

Even though Aristotle would in that sense already be 'modern' (or rather, modern though still Aristotelian) – because, according to him, there can only be a science of the general and that only the general makes possible certain knowledge – he draws from this an opposite conclusion from the representatives and founders of modern political science: the modern Montesquieu – and at least

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lacking from his metaphysics was the assumption of other possible worlds, from which the realised history is just one possibility and in which possibility is defined in terms of logical non-contradictoriness. In Aristotle's world, all possibilities are realised in one real world history which already contains all possible entities and *even individual events which factually exist*. In such a model it is not possible to differentiate between logical and natural necessity and possibility. The species structure of the prevailing world is necessary and there are no alternatives to be conceived' (Sihvola and Thesleff 1994, p. 175; my emphasis). Aristotle's sensitivity to these questions can also be seen in the following section of *Metaphysics* in which the 'non-necessity' of chance is characterised: '… everything that will be will be of necessity, e.g. that he who is living dies; for something has already come to be, as for instance opposites in the same thing. But whether by disease or violence is not yet [necessary], but [will be] if *this* comes to be. It is consequently plain that it runs as far as some origin, but this no further to anything else; the [origin] of whatever may chance will therefore be this, and nothing else is the cause of its coming to be' (Met. 1027b5–15). Even though chance and the accidental would be in conflict or incompatible with the principle of plenitude, one can still discern links between Aristotle's views on chance and the accidental and Machiavelli's thinking. For both of them, chance is something 'more objective' than the ignorance of the subject, and both of them study chance in regard to human practice and human actions and not 'chance in general'.

²² Sihvola 1994, p. 76. Cf. also Aristotle, Met. VI.3.1027a29–b14; XI.1065a6–21; De int. 9.18.a28–19b4. Cf. also Kakkuri and Knuuttila 1993, in which they analyse the relation between dialectics and science in Aristotle.

already in the rhetoric of Hobbes's *The Leviathan* – deduces that it is also possible in the case of human things and practical life to propose general laws, to create a generally applicable 'human science', 'political science' or 'political physics', as Althusser states in his Montesquieu study.[23] In the case of Montesquieu, this means that he endeavours to find and to present those general principles and laws that unite all cases, as he declares at the very beginning of *De l'esprit des lois* (cited by Althusser in both his Montesquieu study and in *Machiavel et nous*):[24]

> I have set down the principles, and I have seen particular cases conform to them as if by themselves, the histories of all nations being but their consequences, and each particular law connecting with another law or dependent on a more general one.[25]

From the multitude of customs and laws of nations, it is possible to emphasise those general principles that *unite* a variety of cases (cf. Montesquieu: '. . . every particular law is connected with another law, or depends on some other of

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[23] Critical standpoints towards modern science can be found in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, who lived at the beginning of the age of modern science, and particularly in the writings of Giambattista Vico, who lived during the Cartesian era. According to Vico's thesis of *verum et factum convertuntur* [the truth and the made are convertible], truthful knowledge [*verum*] can only be obtained in regard to what one has created oneself. Thus only God can have certain knowledge about nature, because he created it, whereas the most certain knowledge man can have is that of culture and its artefacts and customs because man himself created these. It should be noted, however, that Vico's view of the 'new science' of 'knowledge' differs from the Cartesian view. According to Vico, truth entails an immediate intuition about the nature of things. The object of science, however, is general – for instance, customs common to all peoples (e.g. that the dead are buried) – whereas in the everyday knowledge of 'ordinary people' the question is about *senso commune*, of unfounded 'certainty' (cf., for example, Caponigri 1953, pp. 155–7). In the case of Hobbes, it has also been stated that, despite the modern emphasis of *Leviathan*, he thought that in the writing of both natural history and the social history of man the question is about *knowing indemonstrable facts*. A good historian can clarify the events of the past and present evidence to support his interpretations, but this is not a case of a necessary truth that would fulfill the criteria set for the demonstrative truth of the methods of geometry (cf., for example, Reik 1977, p. 49). According to Hobbes, history indeed teaches us to be 'prudently in the present and providently towards the future' (cited in Reik 1977, p. 38). Such a lesson of history was offered to Hobbes by the writings of Thucydides, whose book *The Peloponnesian Wars* he much admired when he was young (Hobbes published a translation of Thucydides in 1628), for giving such a convincing description that the reader feels that he himself was part of the events.

[24] Althusser 1959, p. 43; Althusser 1972b, p. 43; Althusser 1995a, p. 56; Althusser 1999, pp. 14–15.

[25] Montesquieu 1951, Préface, p. 229; Montesquieu 1989, Preface, p. xliii.

a more general extent'). Seen from this angle, Montesquieu can *justifiably* be called the founder of modern political science because he does, after all, present a theory that is intended to cover *all* cases. Even though Montesquieu at times was a very active political actor – for instance, president of the parliament of Bordeaux (1716–26) and a writer of political satires (e.g. *Lettres persanes* [1721]) – he is remembered above all as a political theoretician, who, having withdrawn to his castle in the countryside (1735–47), created a general theory about laws and states, *De l'esprit des lois* (1748). He was not primarily interested in the French political conjuncture of the mid-eighteenth century, even though this conjuncture, characterised by absolutism, indeed formed the essential context of his theoretical and practical activities. Montesquieu 'parenthesised' his own case and strived instead to study all cases.

On the other hand, Althusser states in his Montesquieu study that the interests of his fellow countryman in the general within the specific does not mean that he would have dismissed the special characteristics of nations and the differences between them. Along with the experiences brought about – willingly or forcibly – by journeys of exploration and colonialism, *specifically* the sensitivity to differences and the different laws and customs of different peoples had grown to considerably larger dimensions than previously. It was specifically these differences and the unfamiliar customs of distant peoples and cultures that were the contextual starting points for Montesquieu when he was searching for the deeper principles uniting different kinds of cases – principles that would not mask the differences between cases, but rather explain them through general principles:

> … every diversity is *uniformity*, every change is *consistency*.[26]

Montesquieu was not, however, the founder of modern political science simply because he formulated general principles, but rather because he aimed to present these principles based on the nature of things [*de la nature des choses*], and not his own personal prejudices:

> I did not draw my principles from my prejudices but from *the nature of things*.[27]

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[26] Montesquieu 1989, p. 4.
[27] Montesquieu 1989, Preface, p. xliii; my emphasis.

And furthermore:

> Laws, taken in the broadest meaning, are the necessary relations deriving
> from the nature of things ….[28]

According to Althusser, reflecting on the totality of concrete actions and
facts [*la totalité des faits concrets*][29] is the central starting point that produces
Montesquieu's *differentia specifica* in relation to both the theory of natural rights
as well as the theory of the social contract.[30] Montesquieu differs from the
natural-rights theoreticians because he does not found society on a moral or
theological principle, in other words 'pre-judgements [*pré*-jugés]'. Morality
and religion do not justify the social order, but rather the general laws of the
social order enable also the profane understanding of morality and politics
(and moral and political prejudices):

> Religion and morality, which he correctly refuses the right to judge history,
> are no more than elements *internal* to given societies which govern their
> forms and their nature. The same principle that explains a given society also
> explains its beliefs.[31]

The social-contract theoreticians of the new era also denied the 'divine' bases
of the origins of society. According to Althusser, these were, nevertheless –
just like Hobbes and Spinoza – linked with the natural-rights theoreticians of
the feudal world by the fact that both posed the same problem, though their
answers differed:

> … they pose the same problem: *what is the origin of society?*[32]

Even though the theoreticians of the social contract questioned the justifica-
tions of the old natural rights of the feudal society, their own justifications,
based on modern theory of natural law, were idealist and abstract:

> They do not produce a theory of real history, but a theory of the essence of
> society. They do not explain any particular society, nor any concrete historical
> period, nor *a fortiori* all societies and all history. They analyse the essence of

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[28] Montesquieu 1989, p. 3.
[29] Althusser 1959, p. 14; Althusser 1972b, p. 19.
[30] Althusser 1959, p. 21; Althusser 1972b, p. 25.
[31] Althusser 1959, pp. 19–20; Althusser 1972b, p. 23; my emphasis.
[32] Althusser 1959, p. 21; Althusser 1972b, p. 25; Althusser's emphasis.

society and provide an ideal and abstract model of it. We might say that their science is as far from Montesquieu's as the speculative physics of a Descartes is from the experimental physics of a Newton.[33]

Neither Hobbes nor Spinoza proposed an experimental theory about 'the histories of all nations [*les histoires de toutes les nations*]' as did Montesquieu, but rather a theory about society or history in general.[34] Montesquieu, on the other hand, did not aim to ascertain the common essence of all societies but rather to find those laws (diachronic and synchronic constant *relationships*)[35] that have an influence in and between all existing societies. Due to this difference, Montesquieu's experimental method (laws about facts) differs from both Hobbes's and Spinoza's speculative method (the theory of essence).

As mentioned earlier, assessed from Althusser's viewpoint, Machiavelli cannot be considered the 'founder of modern political science', nor as an Aristotelian practitioner of science, because he is primarily interested in his own case, in '*the* thing in the singular – the singularity of its "case" '.[36] But Machiavelli is also not on the same lines as the natural-law theoreticians or the social-contract theoreticians (the modern philosophy of the new era) because his starting point and object of interest is, as with Montesquieu, the *effective truth* [*la verità effettuale della cosa*] and not the ideals postulated as moral, theological or judicial ideals.

Because Machiavelli's political science is neither classical, in the sense of referring to the antiquity, nor modern in the Montesquieuian sense of the word, it must therefore be something else. The answer, however, is not that Machiavelli's texts would be 'merely politics' or the 'empirical' description

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[33] Althusser 1959, pp. 14–15; Althusser 1972b, p. 20.

[34] In his writings from the 1980s, Althusser presents a different, aleatory interpretation of Spinoza's conception of history. This interpretation is based on the analysis of Jewish history which Spinoza presented in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). According to Althusser, Spinoza's viewpoint is in accordance with aleatory materialism because the history of the Jews is described as a unique case, the understanding of which requires, however, the presence of constants which are more common than this particular history. Spinoza's analysis is based on his theory of 'three kinds of knowledge' which enables the study of such cases in which the general and the specific come together in a unique way (Althusser 1994c, p. 552; Althusser 2006a, p. 179).

[35] On the interpretation of 'law', cf. Althusser 1972b, Chapter 2.

[36] Althusser 1995a, p. 57; Althusser 1999, p. 16.

of the effective truth of his own case. The question is, rather, what kind of 'theoreticity' is at play here when it cannot be understood by reducing Machiavelli's theoretical disposition to other theoretical or political discourses that precede or come after him?

In his Montesquieu study, Althusser does not yet present his response to this question. Indeed, he refers to Machiavelli in only two places,[37] and, even then, Machiavelli is not included in the theoretical argumentation, nor are his views compared to those of Montesquieu. The references to Machiavelli are merely observations made in passing. Althusser's response comes later, in *Machiavel et nous*, as well as in his autobiography and the manuscript *L'unique tradition matérialiste*, written in parallel with the latter, but which was not published until 1993.[38]

Althusser argues that Machiavelli's position is more in accordance with classical Aristotle rather than the modern Montesquieu, in that he argues that, due to the effects of coincidences and exceptions, it is not possible to posit a general theory about human life or *praxis* in general. Machiavelli's conclusion, however, differs from Aristotle's, in which the possibility of a *science* of *praxis* is denied. For Machiavelli, a science of *praxis* is possible, even though it would not fulfill the requirement of generality. What one ends up with is a strange and unique science that does not primarily aim at or focus upon general laws that unite all cases.

This brings us back to Aristotle. The coincidences and other contingent factors that are due to man's actions and the changeability of the sublunary world leads to the fact that, in every individual case, there are features that prevent the *subsumption* of the case in question under general laws and a theoretically formulated ideal case. Montesquieu himself does not deny this – according to Althusser, it was specifically the *uniqueness* of the cases that encouraged Montesquieu in his theoretical ambitions – but, for him, the differences and unique characteristics of the cases are nevertheless secondary compared to those general laws and necessities that one finds to be indirectly influencing the case. In other words, Montesquieu explains the differences through the general, and

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[37] Althusser 1959, p. 12; Althusser 1972b, p. 17, and Althusser 1959, p. 20; 1972b, p. 24.
[38] *L'unique tradition matérialiste* has also been published as an appendix to the paperback edition of Althusser's autobiography (Althusser 1994a).

emphasises the general within the unique, whereas Machiavelli is interested – due specifically to his political interests – in the 'singularity of his case' and consequently 'a *certain* thing in its singularity'. Thus Machiavelli's 'political science' is, from an Aristotelian point of view, *impossible* because it concerns the *unique* and the *particular*.

Seen from Machiavelli's position, the unique and the particular are of *primary* importance because they are central conditions for the success of the man of action undertaking political actions. For the man of action, knowledge about general laws ('general knowledge') will always be insufficient. Unlike the theoretician, the man of action must be sensitive to the unique and surprising features of his own case, that is, the fact that his conjuncture is aleatory and what the aleatory nature of his conjuncture entails. Unlike the theoretician Montesquieu, he cannot parenthesise these features. The condition for a successful *action* is that the man of action not only takes into account the contingent factors of his own case and its particular aleatory characteristics, but also understands that he acts in a contingent and unique conjuncture. Althusser indeed states that Machiavelli teaches us to give up the idea that deludes even political actors – such as communist parties – namely, the idea that, when faced with practical problems, one should 'call for help' from theory alone. We must

> … abandon a conception that brings in only theory for one that brings in practice and, *since we are dealing with politics, political practice*. This is where Gramsci's remark that *The Prince* has the character of a manifesto is going to enlighten us.[39]

Even though theory should not be called upon for assistance, this does not mean that one should abandon it. Instead, one must learn to use theory in relation to practice in a subversive way (the 'praxis of *The Prince*'), and to develop a theory that teaches the practice of action for men of action (the 'praxis of the prince'). It was specifically this to which Althusser was referring in the passage from *Machiavel et nous*, cited in the beginning of Chapter 4.1., where he differentiates between the theoretical observation of a political problem and the observation of a theoretical problem.[40]

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[39] Althusser 1995a, p. 58; Althusser 1999, p. 17: my emphasis.
[40] Althusser 1995a, p. 58; Althusser 1999, pp. 16–17.

4.3. The praxis of *The Prince*: the text as a political act

The historical character or crystallisation *par excellence* of the man of action, which Machiavelli presents as the *real* deciding factor – though one which may never *actually materialise* – in his own case or the political problem of his conjuncture, is the prince:

> The whole question then becomes: in what *form* are all the positive forces currently available to be rallied, in order to achieve the political objective of national unity? Machiavelli gives this *form* a name: the Prince.[41]

Because the problem that Machiavelli has set up and studied is a political problem arising from his own conjuncture, this compels a 'shift' in philosophical status, 'to change space [*changer d'espace*]' from the space of pure theory – 'assuming that it exists' – to the 'space of political practice'.[42] 'His writing is new; it [*The Prince*] is a *political act*'.[43]

What kind of political act is being dealt with here? What is the 'logic' of this act? What kind of political effects and objectives does this act have? What is the role of Machiavelli's text in his political practice and how does he problematise that political practice in his text?

According to Althusser, *The Prince* is a conscious and premeditated political intervention, because Machiavelli does not even aim for a purely theoretical description of political practice – even though such a description would be a 'realistic' description of the amoral courses of action of the princes – but must '*openly* declare himself *partisan* in his writings [ouvertement partisan *dans ses écrits*]'.[44] If the 'political' viewpoint and strategy of Machiavelli's textual intervention is not taken into account, *The Prince* becomes a mere – albeit high-standard – 'general' study of the amoral courses of action of princes or a 'neutral political science' (Croce), as will become evident a little later.[45]

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[41] Althusser 1995a, p. 61; Althusser 1999, p. 19; Althusser's emphasis.
[42] Althusser 1995a, p. 62; Althusser 1999, p. 20.
[43] Althusser 1995a, p. 66; Althusser 1999, p. 23; Althusser's emphasis.
[44] Althusser 1995a, p. 65; Althusser 1999, p. 23; my emphasis.
[45] Althusser 1995a, p. 66; Althusser 1999, p. 23.

What viewpoint does Machiavelli commit himself to in his intervention?

> … it would seem that Machiavelli should, in ideology, *write his texts from the viewpoint of the one who is to revolutionize the historical conjuncture: the Prince*.[46]

Though it may indeed seem as if Machiavelli *should* write in this way, the reality, however, is rather different. This is evident from the dedication at the beginning of *The Prince*, which reveals Machiavelli's viewpoint on the (amoral) practice of princes:

> Nor I hope will it be considered presumptuous for a man of low and humble status to dare discuss and lay down the law about how princes should rule; because just as men who are sketching the landscape put themselves down in the plain to study the nature of the mountains and the highlands, and to study the low-lying land they put themselves high on the mountains, so, to comprehend fully the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to comprehend fully the nature of princes one must be an ordinary citizen [*essere popolare*].[47]

Because Machiavelli wants us to understand princes, he 'must' write from the popular viewpoint of the people. This 'necessity', however, has two levels: i) in the ideological field and historical situation in which Machiavelli writes, he has to direct his words to the prince, Lorenzo de' Medici. Machiavelli has – in a 'Machiavellian' way – to pretend that he is advising the prince;[48] ii) but, even though Machiavelli addresses himself to the prince in a way that is familiar

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[46] Althusser 1995a, p. 66; Althusser 1999, p. 24; Althusser's emphasis.

[47] Machiavelli 2004, p. 2.

[48] Althusser 1995a, p. 74; Althusser 1999, p. 30. As Quentin Skinner shows, as a writer of a guidebook for princes, Machiavelli had numerous predecessors (Skinner 1978, pp. 33–4, 40–1, 116–18 and 126–8). However, Skinner's view is one-sided because he does not take into account how in its subversiveness the positioning of the viewpoint of the people in *The Prince* differentiates Machiavelli from the writers of the 'Machiavellian' guidebook genre, for whom it was sufficient that the prince took heed of their teachings. As I have tried to show in the present study, the radicalness or subversiveness of Machiavelli is ultimately based *not* on the fact that he gave the prince radical advice but on how he and his works were positioned in relation to the political context of the time. In this sense, Max Weber's claim (Weber 1989, p. 58) that much more radical guidebooks for princes than *The Prince* can be found, for instance, in Indian literature, is only 'abstractly true'. Weber's claim holds true only if the guidebooks are assessed 'textually', that is, without paying attention to the possibly even more subversive position of Machiavelli's texts compared to the position of even the 'radical' advisors to the *maharajas* of India.

already from numerous earlier 'guidebooks for princes', he manages with the help of his landscape painter allegory to justify another 'necessity': why he 'must' advise the prince from the viewpoint of the people.[49] Even though Machiavelli indeed has to act within the ideological field of his time, and under the pressure of the powers that dominate it, he manages, with the help of his landscape painter allegory, to place himself within that ideological field in the position of the people. In other words, by means of 'servant-like' flattery of Lorenzo de'Medici, Machiavelli can 'shamelessly' side with the people.[50]

The 'popular' viewpoint of the people determines whether the ruler is good or bad, suitable or unsuitable. The dedication in *The Prince* is, in Althusser's opinion, subversive in its 'shamelessness', because the prince has importance only to the extent that he acts as the leader of the people in its class struggle against the nobility:

> . . . his [Machiavelli's] *viewpoint is not the Prince*, who is nevertheless deter-
> mined as the 'subject' of the decisive political practice, *but the people*. The
> paradox is that in the dedication to a ruler, Lorenzo de'Medici, which opens
> a book that is going to speak of the Prince, Machiavelli does not hesitate to
> declare that 'one needs to be . . . a man of the people to understand prop-
> erly the character of rulers' – hence, not to be a ruler. This means not only
> that rulers incapable of knowing themselves, but that *there can be no knowl-*
> *edge of rulers except from the viewpoint of the people*. . . . But we must go further:
> Machiavelli does not say that one needs to be a man of the people to know
> the nature of *the* Prince, but the nature of *princes* – implying that here are sev-
> eral sorts, and thus that there is a choice to be made between them *from the*
> *viewpoint of the people*.[51]

Althusser nevertheless remarks that Machiavelli did not write a manifesto titled *The People* [*Le peuple*],[52] that is, a manifesto for the people. Understanding the character of Machiavelli's textual intervention indeed requires paying

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[49] When using the term 'people' (for Althusser, *peuple*), one should keep in mind that this is not equivalent to the term 'nation-state [*nazione*]' or the notion of nationalism which developed during the nineteenth century.

[50] Althusser 1995a, p. 67; Althusser 1999, pp. 24–5: cf. Althusser 1990a, p. 39; Althusser 1993a, p. 93.

[51] Althusser 1995a, p. 67; Althusser 1999, pp. 24–5; Althusser's emphasis.

[52] Althusser 1995a, p. 67; Althusser 1999, p. 24.

attention to the 'duality of places, the duality of "subjects" ' in *The Prince*.[53] The duality refers to the difference between the subject of political practice and the subject of the Machiavellian popular viewpoint.[54]

> 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 duality, this irreducibility, affects *both* the prince *and* the people. Being uniquely and exclusively defined by the function he must perform – that is to say, by the historical vacuum he must fill – the prince is a pure aleatory possibility-impossibility. No class membership disposes him to assume his historical task; no social tie binds him to this people whom he must unify into a nation. Everything hangs on his *virtù* – that is to say, the subjective conditions of his success. As for the people who expect this impossible prince to transform them into a nation, and from whose perspective Machiavelli defines the prince's politics, nothing obliges or even prompts them to constitute themselves as a people, to transform themselves into a people, or – *a fortiori* – to become a *political force*.[55]

It is due to the duality of the places that both the 'Machiavellian' and 'democratic' interpretations of *The Prince* can, both in their own way, be one-sided and contradictory. When assessing the problems of these interpretations and developing his own interpretation, Althusser's starting point is Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli in the *Prison Notebooks*. According to Althusser, Gramsci was the first to have realised that *The Prince* is 'a utopian revolutionary manifesto'.[56] According to Gramsci, *The Prince* is neither a 'cold utopia' nor a 'learned theorising' but a 'concrete phantasy', in which the prince has no real historical existence, but is rather a creation of a pure theoretical abstraction, an 'ideal *condottiere*'. As Althusser points out, in calling the book a 'revolutionary manifesto', Gramsci links it to a class-aligned intervention, and yet it

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[53] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, p. 27; translation modified.

[54] In the case of the word 'subject', one must be aware of its ambiguity. It refers, on the one hand, to the loyal or subjugated [*subiectus*] 'object' of knowledge, action or control and, on the other hand, to the actor who produces and is responsible for his own actions, in other words, the agent of knowledge or action: '*There are no subjects except by and for their subjection*. That is why they "work all by themselves" ' (Althusser 1976a, p. 119; Althusser 1971, p. 169; Althusser's emphasis).

[55] Althusser 1995a, p. 70; Althusser 1999, pp. 26–7; Althusser's emphasis.

[56] Althusser 1995a, p. 57; Althusser 1999, p. 14.

is still a study, so Gramsci argues, that retains a scientific detachment from its object. The 'logic' of *The Prince* is encapsulated in the *simultaneity* of this 'coolly detached' approach and the author's passion, which brings the prince to life:

> Throughout the book, Machiavelli discusses what the Prince must be like if he is to lead a people to found a new State; the argument is developed with rigorous logic, and with scientific detachment. In the conclusion Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people; not, however, with some 'generic' people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument – the people whose consciousness and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified. The entire 'logical' argument now appears as nothing other then auto-reflection on the part of the people – and inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency.[57]

Even though the penultimate chapters of *The Prince* indeed describe the practices of princes (such as the skills of plotting and deceit), the book is not a 'Machiavellian' text. Why? Because Machiavelli presents the problem of the politics of the princes from the *viewpoint of the people*.[58] But, even though the viewpoint of the people determines whether we are dealing with a good or bad ruler, these qualities cannot be reduced to a 'Machiavellian'-'anti-Machiavellian' dualism. For Machiavelli, it is clear that the prince must *always* have the power of a lion and the cunning of a fox. It is not a matter of a choice between Machiavellian and anti-Machiavellian strategies, and ultimately not even about what 'Machiavellianism' would entail at any particular moment (it could be, depending on the situation, equally violent as virtuously 'idealistic'). More important is the question of how political practice and the 'passionate cry' of the people *relate* to each other.[59]

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[57] Gramsci 1975, pp. 1555–6; cited in Althusser 1995a, p. 68; cited in Althusser 1999, pp. 105–6; cf. also Gramsci 1971, pp. 126–7. Though Althusser and Gramsci do not explicate it, the landscape allegory also refers to the flexibility of Machiavelli's own position. Even though he identifies with the 'passionate cry' of the people, he also understands the nature and logic of the real political practice of the prince. As will become clear in the following section (4.4.), Machiavelli knows how the prince appears in the eyes of the people and how they assess the prince, but Machiavelli also understands what answering the 'passionate cry' of the people requires from the prince.

[58] Althusser 1995a, p. 67; Althusser 1999, p. 24.

[59] Cf., e.g., Althusser 1995a, pp. 63 and 67; Althusser 1999, pp. 21 and 24.

Unlike what the Italian scholar and poet Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) suggests in his poem 'Dei sepolcri' ('The Graves'),[60] emphasising the viewpoint of the people does not mean that the political practices of the princes should be condemned on 'moral' grounds. According to Gramsci, the final chapter of *The Prince* shows that Machiavelli's starting point is not moralistic but 'political':

> One may therefore suppose that Machiavelli had in mind 'those who are not in the know', and that it was they whom he intended to educate politically. This was no negative political education – of tyrant-haters – as Foscolo seems to have understood it; but a positive education – of those who have to recognise certain means as necessary, even if they are the means of tyrants, because they desire certain ends. Anyone born into the traditional governing stratum acquires almost automatically the characteristics of the political realist, as a result of the entire educational complex which he absorbs from his family milieu, in which dynastic or patrimonial interests predominate. Who therefore is 'not in the know'? The revolutionary class of the time, the Italian 'people' or 'nation', the citizen democracy which gave birth to men like Savonarola and Pier Soderini, rather than to a Castruccio or a Valentino. It seems clear that Machiavelli wished to persuade these forces of the necessity of having a 'leader' who knew what he wanted and how to obtain it, and of accepting him with enthusiasm even if his actions might conflict or appear to conflict with the generalised ideology of the time, religion.[61]

Foscolo's well-intentioned moralism does indeed turn against the people, because it leaves them defenceless in the battle against tyrants. The defencelessness arises because, in condemning on moral grounds all 'Realpolitik' and all 'realpoliticians', Foscolo also excludes the possibility of a 'Realpolitik' with which the people could successfully fight against tyrants. In other words, the problem with the 'democratic' interpretation of Foscolo, among others, is that 'Realpolitik' is defined as *entirely* negative, whereas, in Gramsci's interpretation, the positive aspects or the negative aspects of the politics of the prince are defined by the *historical context* of each case, that is, in the service of what kind of goals and users the protagonist of the *Realpolitik* (the prince) is *de facto* posited. The problem is thus not 'Realpolitik' in itself or the text that presents it

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[60] Foscolo 1952, lines 155–8.
[61] Gramsci 1975, pp. 1600–1; Gramsci 1971, pp. 135–6.

as an object lesson, but, on the contrary, a historical context where the nobility have the sole rights both to study and use the political means available.[62] An expression of this unequal situation is specifically that an influential minority are able to produce a moralism against the 'Realpolitik', for instance, utilising

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[62] According to Gramsci, one essential difference between Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini is that the 'cynicism' of the latter remains part of the internal 'diplomacy' and description of a system at the level of a city state, whereas the former surpasses such a cynical perspective of 'small politics [*piccola politica* or *politica giorno per giorno*]' with his realistic 'grand politics [*la grande politica*]' which aims to constitute the nation-state. '"Too much" (therefore superficial and mechanical) political realism often leads to the assertion that a statesman should only work within the limits of "effective reality"; that he should not interest himself in what "ought to be" but only in what "is". This would mean that he should not look farther than the end of his own nose. This misunderstanding led Paolo Treves to see in Guicciardini rather than in Machiavelli the "true politician" (Paolo Treves, "Il realismo politico di Francesco Guicciardini", *Nuova Rivista Storica*, nov.–dec. 1930). A distinction must be made not only between "diplomat" and "politician", but also between political scientist and active politician. The diplomat inevitably will move only within the bounds of effective reality, since his specific activity is not the creation of some new equilibrium, but the maintenance of an existing equilibrium within a certain juridical framework. Similarly, the political scientist has to keep within the bounds of effective reality in so far as he is merely a scientist. But Machiavelli is not merely a scientist: he is a partisan, a man of powerful passions, an active politician, who wishes to create a new balance of forces and therefore cannot help concerning himself with what "ought to be" (not of course in a moralistic sense)' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1577; cf. also pp. 760–2, where Gramsci subjects to critique the assessments of Guicciardini by Traves and De Sanctis. Cf. also Dotti 1979, in which he compares Machiavelli's 'Jacobinism' and his friend Francesco Vettori's 'fatalism'). Machiavelli's realism does not exclude change and 'should be [*dover essere*]' objectives which aim at change. Here, the question is not about a critique of moralistic politics but a realistic critique of (and attempt to change) the existing political situation (cf. 'not of course in a moralistic sense'). Gramsci indeed continues that the 'effective truth [*realtà effettuale*]' must not be understood as an unchanging situation, but rather it is the 'realistic' starting point of action in striving for change: 'The active politician is a creator, an initiator; but he neither creates from nothing nor does he move in the turbid void of his own desires and dreams. He bases himself on effective reality, but what is this effective reality? Is it something static and immobile, or is it not rather a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium? If one applies one's will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative – basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory – one still moves on the terrain of effective reality, but does so in order to dominate and transcend it (or to contribute to this). What "ought to be" is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1578). Gramsci's view comes close to an idea later evident in the thinking of Althusser, that is, that the conjuncture forms the complex starting point of political action, the conditions – such as diplomacy – for which, however, do not determine what can be done based on the 'effective truth'. The conjuncture also opens up *possibilities* for political action. (The expression in the above quote 'it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making [*è sola storia in atto e filosofia in atto*]' refers ironically to Giovanni Gentile's 'actualistic philosophy'). Croce,

the religious ideology of the time, 'Jesuitistically'.[63] In other words, such an 'antipolitical' morality was an effective political instrument for controlling the people ideologically.

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on the other hand, characterises the difference in 'character' between Machiavelli and Guicciardini as follows: 'The lack of that bitter and pessimistic sentiment distinguishes Guicciardini from Machiavelli. Guicciardini does nothing more than display a sort of contempt towards men, in which he finds very "little goodness"; and he makes himself at home tranquilly in this world that he does not esteem, aiming only at the advantage of his own 'particular' interest. If he hadn't needed to serve the Pontiffs of the Medici for his own "particular" interest, he would have loved "Martin Luther more than himself", because he would have hoped that the rebel monk could have unmade the ecclesiastical state and ruined the "evil tyranny of the priests". The man of Guicciardini is of another temperament from the man of Machiavelli' (Croce 1981, p. 206). Guicciardini's statement, 'Martin Luther more than himself', is located in section 28 of his work *Ricordi*; cf. also Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*, Chapter XIII, as well as, for example, Quatela 1991, pp. 115–16; for more on Luther in Italy, cf. *Lutero in Italia*. Unlike with Althusser and Gramsci, Croce emphasises the 'pessimistic' side of Machiavelli's thinking. Croce does not consider Machiavelli merely a pessimist for whom politics is only 'sad necessity', but *sometimes* politics is also 'the sublime art of founding and sustaining that great institution that is the state' (Croce 1981, p. 126). It is the latter notion that Althusser and Gramsci share with Croce but, unlike Croce, they emphasise the difference between the politics of the new prince aiming to establish and sustain a state and the *Realpolitik* of the tyrant who preserves the existing conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula.

[63] Disassociating himself from the 'democratic' interpretation, Gramsci states that Machiavelli is more multifaceted and 'more democratic' in his objectives than has been claimed in democratic interpretations, even though his 'democraticness' would indeed have to be understood in relation to his own time, that of the formation of absolute monarchies: 'It seems that the intentions of Machiavelli in writing *The Prince* were more complex and also "more democratic" than the "democratic" interpretation supposes. That is, Machiavelli maintains that the necessity of the unitary national state is so great that all will accept that in order to attain to this very high end only those means that are adequate are employed. It can therefore be said that Machiavelli proposed to educate the people, but not in the sense that is usually given to this expression or at least that which has been given to it by certain democratic currents. For Machiavelli, "to educate the people" could have meant only to make the people convinced and conscious that only one politics can exist, the realistic type, in order to attain to the desired end and that therefore there is the need to come together and to obey precisely that prince that uses such methods in order to attain the end, because only he who wants the ends wants the means adequate to attain it. The position of Machiavelli, in this sense, should be related to that of the theoreticians and politicians of the philosophy of praxis, who themselves had to struggle aginst a form of "Jesuitism" adequate for different times. The "democracy" of Machiavelli is of a type suited to his times; that is, it is the active consent of the popular masses for the absolute monarchy, insofar as it was limiting and destructive of the feudal and seigneurial anarchy and of the power of the priests, insofar as it was founding of large territorial national states, a function that the absolute monarchy could not fulfill without the support of the bourgeoisie and of a standing, national, centralised army' (Gramsci 1975, pp. 1690–1; cf. 1962–3).

According to Althusser, Gramsci's viewpoint here seems to touch on Rousseau's interpretation of Machiavelli. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau states that *The Prince* is a 'Republican book' because 'he [Machiavelli] professed to teach kings, but it was the people he really taught'.[64] *The Prince* is a *plot*, by means of which Machiavelli could reveal political courses of action to republicans so that they could fight against tyrants with their own weapons. Even Rousseau's interpretation, however, is problematic for Althusser because, if *The Prince* is a plot against princes and their practices of *Realpolitik*, then the book turns against *all* princes. Such a viewpoint would conflict with Gramsci's interpretation, according to which a particular prince, 'a new prince', is appealed to, who would expel the 'barbarians' and unite the peninsula.[65]

Even though Machiavelli's teachings could have worked during Rousseau's *own* time, in the cause of the 'republicans', in Machiavelli's Italian context, they were not well received by the urban bourgeoisie. Rousseau himself admits this in a footnote to *The Social Contract*, where he states that Machiavelli, 'this profound political thinker', has so far been studied only by 'superficial or corrupt' readers [*lecteurs superficiels ou corrompus*].[66] Althusser indeed refers to this footnote (as well as a similar interpretation from an entry, thought to be by Diderot, in the *Encyclopédie*) when asking why Machiavelli would have written a textbook for the people if these indeed were not even able to read his texts.[67]

The problems with the interpretations of Foscolo, Rousseau and others, however, are not due to the 'external effects' of the contexts of their writings; rather, these problems 'reflect' *The Prince*'s 'internal' problematics and its unusual character.[68] In what sense is *The Prince* unusual? As Althusser sees it, Machiavelli did not even attempt to present a *generally applicable solution* to the problem of the relationship between the politics of the prince and the people. Machiavelli does not offer a solution to the problem but presents it as a problem

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[64] Cf. Rousseau 1993a, pp. 244–5; Althusser 1995a, pp. 72–3; Althusser 1999, p. 28.

[65] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, p. 27.

[66] Rousseau 1966a, p. 112; Rousseau 1993a, p. 245.

[67] Althusser 1995a, p. 75: Althusser 1999, p. 31. Althusser remarks that it was doubtlessly Diderot himself who wrote the following entry for 'Machiavellianism' in the *Encyclopédie*: 'When Machiavelli wrote his treatise on the Prince, it is as if he said to his fellow citizens: Read this work carefully. Should you ever accept a master, he will be such as I depict him for you. Here is the savage brute to whom you will be abandoning your selves. Thus it was the fault of his contemporaries if they misjudged his aim: they take a satire for a eulogy' (Diderot cited in Althusser 1995a, p. 75; Althusser 1999, p. 31).

[68] Althusser 1995a, p. 76; Althusser 1999, p. 31.

arising from the political conjunction of early *cinquecento* Italy, a negative yet *real* problem, for the solution of which there are no material tools ('weapons') in the conjuncture.[69] The real problem is the relationship between the prince and the people, the 'irreducible duality [*dualité irréductible*]':[70] the people are incapable of uniting Italy and there is no 'new prince' on the horizon who could lead them.[71] According to Althusser, transcending the contradictions of the above mentioned interpretations requires paying attention specifically to the 'internal' dualist problematics and viewpoints of *The Prince*. *The Prince* was written from the viewpoint of the people (the unification of Italy) but the people – unlike the Third Estate in the great French Revolution – was not the political subject (i.e. the agent) of the historical context of the text.[72]

According to Althusser, if one pays attention only to the role of the prince in *The Prince*, one falls into 'Machiavellianism', and thus the book comes across as a guidebook for tyrants;[73] consequently, the viewpoint of the people as the *constituters of politics* is forgotten. If, on the other hand, one considers only the viewpoint of the people, that is, that the book is written for the people as a sort of moralistic book of revelations or as a 'guidebook to democracy', then the appeal at the end of the book to a 'new prince' would have to be disregarded.[74] The point is, however, that instead of searching for such *answers*, which only lead to conflicts, one must pay attention to the *questions*. Instead of providing answers, Machiavelli discusses the question about the *interrelated position* of the political actors within their own conjuncture. He does not even try to define these positions in a *generally* applicable way or in advance, but rather directs the reader's attention to the situationally specific character of the political positioning. According to Althusser, Machiavelli's texts are indeed based on the idea that in a political space it is not possible – and one must not try – to define in a generally applicable way the Archimedean point from which the political conjuncture could be revolutionised.[75] *The Prince* is indeed a 'revolutionary' work because in it the politics of the prince are discussed from the point of view of the goal of the people. This, however, does not mean that

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[69] Althusser 1995a, pp. 76–7, cf. p. 60; Althusser 1999, p. 32, cf. pp. 18–19.
[70] Althusser 1995a, p. 70; Althusser 1999, p. 26.
[71] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, p. 27.
[72] Althusser 1995a, p. 70; Althusser 1999, p. 26.
[73] Althusser 1995a, p. 76, Althusser 1999, p. 31.
[74] Althusser 1995a, p. 76, Althusser 1999, p. 31.
[75] Althusser 1995a, pp. 62–3; Althusser 1999, p. 21.

Machiavelli would define in advance the conjuncture of the actors, and how and where they should implement the 'revolution'. The places of the prince and the relationship between him and other 'points' of the conjuncture vary according to changes in the conjuncture:

> 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.[76]

Because of the *unpredestined* nature of political practice, if one tries to interpret *The Prince* as a theoretical text, finding 'laws' within it which would be repeatable from one conjuncture to the next, it will remain elusive [*insaisissable*].[77] The work is gripping [*saisissant*], drawing in its reader, because it makes him think about his own political position. *The Prince* is thus also a shock to the classical philosophical way of thinking, where the general rules the particular, because, in this text, the way in which a particular 'political' problem is set up governs the 'theoretical' and 'general'.[78]

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[76] Althusser 1995a, p. 63; Althusser 1999, p. 21; Althusser's emphasis.

[77] Althusser 1995a, pp. 57–9 and p. 77; Althusser 1999, pp. 15–18 and 32. According to Gramsci, Croce's view is problematic specifically because he considers the teachings of *The Prince* to be a 'neutral science', and in doing so gives no consideration to Machiavelli's historical context. 'There has developed a habit of considering Machiavelli too much as the "politician in general", as the "political scientist", contemporary in all times' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1572). In both Machiavellian and anti-Machiavellian interpretations, attention is not paid to the fact that there is nothing useful for rulers to gain from Machiavelli's political teachings because they were already in possession of the necessary political skills, whereas the people were not, and thus Machiavelli's teachings were useful to the latter. Such usefulness, however, is something different than Foscolo's or Diderot's 'negative education', because the intention behind Machiavelli's 'revelations' was not moralistic but political (Gramsci 1975, p. 1600). If the people – whose passion Machiavelli identifies with at the end of *The Prince* – 'intends to achieve what it wants' it must liberate itself from the power of the ruling ideologists, religions and moral teachings of the time. Furthermore, in its class struggle it must adopt the 'Realpolitik' modes of action which the other party *already knows*, instead of only being able to show its disapproval of them or moral indignation (Gramsci 1975, p. 1600).

[78] Cf. Althusser 1990a, p. 39.

4.3.1. Machiavelli's utopianism

According to Althusser, Machiavelli was aware of being merely a writer who cannot draw in the people simply *with a text*. Instead, it requires *real* power, a new prince who in his *praxis* adapts the people's 'naked awareness' – their 'passionate cry' – into a collective will. The problem, however, was two-fold, because there was no new prince in sight and the people's 'naked awareness' was merely unorganised passion. Althusser and Gramsci refer in this context to the last chapter of *The Prince* where Machiavelli states that the people are certainly ready for change but that they lack a prince who would have sufficient *virtù* and *forza*, and under whose leadership this change and movement would be realised:

> See how Italy beseeches God to send someone to save her from those bar-barous cruelties and outrages; see how eager and willing the country is to follow a banner, if only someone would raise it.[79]

According to Althusser, Machiavelli well understood his own peripheral and solitary position in this Italian class struggle:

> This intellectual did not believe that intellectuals make history.[80]

In his writings, Machiavelli was able to shed light on the real conditions of this struggle, to define its political problems, to identify with the passions of the people, and thus to position himself on their side. He could not *solve* these problems, but through his writings only reflect upon and assess the existing awareness of the people, such as it was.[81] Though *The Prince* is indeed

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[79] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 26, p. 110.

[80] Althusser 1988, p. 478; Althusser 1990a, p. 39. François Matheron sums up Althusser's view that emphasises the primacy of political practice as follows: 'Machiavelli analyses, with extreme precision, the conditions for this possible and necessary encounter between fortune and *virtù*; however, in the same gesture, he cannot, and does want to, say anything about the Prince and Principality to come: not only because he does not know them (a simple admission of ignorance), but also because he knows, positively, that it cannot be a question of any of the already existing Princes and Principalities. Concrete political practice alone can designate them: theory is incapable of doing so, although it knows how to inscribe a place for this practice within itself. This place, for the moment, is that of the void: "the grand adventure begins outside all that exists, and therefore in an unknown place, thanks to an unknown man."' (Matheron 1995, pp. 13–14).

[81] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, p. 27.

a political act – a manifesto – its author is not the new prince himself but only an 'unarmed prophet', a mere writer who 'inscribed' his 'theory' somewhere in the Italian political struggle.[82] Machiavelli could not know precisely the effects of his writings nor define 'where his works would hit the Italian struggles'.[83] Even though he did appeal to both the unknown or undefined prince and 'those who do not know', he himself knew that 'if his thought contributed at all to the making of history, he would no longer be there'.[84]

According to Althusser, *The Prince* is indeed, in all its revolutionary nature, a *utopian* manifesto, as he states with reference to Gramsci.[85] However, it is not utopian in any theoretical-philosophical sense: the unification of Italy is a revolutionary opportunity existing in the effective truth, a 'void [*vide*]', the conditions for the fulfilment of which Machiavelli highlights. The revolutionary and utopian nature of *The Prince* indeed refers to this *historical* opportunity, as Althusser states, referring to Lenin:

> … I encapsulate the distinction in Lenin's formulation: revolution, or a historical task, can be on the agenda without the concrete situation being revolutionary.[86]

It is the distance or difference between the actual subject of the political practice (the prince), which *The Prince* has made manifest, and the class viewpoint (the people) of the book that produces the utopian character.

> … the places of class viewpoint and political practice are dissociated: the *hiatus* opens up the vacuum of utopia …[87]

And, further, referring to Gramsci:[88]

> *The Prince* is a kind of revolutionary manifesto, but a *utopian* one. Revolutionary, in so far as Machiavelli clearly understood the revolutionary task 'on the agenda' – the constitution of the national state – and poses this problem from *the viewpoint of the people*. But utopian in two senses. First, in so far

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[82] Althusser 1990a, p. 39; Althusser 1988, p. 478.
[83] Althusser 1990a, p. 39; Althusser 1988, p. 129.
[84] Althusser 1995a, p. 66; Althusser 1999, p. 23.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, p. 27.
[87] Althusser 1995a, p. 72; Althusser 1999, p. 28; my emphasis.
[88] Cf. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1555–6.

as Machiavelli believed that the 'situation was revolutionary', and that Italy was ready to become a national and popular state. ... And second, in so far as Machiavelli, for all sorts of reasons that would require detailed examination, *entrusts to someone else* – to an unknown individual whom he thought he recognized in several successive personalities, an individual indefinable in advance – the mission of achieving national unity on behalf of a third part: the people. The duality of places and 'subjects' thus results in the alterity of utopia, entrusting the realization of national unity to a mythical individual: the Prince. When Gramsci says that Machiavelli becomes the people, that he speaks to the people, to 'those who do not know'; when he writes that '[t]he entire "logical argument"' of *The Prince* 'appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people – an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness', *this reflection remains utopian* [my emphasis]. For it can contribute to modifying the political consciousness of the people, it is only to put this simple consciousness as consciousness in contact with a possible and desirable event: the advent of the Prince. It is not in order to transform this consciousness into a *political force capable of producing this event, or participating in its production.*[89]

It is evident from Althusser's interpretation that Gramsci was being overtly optimistic in his interpretation of the possibility of the urban bourgeoisie becoming a political force (a political subject). In this context, Althusser compares *The Prince*, as a manifesto, and *The Communist Manifesto*. The essential difference between them is that, in Marx and Engels's manifesto – as well as in Gramsci's outline of the 'modern prince [*il principe moderno*]'[90] – the proletariat is both its class viewpoint and the active subject in the political class struggle: the proletariat of all nations is urged to unite: 'Proletarier aller Länder vereinigt euch!' The party of the working class is the political form of their self-organisation – or at least it could be – and not an external force of the class struggle of the working class, whereas the new prince of *The Prince*

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[89] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, pp. 27–8: Althusser's emphasis.
[90] Gramsci's optimism may have been due to the fact that with his analyses of Machiavelli he aimed to outline a 'modern prince [*il principe moderno*]', that is, the conditions and goals of the collective political movement. The most central goal was that the difference between the leaders and those who are led – something regarded as a historical fact – would be lessened.

manifesto cannot be a metaphor for the people's self-organisation.[91] The simi-larity between *The Prince* and *The Communist Manifesto* again lies in that both are conscious interventions (manifestos) in the political practice of their own time, and do so by positioning themselves in the place of a particular class (the people, the proletariat).[92] This does not mean that the new prince should identify himself with the people – or the people with the prince – but that unit-ing the people under one nation requires that the prince, through his actions, understands the feelings of the people – and wishes to 'gaze down' upon them – and, accordingly, can govern and direct them:

> And if, from your lofty peak, Your Magnificence will sometimes glance down
> to these low-lying regions …[93]

The following section deals with the question of the 'praxis of the prince'; first from the viewpoint of the 'aleatory' logic of the man of action (4.4.), and second through the project and strategy of the new prince (4.5.). The aim is to further develop several viewpoints that preliminarily emerge in Althusser's interpretation concerning the aleatory reality and the action occurring therein.

4.4. The praxis of the prince: the aleatory truth

A man of action such as the prince must pay particular attention to the unique characteristics of his own case and take these into consideration in his actions. Such knowledge and skill become the central dimensions of successful and effective political action. Machiavelli differs, however, from ordinary men of action because he also opens up a theoretical viewpoint into the understanding of the aleatory logic of political action. Even though he himself as a writer was a man of action (and not only a diplomat, as he was in his youth), his works

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[91] Althusser criticised the leadership of the PCF because it had isolated itself from the masses. He indeed states, referring implicitly to Machiavelli, that a distance prevails between the leadership and the masses (Althusser 1978a, pp. 109–10; cf. 116–22, where Althusser utilises Machiavelli's views concerning fortifications and entrenchments). In other words, within the PCF, the masses are not a political subject but, like Machiavelli's prince, the party leadership is an actor and the masses are the object of its actions.

[92] Althusser 1995a, pp. 69–72; Althusser 1999, pp. 25–8; cf., Althusser 1990a, p. 39; Althusser 1988, p. 478.

[93] Machiavelli 2004, p. 2.

nevertheless are, according to Althusser, still 'sufficiently theoretical' to offer an *example* or model of what such theoretical examination could be, which are intrinsically linked to acting within a certain conjuncture and striving to succeed within it.

> So much for the fragments (and hence the contradictions as well). Above all, however, a theoretical dispositive is here brought to light that breaks with the habits of classical rhetoric, where the universal governs the singular.
>
> Yet this recasting still remains 'theoretical'. No doubt the order of things has been 'moved', and the formulation and mediation of a particular political problem substituted for general knowledge of an object.[94]

What, according to Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, is this 'aleatory logic' of political action in which the particular is primary in relation to the general?

The modifier 'aleatory' to the 'logic that has gone almost unnoticed and which should be developed' refers to the viewpoint presented earlier (Chapter 3),[95] according to which a case and its development cannot be either reduced to some general law or theory or derived from these. The individual case cannot and should not be *subsumed* under any *general* law or theory. From the point of view of the man of action, this means that it is not possible to predict or govern the course of the individual case by means of some general law, theory or socially-static utopia. Using Machiavelli's own concepts, each case is affected by the variable *fortuna*, which may all of a sudden, from a 'whim of fortune', turn its back on 'even the most prudent man [*un uomo più prudente*]'. Althusser characterises the situation in anthropomorphic terms:

> So everything is in continual, unstable motion, subject to an unpredictable necessity. This necessity is represented by the mythical conceptual figure of Fortune.[96]

The changeability of *fortuna* is due to the fact that the events of each case are characterised by accidental and contingent factors, reasons and encounters. Preliminarily, one can say that accidental and contingent factors are the reason

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[94] Althusser 1995a, p. 58; Althusser 1999, p. 16; Althusser's emphasis.
[95] Althusser 1992a, p. 234; Althusser 1993c, p. 241.
[96] Althusser 1995a, p. 80; Althusser 1999, p. 35.

why particular cases are characteristically unique, non-transparent and unpredictable. Every case contains unique features because things do not *organise* or *conjunct* in two or more cases in exactly the same way. Even though it would be possible to say how man usually acts and behaves, or even to define what man's 'essence' is, in each particular case a person's actions or the tendencies resulting from 'human nature' tend to diverge from other cases. The cases are complex conjunctures, con-junctions of numerous series of causes, 'crossings [*jonctions*]' or 'encounters [*rencontres*]':

> … the conjuncture itself being junction, con-junction, congealed (albeit shifting) encounter, since it has already taken place, and refers in its turn to the infinite number of its prior causes, just as (led us add) a determinate [*défini*] individual (for instance, Borgia) refers to the infinite sequence [*suite*] of prior causes of which it is the result.[97]

Logic based on cause-and-effect reasoning is unsuitable for analysing particular cases because a condition for using such a logic is that, in the analysis of the progress of the case, it would be possible to proceed from causes to effects or from effects to causes.[98] This would require if-then-so argumentations –

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[97] Althusser 1994c, pp. 565–6; Althusser 2006a, p. 193.

[98] Historically, the conjuncture refers to the relationship between the stars, a conjunction which in Renaissance astrology was seen to be both the cause and sign of worldly events (cf. Garin 1990, esp. pp. 15–29). As will become clear in Chapter 5, Machiavelli's view of *fortuna* was in that sense deviant and subversive for its time: it did not refer to transcendental, 'heavenly' conjunctural causal factors. In other words, Machiavelli's view of the conjuncture was immanent and worldly. From this follows that the 'fate' of man or a nation, according to Machiavelli, is not defined from outside the worldly reality but in itself. Machiavelli's assumption that conjunctures and 'fate' can be influenced by human *virtù* – by organising the worldly reality, and not only by means of magic, by carefully reading the conjunctions of the heavenly bodies, and, in this way, preparing for future conjunctions and their influences (Garin 1990, pp. 16–17) – is also included in this notion of the worldliness of fate. As Garin notes, the astrologers and magicians of the Renaissance were not determinists. They did not assume that man could not influence his own fate. In the 'new' astrology, which had evolved as part of the new world-view of the Renaissance, it was assumed that the magician could influence the fates of people (Garin 1978, pp. 145–65). Assessed in the light of Garin's view, it was not the attitude towards determinism that separated Machiavelli from the astrologers of the Renaissance but the notion of the conjuncture. For astrologers, a conjuncture was heavenly, for Machiavelli worldly. Unlike Parel 1992, in the present study I emphasise more the differences rather than the connections in Machiavelli's thinking to the astrology and natural sciences of his time. This is because, for Machiavelli, the conjuncture is an immanent worldly conjuncture. (In this context, one must remember, however, that astrology and astronomy did not yet in the Renaissance differ distinctly from each another.) The connection was also due to the fact that astrologers developed very

which, in turn, would require real or imagined knowledge about the causal relationships or laws that affect the particular case – because, in order to be valid, causal argumentations must be flawless and systematic. This, however, is not possible with individual cases, from which it follows that the deductions concerning these cases are uncertain, flawed and hypothetical. According to Althusser, in the case of Machiavelli it is a question of thinking based on 'weak logic', that is, on ' "if" – "then …" '.

> Contrary to the whole Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, Machiavelli does not think in terms of cause-and-effect *consequences*, but in terms of factual *sequences* [*consécution*] … between "if" and "then …" In this case, it is no longer a question of the consequence of a cause (or a principle or an essence) – effect or derivation or logical implication – but, rather, of a simple sequence of *conditions*. "If" means: *given* certain real conditions, that is, given this factual conjuncture with no originary cause; "then" means: what can be observed to follow from them and what can be linked to the conditions of the conjuncture.[99]

Furthermore:

> The *Discourses* on the first decade of Titus Livy are nothing but an inventory of historical cases in which this very special 'logic' of the factual conjuncture, *virtù*, and fortune has already operated.[100]

According to Althusser, in both the Platonic and Aristotelian way of thinking, it is possible, at least in principle, to propose a cause, essence or principle for every event from which it follows, or of which it is an expression, or which directs its development.[101] Even though, for instance, the Aristotelian *telos* is

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precise astronomical methods to study and to predict the conjunctions of the heavenly bodies. Unlike the 'old' astrology of the Middle Ages, the 'new' astrology of the Renaissance was considered a subfactor of human rationality and not a 'dark' and super- or unnatural thing that was in opposition to the mind (cf. Garin 1978, pp. 157–65).

[99] Althusser 1993a, p. 99; Althusser's emphasis.

[100] Althusser 1993a, pp. 100–1.

[101] In the case of the 'Aristotelian' context, Althusser probably had in mind the cosmological idea of the teleological nature of reality and the great chain of being and not ideas presented by Aristotle regarding *praxis* and *poiesis*, such as chance and accidental causes. In the case of the latter issues, at least Aristotle himself is not necessarily on a different track from Althusser's aleatory materialism. Althusser's critique of Aristotelianism is indeed primarily directed against Aristotelian cosmology.

not a cause in the sense of modern logic or causal thinking, it nevertheless is, according to Althusser, a question of something 'general' or 'generally applicable', with the help of which the events in the conjuncture can be understood, justified or to which they can be reduced.

> … this tradition's radical rejection of all philosophies of essence (*Ousia*, *Essentia*, *Wesen*), that is, of Reason (*Logos*, *Ratio*, *Vernunft*), and therefore of Origin and End – the origin being nothing more, here, than the anticipation of the End of Reason or primordial order (that is, the anticipation of Order, whether it be rational, moral, religious or aesthetic) – in the interests of a philosophy which, rejecting the Whole and every Order, rejects the Whole and order *in favour of* dispersion (Derrida would say, in his terminology, 'dissemination') and *disorder*.[102]

The Machiavellian assessment of the possibilities for deeds and actions is based instead on the principle of 'si … alors' ('when … then') as opposed to the 'if … then' deduction based on a causal assumption. On the basis of the conditions *observable* in the conjuncture, one must assess what kind of different alternative actions there are and, moreover, what kind of opportunities and probabilities there are for changing the conjuncture. The man of action who analyses his own case is in a continuous state of uncertainty, and there are no guarantees that his actions will succeed because his case analyses and strategy of action rest on an uncertain basis. He does not know for certain which factors have had an influence, are having influence and will have an influence in his case. He must base his uncertain analysis on what is observable and implementable in the case, and assess what kind of probable and improbable consequences his actions can have in this uncertain and complex situation.[103]

Althusser's view of the knowledge of the man of action raises a number of questions concerning, for instance, the interpretation of the 'aleatory' – and also 'chance'. Firstly, one can ask whether the cases are objectively aleatory or whether it is only a matter of the ignorance of the actor; that is, whether the aleatory is 'subjective'. Furthermore, one must ask from whose or what *viewpoint* the cases are aleatory, or whether the cases are aleatory from all perspectives. If the cases are aleatory from all perspectives, does this mean

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[102] Althusser 1994c, p. 561; Althusser 2006a, p. 188; Althusser's emphasis.
[103] Althusser 1993a, p. 99.

that the aleatory is a 'humanly objective' quality? Or is the aleatory a consequence of the fact that not a single cognisant subject can propose such an all-encompassing theory or knowledge, which would show that the aleatory factors of the case and its development are only due to the incompleteness of the knowledge concerning the case and its progress?

The qualifiers 'objective' and 'subjective' remain, however, too abstract, unless they can be defined more precisely. In order to better understand Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, one must pay attention to what kind of additional qualifiers one can give to 'objective' and 'subjective'. This leads to a third alternative, that the aleatory is a quality of *both* 'subjective' *and* 'objective' reality. This alternative may at first sound strange, but, after some thought, one can understand why the 'ontological' and 'epistemological' status of the aleatory may *vary*. In Machiavelli's case, the aleatory is something that perhaps should not be presented in the dualistic form of the subjective-objective.

In the following section, Althusser's views on the aleatory will be assessed, particularly from the viewpoint of the previously formulated aleatory Machiavelli.

4.4.1. The aleatory of the 'subjective' and 'objective'

In the previous section, it was preliminarily suggested that no general theory is able to predict what kind of encounters the future will bring. This, in itself, is not enough to refute the assumption that the accidental and contingent factors, which undeniably are often 'surprises' or 'coincidences' for the subject, are indeed such only from the *subject*'s point of view. Perhaps Althusser's claim that all cases are aleatory is indeed only valid from the subjective viewpoint, whereas the idea of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition regarding generally applicable principles and necessities is objectively true? What ultimately would prove that the cases or the development of the cases are *not* determined by some being, original cause or *telos* to which the events in principle can be reduced? Can Althusser show that there is no initial cause, law of history or being?

The latter question, can, however, be turned around: how can one prove the existence of an original cause, or how can one show that things that seem to be coincidences and surprises are indeed the effects of some original cause or

the expressions of some law of development or being? Would not such proof require that the witness demonstrate what kind of logical or necessary cause-and-effect relationships the event, considered as coincidence, was in fact due to?

In the above quote, Althusser proposes that case knowledge cannot be based on logical, cause-and-effect explanations, but it is, rather, always a matter of 'weak' 'when … then'-type conclusions. It is obvious, at least for the man of action who is inside the case and *acts* within it, that the past, present and, above all, the future are veiled (even though he would deny it). If he does not recognise the present state of the case and its history then how could he see its future in advance? On the other hand, what *if* he were to know perfectly the history and present state of his own case? Could he then anticipate its future, in which case nothing would be a surprise or happen 'by coincidence' for him, and the case would not be aleatory?[104]

Althusser's response to this question is to some extent positive. He states that knowing the case would require presenting *all* those causes or series of causes that preceded the event, the conjunction of which the case is.[105] At least at this point, Althusser does not absolutely deny the Petronian claim that 'chance has its causes'. Such a reconstruction is, however, logically impossible and particularly impossible for the man of action, who is inside the case or conjuncture. It is obvious that he would have to be an *omniscient* god (or be completely aware of God's plans) in order to be able to see the past, present and future at one glance or through an intellectual discovery, as well as present an exhaustive interpretation of these. Thus, that which from the viewpoint of the human subject would be aleatory would, from the divine viewpoint, be non-aleatory. On the other hand, one doubts whether even the representatives of the Aristotelian tradition would have such divine characteristics; after all, these philosophers, too, are only human. In their defence, one could still state, referring to Hegel's reference to the *owl of Minerva*, that, if such philosophies of history were possible, they would be so only in *retrospect*, *post festum*.[106]

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[104] Garin states that '*an exact reading of the heavens* to foresee the fates which await us' showed the greatest wisdom of Renaissance astrology (Garin 1990, p. 16, my emphasis).

[105] Althusser 1994c, pp. 565–6; Althusser 2006a, pp. 192–3.

[106] According to Hegel, philosophy cannot teach us 'how the world should be [*wie die Welt sein soll*]' because philosophy always appears on the scene too late: 'Only one word more 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

In this case, the problem of the aleatory would be limited to Machiavelli's man of action, because only he must make decisions based on that incomplete knowledge that he has at his disposal in his own case. The man of action cannot wait for dusk, but must act in the 'darkness of noon'.

In other words, the aleatory must not necessarily be considered an objective property of reality. It can be a matter of a belief resulting from the particular situation of the subject, one which he cannot ever fully eliminate from his life, even though he would try to accommodate it – for instance by eliminating risks and unpleasant surprises as best he can, and by being prepared for them by means of 'if ... then' deductions. In other words, what, from God's point of view, is not coincidence *is* coincidence, at least from the point of view of the man of action.

But is Althusser satisfied with this 'subjective' idea, with the fact that the aleatory is indeed an essential part of the *effective truth* of the man of action, but is not necessarily included among the problems of an omniscient God?

Althusser's response is still both positive and negative. It is positive in the sense that an analysis of the knowledge pertaining to a *particular* conjuncture must take chance into account.[107] Unlike the philosopher in his texts, or God in his almightiness, the man of action has to take risks and encounter even unpleasant surprises. Because Machiavelli was, like the revolutionary leader Lenin, above all interested in acting in a particular case, his works open up interesting viewpoints, particularly regarding the problematics of chance.

But Althusser's response is also negative: even Aristotelian philosophers cannot have certain knowledge about reality and its laws. Even they are at the mercy of chance, because they are, after all, only human. Even if they would

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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*' (Hegel 1952, Preface; last sentence my emphasis, other emphasis by Hegel). Hegel indeed thought of the philosophers of his time mainly as charlatans because their 'contemporary philosophical' advice and recommendations were not always, in his opinion, philosophy but merely sophistry grounded on nothing (Hegel 1952, Preface). That Hegel held Machiavelli in great esteem can clearly be seen in his writings concerning the German constitution, which he wrote in 1798–1803 (Hegel 1979).

[107] Cf., e.g., Althusser 1995a, p. 59; Althusser 1999, p. 18.

follow Hegel's advice and have the patience to wait for dusk, they cannot, even then, present a clear and undisputed explanation for why the course of events *has been* such as it has. Of course, in the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, philosophical systems have been constructed in which, for instance, the essence of society or the natural order and development of things have been specifically defined. Such systems are, however, not satisfied with presenting what man can say based on the 'effective truth'. It is also a matter of products of the imagination, which are presented as ontological or moral postulates, as Althusser argues in his critique of philosophy. In 'Solitude de Machiavel', Machiavelli's ultimate solitude is specifically due to the rejection of such imaginations and the effects of this:

> This is perhaps the ultimate point in Machiavelli's solitude: the fact that he occupied a unique and precarious place in the history of political thought between a long moralising, religious and idealist tradition of political thought which he radically rejected, and the new tradition of the political philosophy of natural law, which was to submerge everything and in which the rising bourgeoisie found its self-image.[108]

Machiavelli represents a 'radical rejection' with regard to different ontological, moral or other essentialist substantiations.[109] Even when Machiavelli observes something other than his own case, his analyses are based on the notion of representing things 'as they are in the effective truth':

> That is why, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli offers us nothing but an empirical-factual description, a conjunctural description in the full sense of the word, of the really existing state of all the Italian principalities and republics ....[110]

This is evident, for instance, in the much-quoted passage in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*:

> But since my intention is to say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer, I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in the real truth, rather than as they are imagined. Many have dreamed up republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist;

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[108] Althusser 1990a, p. 34; Althusser 1988, p. 474.
[109] Althusser 1993a, pp. 99–100.
[110] Althusser 1993a, p. 100.

the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done moves towards self-destruction rather than self-preservation. The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore, if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must be prepared not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need.[111]

The above passage has often been interpreted from the point of view of the modern 'Humean' differentiation between *is* and *ought*, in which case it has been argued that Machiavelli is not interested in how things *ought to be* but in how they *factually are*.[112] The quote can also be interpreted differently: Machiavelli is not interested in republics or principalities, 'which have never in truth been known to exist', because man can have useful knowledge and understanding only of what can be seen and experienced. Thus, when it comes to *existing* republics and principalities – for instance, Machiavelli's own case – he is not at all interested in what man can only imagine.

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[111] Machiavelli 1949, pp. 48–9; Machiavelli 2004, p. 65.

[112] A more recent example is Mansfield (1996, especially pp. 258–80), who indeed states that fact-value distinction cannot be found in Machiavelli's texts. Nevertheless, he also states that 'we do find a realism that was ancestor or parent of the fact-value distinction in Machiavelli's famous call, in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, not to depart from what is done for what ought to be done' (Mansfield 1996, p. 258). Quentin Skinner has, with good reason, noted that '[t]hus the difference between Machiavelli and his contemporaries cannot adequately be characterised as a difference between a moral view of politics and a view of politics as divorced from morality. The essential contrast is rather between two different moralities – two rival and incompatible accounts of what ought ultimately to be done' (Skinner 1978, p. 135). Even though the critique contained within Skinner's thesis of the 'autonomy of politics' is indeed well founded, it nevertheless remains one-sided because he does not take into account the fact that Machiavelli's views have a *reciprocal influence* on idealistic moral conceptions. Machiavelli does not merely present a different moral conception; rather, he demystifies different idealistic moral conceptions, as, for instance, when he studies Christian morality from the point of view of the political use of power, that is, as a sub-factor of the effective truth. In other words, he does not keep clear of traditional moral and religious views but, rather, politicises them. The problems with Skinner's interpretation are ultimately due to the fact that his own notion of morality remains idealistic. For Skinner, morality is a phenomenon on the level of consciousness. In order to understand Machiavelli, however, one should pay attention to the practical and materialist nature of his critique: he does not assess moral issues as problems on the level of consciousness but instead pays attention to those material, social practices where moral doctrines are produced and used.

Even in his own case, Machiavelli does not want to speculate about hidden causes and bases for the situation of the Apennine peninsula and its development, but instead is satisfied with observing what can be seen and known in the conjuncture as well as what can be achieved in light of such knowledge. Even though the past, present and future of the whole peninsula would be seen as, for instance, part of a great plan of Providence, or expressions of the cunning of reason or the law of the development of history, such speculations would not be of any practical use [*cosa utile*] to the person interested in the strategies and projects through which he can *affect* the course of his own case.

Likewise, it is useless to try to imagine utopias. In the aleatory reality, nothing guarantees that the ideals postulated and standardised in a utopia will actually be realised. Unexpected encounters lead to 'necessities [which] force people to act differently than they had intended', as Machiavelli writes in a letter to his friend Francesco Vettori (I will return to this theme later).[113]

This does not mean, however, that Machiavelli would not, in some other sense, have been interested in such fantasies. He was interested, for instance, in the visions and prophecies of Savonarola, but did not give any thought to their 'truth value', but was simply curious to know how these sermons factually influenced the audience and how Savonarola's actions were positioned within the Florentine political conjuncture.[114]

Instead of writing about system building or world-views, Machiavelli discusses how it would be possible, based on the factual conditions of the complex conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula, to constitute an extensive and durable state. According to Althusser, Machiavelli's conclusions are to be found in the form of 'si … alors' ('when … then'):

> 'When' the Italian states are what they are, 'then …' they cannot, and will never be able to, achieve Italian unity.[115]

The previously outlined bases for the aleatory can be summarised as follows:

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[113] Machiavelli 1988, p. 136.
[114] Cf., e.g., Machiavelli 1988, pp. 85–9.
[115] Althusser 1993a, p. 100.

i.) From the point of view of the man of action, the aleatory is a most central effective truth. According to this definition, the man of action cannot wait for the dusk in order to make decisions, because such 'decisions' would already be too late.

ii.) Not even a philosopher can adopt God's view of reality, because not even *post festum* knowledge opens a clear view of how things have developed in the way they have. In such philosophical systems or utopias, this is merely a question of the imagination, yet these are still part of the effective truth.

The subjective interpretation nevertheless allows for the possibility that from the point of view of the omniscient god, who is not party to human imperfection, the aleatory does not exist. Such an incomparable being can see and understand the causes affecting all cases and can thus present flawless and objective explanations for them, as well as prophecies guaranteed to come true.

Althusser's aleatory interpretation of Machiavelli is, however, not limited to the 'subjective' viewpoint, even though the previously cited opportunity to reconstruct in principle a series of courses would lead one to think so.[116] As previously suggested, the aleatory is not a consequence of ignorance and the limited nature of the subject's consciousness, that is, subjective factors. The aleatory is, at least to some extent, an 'objective' property of reality itself. The impossibility of providing complete explanations is to be explained not only by actual subjective ignorance and the impossibility of reconstructions, but also by the fact that reality itself is to some degree 'objectively' aleatory.

But how can Althusser justify the objectivity of the aleatory if philosophers are not able to verify objective world-views? And how should the term 'objective' be understood in this case?

According to Althusser, Machiavelli reopens the Epicurean tradition in politico-philosophical thinking. The starting point in this tradition is the 'miracle of the clinamen', in which the deviation of the atom from its vertical trajectory occurs by chance, without any reason.[117] However, already Cicero (106–43 BC) considered Epicurus's claim about random deviation of the atoms to be a product of his imagination:

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[116] Althusser 1994c, pp. 565–6; Althusser 2006a, p. 193.
[117] Althusser 1994c, p. 564; Althusser 2006a, p. 191.

… he [Epicurus] introduced a fictitious notion: he said that atoms swerve by a very little bit, indeed a minimal distance, and that in this way are produced the mutual entanglements, linkages, and cohesions of the atoms as a result of which the world and all parts of the world and everything in it are produced. [. . .] The swerve itself is made up to suit his pleasure – for he says that atoms swerve *without cause* [. . .] – and without a cause he tore from atoms that straight downward motion which is natural to all heavy objects (as he himself declared); and by so doing he did not even achieve the goal he intended when he made up this *fiction*.[118]

Althusser, who – if anyone – has criticised philosophical systems and world-views for being imaginary, does not agree with the critique that Cicero, and later Marx in his doctoral thesis, made of Epicurius (and Lucretius), but sides instead with the Epicurean viewpoint. Althusser explicitly states that, from the viewpoint of aleatory materialism, the 'accomplished fact [*fait accompli*]' or result [*résultat*] has no cause:

A result without a cause, a result that has no cause because it is aleatory, is born of the aleatory (Epicurean) encounter between *virtù* and fortune, between *virtù* and occasion. A philosophy of the result is in no sense a philosophy of the effect as a fact brought about by [*un fait accompli de*] a pre-existent cause or essence. Quite the contrary: it is a philosophy of the aleatory the result of which is the factual expression, the given result of given conditions that might well have been different.[119]

The question is: does this mean that a 'lack of causes' is not, in Althusser's opinion, mere fantasy but the objective property of reality?

One should note, however, that, in the above quote, Althusser does not claim that the aleatory would mean that the 'result' or 'fait accompli' would be due to some 'whim of chance' or 'pure chance', that is, that the result would be *arbitrary*. Instead, he argues, referring to Machiavelli, that, in the aleatory encounter, the question is about an 'opportunity' or 'occasion', or the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna*.[120] The 'circumstances' of the case, the conditions in all their complexity, affect what can be done and how the

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[118] Cited in Epicurus 1994, p. 47; my emphasis; cf. also pp. 48–9.
[119] Althusser 1993a, p. 105.
[120] Althusser 1993a pp. 100–1; cf. Althusser 1994c, p. 545; Althusser 2006a, p. 172.

conjuncture conjuncts. An essential modifier in the above quote is indeed 'factual [*factuelle*]'. The Latin *factum*, from which it is derived, denotes an action, case, fact or result of an action. A factual case is a result of various acts and facts which in turn form the conditions for future acts and facts [cf. *conditions de fait*, *consécution de conditions de fait*].

No existing cases and their development [*consécution*] can be determined by a *single specific* original cause or essence. It is rather a matter of numerous sums of facts and actions that are interlinked (articulated) in different ways. The subfactors affecting a particular case are not part of the one and the same (linear) cause-and-effect chain (and the general law describing this); rather, the case can be described as a kind of complex network of conditions and actions, where the chains of innumerable causes and effects are linked to one another in different ways. The accomplished result is the 'factual expression [*l'expression factuelle*]' of its birth conditions.[121] Althusser also characterises this with the

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[121] Althusser 1993a, p. 105. This viewpoint can be compared to John Stuart Mill's interpretation of chance as presented in *A System of Logic* (1843). In Book Three of that work, he presents an 'objective' interpretation of chance. This interpretation in turn paved the way for those non-metaphysical interpretations of chance proposed at the end of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century, where chance refers to the complex pluralism of causes. According to Mill, it is incorrect to state that some individual phenomenon would occur by chance, that is, without it being the result of some law of nature, because, according to him 'it is, however, certain, whatever happens is the result of some law' (Mill 1919, 3.XVII, §2). In other words, chance is, even in Mill's opinion, not the opposite of an event that occurs due to some law. However, Mill does not, based on this assumption of the existence of a law, abandon the idea of the objectivity of chance but presents the following definition that preserves the ontological status of chance: 'It is incorrect, then, to say that any phenomenon is produced by chance; but we may say that two or more phenomena are conjoined by chance, that they co-exist or succeed one another only by chance, that they are neither cause and effect, nor effects of the same cause, nor effects of causes between which there subsists any law of co-existence, nor even effects of the same collocation of primeval causes' (Mill 1919, 3. XVII, §2). Chance is a matter of an event in which two phenomena, which are causally independent from one another and the series of effects that these cause, are conjoined with one another in certain circumstances without the conjunction being based on any law that links them: 'Facts casually conjoined are separately the effects of causes, and therefore laws; but of different causes, and causes not connected by any law' (Mill 1919, 3.XVII, §2). Thus chance refers to the fact that the conjoining of two or more cause-series does not happen under the influence of some general law that links these two series, but rather chance is by nature a casual event which will not necessarily ever be repeated. The event can in principle, however, be repeated 'if *all* the circumstances were repeated' (Mill 1919, 3.XVII, §2; Mill's emphasis). The fact that the conjoining is never repeated is nevertheless, according to Mill, the condition for the casualness of this event. As long as one cannot propose such a general law that would explain an event that is repeated even very often, one cannot exclude chance. In deciding the criteria for whether an event is casual or follows a law, it is thus insufficient whether

expression 'the absence of centre [*l'absence de centre*]'. The characterisation also reminds us of 'a complex whole [*un tout complexe*]' in his critique of Hegelianism as well as the complex interactions between the 'elements' characterised by over- and underdetermination.

Because the *degree of complexity* in a case is great, subjectively both lucky *and* unlucky encounters will occur within them that cannot be predicted or explained by means of some general law because such unique encounters have not occurred before. Even though some constant factors could be defined that occur in different cases and in different points of time of a case, thus lessening the degree of the subjective aleatory, it is impossible to take control, by means of some general theory, of all those possible ways in which these constants or 'general tendencies' encounter each other in some particular case. Thus, even though the understanding of a case becomes easier as different constants

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the question is about a once-only conjunction, a conjunction that occurs a few times or one that occurs repeatedly, but rather, in each case, one must separately assess what kind of frequency of recurrence is sufficient to nullify the assumption regarding the casualness of the event. It is not possible to give any general answer to this question. The assumption regarding the casualness of the event is fully nullified only with a general law that explains chance (one must note that Mill presents his interpretation of chance in a chapter where he discusses the problems of induction. Just as it is never possible to inductively reach full certainty, also the recurrence of the event does not prove that it would not be a question of chance. Only a general law or theory, on the basis of which the coming together of the series of causes can be explained deductively, suffices as a certain proof that excludes chance): 'We have to decide, therefore, what degree of frequency in a coincidence chance will account for. And to this there can be no general answer. We can only state the principle by which the answer must be determined: the answer itself will be different in every different case' (Mill 1919, p. 346). Thus Mill does not claim that the casual nature of the event could be proved. The question is about an assumption that is valid as long as any other general law indicates otherwise. Thus the casualness of the case could indeed only be a delusion, one that is caused by the fact that the human subject is not in possession of knowledge about any general law that causes the encounter of the series of causes that have been considered separate. According to Mill, such a possibility must always be taken into account in research. On the other hand, Mill does not assume that it would always in principle be possible to find a law that nullifies the apparent casualness behind all casual events. Thus Mill does not exclude the possibility that some events would be *genuinely* or 'objectively' casual and that the question would not be about merely the ignorance of the observing subject. Mill also does not claim that in order to explain events one should make use of the cosmological viewpoint. Such a viewpoint cannot be the starting point for the scientific explanation of an event because it leads to the problems associated with the metaphysical-cosmological perspectives that Hume had already described. The only valid explanation has to be a scientific law and theory, the criteria for which Mill presents on the hundreds of pages of his book *A System of Logic*. (For Mill's formulation of the rules for analysing chance cf. pp. 346–50).

and tendencies are found – and, indeed, it becomes possible to talk in general about 'a case' – due to the unique character of these encounters, no case can be considered as merely an 'example' of a general case.[122] This means that the Popperian idea of falsification, where cases test (by means of either falsification

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[122] Cf. Aristotle's view on chance [*tykhe*] and spontaneity [*automaton*] presented in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. In the *Physics*, Aristotle's starting points are the contradictory views (or even silence) of the 'ancient thinkers' on the question of chance. They have said, for instance, that living beings and plants have not come about by chance, but rather that the reason for them is, for example, nature or reason itself. However, they have also claimed that the order of the heavens and the most godly things have come about by themselves, they have no such causes as lower matters have (*Phys.*, 196a). According to Aristotle, such a view is nonsensical: 'For besides the other absurdities of the statement, it is the more absurd that people should make it when they see nothing coming to be spontaneously in the heavens, but much happening by chance among the things which as they say are not due to chance; whereas we should have expected exactly the opposite' (*Phys.*, 196b1–5). According to Aristotle, chance and spontaneity are linked, among other things, to human and other sublunary matters. In Chapter Six of the second book of the *Physics*, Aristotle differentiates between chance and spontaneity. In the previous chapter, he discusses the relationship between something that happens in a certain way by chance and things which happen always or mostly in the same way. According to him, it is obvious that the cause for the thing that always happens (or that happens mostly in the same way) is not chance or that which happens by chance. Apart from these, there are, however, other issues 'which all say are "by chance"' (*Phys.*, 196b10–15). Aristotle does not dispute this common belief but states that 'it is plain that there is such a thing as chance and spontaneity' (*Phys.*, 196b10–15). He at least preliminarily accepts the notion that chance is something that exists, and thus it is not, at least not solely, based on subjective belief. According to Aristotle, chance [*tykhe*] is not possible other than in the case where people can *act* and who thus have the ability to make *choices*: 'Chance and what results from chance are appropriate to agents that are capable of good fortune and of moral action generally. Therefore necessarily chance is in the same sphere of moral actions' (*Phys.*, 197b1–3). Chance is not possible with, for instance, children because they are not able to set goals and act so as to fulfil them. Chance is primarily linked with the goal-oriented actions of adults for whom chance describes the unintended consequences of actions (the corresponding concept of chance is indeed spontaneity [*automaton*]: if, for instance, a tripod by chance falls on its feet, then the cause of the falling was not that it fell in order so that one could sit on it, but in the act of falling it was a matter of spontaneity: 'We say, for example, that the horse came "spontaneously", because, though his coming saved him, he did not come for the sake of safety. Again, the tripod fell "of itself", because, though when it fell it stood on its feet so as to serve for a seat, it did not fall for the sake of that' [*Phys.*, 197b15–18]). Aristotle takes as an example a man who is 'engaged in collecting subscriptions for a feast' (*Phys.*, 196b33). The man would have gone to a particular place for the purpose of getting the money, if he had known, but in fact went there for another purpose, and it was only incidentally that he got his money by going there. The man meeting people who can make their payments was thus an unintended consequence of him going to the place in question. The meeting and paying the subscriptions have taken place 'by chance' when one thinks of it *in relation* to the main objective of the man going to collect subscriptions for a feast. If, on the other hand, the man in general or always was in the habit of going to that same place to collect payments or would go there knowing that

or verification) a general theory, cannot be applied to Machiavelli's conception of cases nor to Spinoza's 'third kind of knowledge', namely, intuition:

> All I wish to say here is that the most valuable thing I learnt from Spinoza
> was the nature of the 'third level of knowledge', that of a singular and at

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he would meet people who could pay, it would no longer be a case of chance. Aristotle does not claim, however, that chance would not have preceding causes. The causes of this unintended consequence are, however, *undefined*. Aristotle indeed emphasises that it is virtually necessary that the causes of things occurring by chance are undefined or that the number of causes for which the debtor 'by chance' arrived at the place in question is *infinite* and *incalculable*: 'It is necessary, no doubt, that the causes of what comes to pass by chance be indefinite; ... Things *do*, in a way, occur by chance, for they occur incidentally and chance is an *incidental cause*. But strictly it is not the *cause* – without qualification – of anything; ... And the causes of the man's coming and getting the money (when he did not come for the sake of it) are innumerable' (*Phys.*, 197a8–23). If the man going to that place would *already know* when going there that he would meet people who could make payments for the subscriptions for the feast, then any mention of the chance or accidental nature of the meeting would seem contradictory (or perhaps it could have been part of the man's scheme to mask his real intentions when collecting money). Thus the meaningful use of the concept of chance indeed requires that it refers to the unintended or unforeseeable accidental consequences of actions. Because of the indefinable nature of chance, it follows that it is the unstable, unpredictable and uncertain dimension of human action: 'For chance is unstable, and none of the things which result from it can be invariable or normal' (*Phys.*, 197a32–33). According to Mill, the chance nature of an event would not be nullified even if it is repeated often, unless, that is, the repetition can be explained by some general law (see previous footnote). In this regard, Mill's view differs from that of Aristotle, according to whom recurring events do not occur by chance. Aristotle probably bases his view on the notion that often-repeated occurences are not surprises, whereas it is specifically surprise that is typical for chance. Aristotle indeed refers, in regard to chance, to good or bad luck (*Phys.* 197a25–30). Luck changes specifically because it refers to the unintended and surprising consequences of actions. Even though man's actions are indeed based on choices and are goal-oriented, the consequences of the actions are never necessarily in accordance with the intentions behind those choices. What makes Machiavelli interesting is the very fact that he strives to understand and discuss the problematics of an unstable *fortuna* (see below, 5.2.), whereas Aristotle states in Book 6 of *Metaphysics* that there is no scientific treatment of the accidental: 'This is confirmed by the fact that no science – practical, productive or theoretical – troubles itself about it. For on the one hand he who produces a house does not produce all the attributes that come into being along with the house; for these are innumerable: the house that has been may quite well be pleasant for some people, hurtful to some and useful to others, and different – to put it shortly – from all things that are; and the science of building does not aim at producing any of these attributes' (*Met.* 1026b4–9). Aristotle argues that change takes place according to four different kinds of cause; referred to in Aristotle scholarship as *material cause*, *formal cause*, *efficient cause*, and *final cause*. For example, in the building of a house, the material cause is the materials the house is made of, the formal cause is the architect's plan, the efficient cause is the process of building it and the final cause is to provide shelter and comfort. However, the four reasons for someone building a house do not include the idea that the house will bring fortune or misfortune to some of its inhabitants. These things are something that the house-builder

the same time universal case, of which Spinoza offers us a brilliant and often misunderstood example in the singular history of a singular people, the Jewish people (in the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*). Given that my own 'case' is of this kind, like any 'medical', 'historical', or 'analytical case', this means that it has to be recognized and treated as singular. The universality of this singular case emerges not from a Popperian verifiable-falsifiable law, but from the fact that certain constants are repeated, appear in every case, and allow one to infer from them the theoretical and practical treatment appropriate in other unique cases. Machiavelli and Marx work in exactly the same way, with a logic that has gone almost unnoticed and which should be developed.[123]

The viewpoint of the Popperian system of verification and falsification is not suitable for historical, medical or (psycho)analytical cases because they are not really examples of an ideal case proposed by a theory. If a case occurs where the general law does not apply – a case where the events do not follow the general laws proposed in the theory – from a Popperian way of thinking this would mean that either the general law has been falsified or the case would be an exception.[124] This, however, is not so: as Althusser proposed already in his article, 'Contradiction and Overdetemination', *all* cases are 'exceptions'.[125] There are no model cases or special cases differing from them because every case is a special case and no case is a 'normal case'.

Althusser nevertheless states in the above quote that the universal enables the theoretical and practical study of the particular. Likewise, he proposed in his self-criticism that the precondition for the concrete study of a concrete object is a 'minimum of generality'.[126] At this point, however, 'the general' ('generality') does not refer to a general theory but to the fact that certain

cannot anticipate – at least not fully – when he plans and builds the house. Even though the house indeed offers protection for its inhabitants, nothing can guarantee that all the inhabitants will be happy. Such issues are due to causes other than the four that influence house building. Chance and the accidental remain, in other words, forever undefined. According to the Aristotelian viewpoint, it is not possible to create such a science – for instance, the knowledge and skill of building a house – which would foresee chance and the accidental.

[123] Althusser 1993c, p. 241; Althusser 1992a, pp. 233–4; cf., Althusser 1994c, p. 552; Althusser 2006a, p. 179; and Althusser 1976b, p. 136.

[124] On falsification, see, for example, Popper 1994, pp. 131–7.

[125] Althusser 1986, p. 103; Althusser 1979, p. 104.

[126] Althusser 1976b, p. 112, fn. 8.

constants [*constantes*] are repeated from one case to another. If the case were *completely* unique, it would have no connections to other cases, and to *recognise* [*reconnaître*] it as a case would be obviously impossible.[127] In fact, the whole idea of a 'case' would remain vacuous. Recognition requires that the case resembles, at least to some extent, other (previous) cases: that certain general constants are repeated from one case to another, even though each particular case – for instance, the history of the Jews or of Russia – does indeed contain contingent and unique features that are neither repeated in other cases nor repetitions of previous cases.[128] (In this sense, Althusser's Machiavelli has connections to Aristotle because he, too, required that there can only be a theory of the general. There must be a certain amount of generality – factors that link one case to others, be it structurally, temporally or locally – in order for a case to be considered a case at all.)

The man of action and his case

In order to clarify the above explanation, one should note that *virtù* is one of the essential preconditions in the actions of a person. In the case of Machiavelli, Althusser talks about the encounter [*rencontre*] of *virtù* and *fortuna*.[129] If the actor has *virtù*, he can affect those circumstances that affect him. *Fortuna* is not

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[127] Though a physician would approach her patient as a unique individual, in whose life the fracture of a bone in the hand becomes meaningful in a unique way, she must nevertheless recognise the patient as a person with a fracture in order to be able to treat the injury.

[128] In *Sur la philosophie* Althusser defines the relationship between a law [*loi*] and a constant [*constante*] as follows: 'But what transpires when it is not a question of objects which repeat themselves indefinitely and on which experiments can be repeated and rerun by the scientific community from one end of the world to the other? (See Popper: "A scientific experiment deserves the name when it can be indefinitely repeated under the same experimental conditions".) Here the materialist philosopher-traveller, who is attentive to "singular" cases, cannot state "laws" about them, since such cases are singular/concrete/factual and are therefore not repeated, because they are unique. What he *can* do, as has been shown by Lévi-Strauss in connection with the cosmic myths of primitive societies, is to single out "*general constants*" among the encounters he has observed, the "variations" of which are capable of accounting for the singularity of the cases under consideration, and thus produce knowledge of the "clinical" sort as well as ideological, political and social effects. Here we again find not the universality of laws of the physical, mathematical or logical sort, but the *generality* of the *constants* which, by their variation, enable us to apprehend what is true of such-and-such a case' (Althusser 1994b, pp. 65–6; Althusser 2006a, p. 278, Althusser's emphasis).

[129] Althusser 1993a, p. 100; cf. Althusser 1995a, pp. 80 and 126; Althusser 1999, pp. 35 and 74.

some mystical force that would influence the life of the actor from the outside, because the actor can, by means of his *virtù*, have an influence – at least to some degree – on how his *fortuna* turns out. Unlike in astrology, the conjunctures of the human world are, for Machiavelli, *immanent*, worldly conjunctures, not conjunctures of 'heavenly' bodies that would affect one system (e.g. the worldly life) from the *outside*, that is, from another system. In other words, the actor can, through his actions, *affect* the conjunctural conditions of his actions, even though this influence is based on those conditions. Althusser does indeed argue that, in Machiavelli's texts, a conjuncture and the *fortuna* produced by it are not the mystical interpreters of events but, on the contrary, matters which Machiavelli aims to demystify by explaining them logically, that is, by interpreting them from the viewpoint of the effective truth.[130]

It is, of course, still possible to claim that the complex network of causes and effects is an expression of some invisible or secret original cause or principle. This unverifiable belief is, however, of no practical *use*, at least not to the one *who has to act*. In other words, the cosmological-metaphysical-theological viewpoint of a case is unfruitful and passifying in its determinism, curtailing possibilities for action, instead of activating situational analyses and action.

It is an irrefutable fact that, in any given situation, there are men of action, some of whom succeed and some who do not. Even though Machiavelli was indeed of the opinion that no one's success is guaranteed or eternal, on the other hand a man of action can influence it, at least to some extent. Success is not 'in God's hands', 'written in the stars' or an 'innate gift', but a factual opportunity that can be utilised or not. Besides, even if man's happiness or unhappiness were indeed 'predestined' already at the beginning of time – or written in the Big Book as Diderot's Jacob the fatalist believed – from the point of view of the man of action, the issue does not become *significant* for that reason, or if it does it has *factual* detrimental effects on his actual ability to act.

But, even here, the philosopher can, from a cosmological, metaphysical or theological point of view, argue that even the obstacles to the conditions for success are *ultimately* or at least *basically* the expressions of some original cause, law or principle. Likewise, the astrologer can claim that, ultimately, worldly conjunctures are determined by heavenly conjunctures.

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130 Althusser 1995a, p. 80; Althusser 1999, p. 35.

Such arguments, however, are unfounded in the sense that those who propose them cannot offer any valid justifications for what kind of law or principle they possibly would refer to. Such a law would have to be so general that it could cover even the smallest encounters that occur in the course of events.

The arguments are unfounded also because, from the viewpoint of a man of action, the cosmological-metaphysical-theological viewpoint is not only useless but also often outright detrimental, as Machiavelli states, referring to the religion of his time.[131] Even though the claims of a philosopher cannot be proved wrong – this is a matter of non-provable claims – from the practical viewpoint, they have no use, as David Hume argued.[132]

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[131] 'Reflecting now as to whence it came that in ancient times the people were more devoted to liberty than in the present, I believe that it resulted from this, that men were stronger in those days, which I believe to be attributable to the difference of education, founded upon the difference of their religion and ours. For, as our religion teaches us the truth and the true way of life, it causes us to attach less value to the honours and possessions of this world. … Our religion, moreover, places the supreme happiness in humility, lowliness, and a contempt for worldly objects, whilst the other, on the contrary, places the supreme good in grandeur of soul, strength of body, and all such other qualities as render men formidable; and if our religion claims of us fortitude of soul, it is more to enable us to suffer than to achieve great deeds. These principles seem to me to have made men feeble, and caused them to become an easy prey to evil-minded men, who can control them more securely, seeing that the great body of men, for the sake of gaining Paradise, are more disposed to endure injuries than to avenge them' (Machiavelli 1949, II.2, pp. 237–8; Machiavelli 1950, II.2, pp. 284–5).

[132] Hume 1975, p. 103. Though Hume indeed denies the 'objective' status of chance, also in his opinion searching for original causes leads to endless and thus useless speculation. In the beginning of Chapter 6 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume states: 'Though there be no such thing as *Chance*, in the world; our ignorance of the real cause of any event has the same influence on the understanding, and begets a like species of belief or opinion' (Hume 1975, p. 56; Hume's emphasis). According to Hume, reality follows rules, but human understanding does not fully grasp this. This ignorance leads either to talking about chance or inductive deductions about probability: for example, the sun will 'rise' again tomorrow because it has always done so. In other words, based on the force of custom, man assumes that the future will be like the past: 'Being determined by custom to transfer the past to the future, in all our inferences; where the past has been entirely regular and uniform, we expect the event with the greatest assurance, and leave no room for any contrary supposition' (Hume 1975, p. 58). 'Chance' enters the picture when something does not happen that usually happens or has always happened. But even then it is not a question about some irregularity of nature or reality but that 'some secret causes, in the particular structure of parts, have prevented the operation' (Hume 1975, p. 58). For example, a doctor who notices that some medication or treatment that is usually effective does not cause the desired result in a particular case does not deduce from this that the medication no longer has its former properties, but assumes that some other factor in the patient's body has prevented this effect (Hume 1975, pp. 57–8). Particularly the latter example

This also means that one should *reject* the viewpoint of the aleatory based on the subjective-objective dualism; the debate about the 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' of aleatoriness only leads to a vicious circle and fruitless polemics. In order to open up and further develop Althusser's aleatory interpretation

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brings forth the question of complexity: man is a complex being, and consequently it is impossible to say with certainty what the effect of some particular cause (in this case, the medicine) in some particular illness would be. However, the doctor does not prescribe the medication completely arbitrarily, but rather she can, based on her earlier experience and diagnoses, make an assumption about what kind of medication and in what dosage it must be given. Nothing, however, will guarantee with certainty the effect of the medicine because the doctor cannot in her diagnosis find out all the effective causes in a particular illness. Hume also raises the often used example in discussions about chance and probability of throwing a dice. The probability of some alternative ensues from the fact that there are several possibilities in its favour. If the same number of dots were to be marked on four sides of a dice and an identical number on the two remaining sides, the probability of the former would be greater than the latter. With the example of the altered dice Hume wants to emphasise that, in human life, one acts according to probabilities. Unlike in an ordinary game of dice, in human life it is usually possible, based on earlier experience, to assume what consequences particular events have. In the case of casting a dice, the occurrence of any number of dots has equal probability, one in six, which enables one to talk about chance: it is a matter of chance which of the six sides will show as a consequence of each throw: 'It seems evident, that, when the mind looks forward to discover the event, which may result from the throw of such a dye, it considers the turning up each particular side as alike probable; and this is the very nature of chance, to render all the particular events, comprehended in it, entirely equal' (Hume 1975, p. 57). In this example chance refers to situations where no one alternative is more probable than another. One must note, however, that in the above quote chance has been presented from the point of view of human understanding ('when the mind looks forward to discover the event'). Chance does not refer to the fact that the movement of the throw of the dice and the movement of the dice on the table would be objectively arbitrary matters but that different results of throwing are equally probable. Hume does not continue the discussion of dice throwing any further than this. However, he would undoubtedly agree with the view that the event of throwing the dice and its movements follow physical laws and are therefore in that sense deterministic. The dice does not move arbitrarily but follows the laws of mechanics and dynamics (for more on this see, for instance, Ekeland 1988, pp. 48–9). Hume would certainly have approved of this point because it is in agreement with the view he himself presented, according to which there is no chance in nature and that its events follow laws, even though they sometimes seem arbitrary. The meaningfulness of dice games is based specifically on the fact that players cannot in practice take into account in the throw of the dice all the factors and their interrelations that influence the event of throwing (Ekeland 1988, pp. 67–8). As Ekeland states in his discussion of Poincaré, it would be possible to predict with certainty the result of each throw of the dice if the thrower had at his disposal the knowledge of all the laws and other effective factors that influence the event and if he could every time throw exactly in the same way. Achieving such knowledge and skill is, however, impossible because it would require taking into account the state of the whole universe and all the laws influencing it (Ekeland 1988, pp. 48 and 67). Even though Hume does not give 'ontological' status to chance, this does not mean that it would not be meaningful to

of Machiavelli, one must go beyond the subjective and objective aleatory. This entails concentrating, in particular, on the position and viewpoint of the man of action. In Machiavelli's texts, this deficient human position is not only a negative matter (a matter of ignorance and so on), but also refers to such

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speak of chance on a certain level. According to Hume, chance and the arbitrariness of events are an essential part of human life and therefore of his 'science of man'. The reason for this is that the total denial of chance easily leads to a belief in cosmological-metaphysical determinism, where all events eventually return to the 'ulterior cause', 'the creator of the world'. Particularly with regard to human life, the viewpoint of metaphysical determinism is problematic because then all talk about human freedom and responsibility becomes senseless: 'It may be said, for instance, that, if voluntary actions be subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter, there is a continued chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of all to every single volition of every human creature. No contingency anywhere in the universe; no indifference; no liberty. While we act, we are, at the same time, acted upon. The ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world, who first bestowed motion on this immense machine, and placed all beings in that particular position, whence every subsequent event, by an inevitable necessity, must result. Human actions, therefore, either can have no moral turpitude at all, as proceeding from so good a cause; or if they have any turpitude, they must involve our Creator in the same guilt, while he is acknowledged to be their ultimate cause and author' (Hume 1975, pp. 99–100). In the above ironic comment Hume does not start a debate about the rightfulness of such 'doctrines of necessity' (Hume 1975, p. 99), but states that they lead to uncertain and eternal speculations about ulterior causes and the ultimate nature of the universe. Despite their possibly intriguing philosophical nature, such musings are of no help or provide no consolation in everyday life or in studying it. Even though from the philosophical-cosmological viewpoint it would be possible to think 'that everything is right with regard to the WHOLE, and that the qualities, which disturb society, are, in the main, as beneficial, and are as suitable to the primary intention of nature as those which more directly promote its happiness and welfare' (Hume 1975, p. 102, Hume's emphasis), this does not console the person 'who is robbed of a considerable sum' (ibid.). Hume indeed ends Chapter 8 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* by stating that happy is she who gives up the study of these noble mysteries, and leaves this field which is full of obscurities and problems in order to return to her own field, the study of common life: 'The second objection admits not of so easy and satisfactory an answer; nor is it possible to explain distinctly, how the Deity can be the mediate cause of all the actions of men, without being the author of sin and moral turpitude. These are mysteries, which mere natural and unassisted reason is very unfit to handle; and whatever system she embraces, she must find herself involved in inextricable difficulties, and even contradictions, at every step which she takes with regard to such subjects. To reconcile the indifference and contingency of human actions with prescience; or to defend absolute decrees, and yet free the Deity from being an author of sin, has been found hitherto to exceed all the power of philosophy. Happy, if she be thence sensible of her temerity, when she pries into these sublime mysteries; and leaving a scene so full of obscurities and perplexities, return, with suitable modesty, to her true and proper province, the examination of common life; where she will find difficulties enough to employ her enquiries, without launching into so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction!' (Hume 1975, p. 103). Althusser himself refers briefly, but approvingly, to Hume, when

intellectual and functional positions and viewpoints that enable, for instance: i) the critique of philosophical fantasies and utopias; ii) the transcendence of the position of philosophical or cosmological systems; and iii) the assessment and utilisation of the factual conditions and opportunities for acting within a particular case.

4.4.2. Beyond the aleatory of the 'subjective' and 'objective'

A good reason to detach oneself from the subjective-objective antagonism is that, for Machiavelli, *fortuna* is not something transcendent affecting the life of man from the outside (I will look at this issue in more detail in 5.2. and 5.3.). When looking at the effects of *fortuna* from his own 'subjective' viewpoint, the man of action does not look at some external system, but, instead, the case or conjuncture *in which he himself is a party and into which he conjuncts with his own actions*. This emphasises the difference in *viewpoint* between

i) Machiavelli's aleatory *fortuna* and the natural-scientific analysis of chance; and

ii) the historian that explains the events of the past (the *fait accompli*) and the man of action who is turned towards the future.

i) When the natural scientist looks, for instance, at the movement of gas molecules, he himself does not participate in that movement – or at least he aims to eliminate the influence of both himself and the measuring instrument from the research object. Even though he heats up the gaseous mixture or changes its volume, the regularities or possible randomness which prevails between the gas molecules is not due to the natural scientist studying

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he states that the aleatory philosopher does not explain events with the help of some Mind, Origin, Principle, or Cause, but instead carries out experiments and observes the 'series of aleatory encounters': 'Of course, our philosopher can conduct *experiments* on the consecutions [*consécutions*] of aleatory sequences that he has been able to observe, and can (like Hume) work out laws of consecution, 'customary' laws or *constants*, that is, structured theoretical figures. These experiments will lead him to deduce universal *laws* for each type of experiment, depending on the type of entities that served as its object: that is how the natural sciences proceed. Here, we again encounter the term and function of "universality"' (Althusser 1994b, p. 65; Althusser 2006a, p. 278, Althusser's emphasis).

the movement. Every natural scientist does indeed attempt to maximise the validity and reliability of the experimental set-up, despite the fact that it is not necessarily guaranteed – especially in quantum mechanics – to succeed. Likewise, the *specific* gaseous mixture which the natural scientist, interested in chance, studies does not become meaningful for him as a unique and historical 'gaseous mixture event' but rather as a non- and over-historical *example* of how the gas molecules move randomly in any mixture. What sort of randomness there specifically is in the studied mixture is not a meaningful question from the point of view of the problematics of studying chance (unless the intention is to compare the movement of molecules of different specimens in relation to each other in order to find some law that explains 'chance').

In the case of the man of action, the situation is different. This is due to the fact that he *is* and *wants to be a party* in the case he studies. Likewise, his own case is for him uniquely historical, thus also shaping his own life and future, whereas a natural scientific experiment, on the other hand, must be *repeatable* in different places at different times by different researchers. Unlike the natural scientist, the man of action does not aim to *minimise* his own influence in the course of events but, on the contrary, to maximise it, or, at least, to increase it. In other words, he is *both* the 'subject' *and* the 'object' of his own case; both the 'cause' and the 'effect'. The better the man of action can assess and control the course of events, the better he can act within his own conjuncture (which sometimes, of course, can require passively standing aside and leaving things as they are). This does not mean, however, that the man of action would not try to take the aleatory (e.g. surprises) into account in his situational analysis – the knowledge and art of politics – but that he takes it into account by aiming to *affect* its degree of influence, both 'subjectively' and 'objectively'. His central concern is not the past tense 'what has been done?' or the generalised 'what has been done in general?' or even the futurological 'what in general must be done?' but the personal and acute 'what should *I* do right now?' As already mentioned in the chapter 'The praxis of *The Prince*' (4.3.), according to Althusser, such a 'political' question was for Machiavelli the most central question also when analysing the course of events of the past and their solutions.[133] Assessed in this light, it is indeed not

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[133] Althusser 1995a, p. 59; Althusser 1999, p. 18.

surprising that the working title that Althusser gave to the material contained in *Le courant*, 'What is to be done?', was a reference to Lenin's text with that title.[134]

If the man of action takes into account the subjectivity of the aleatory, it means that he strives by means of his situational analyses to map out as far possible the *factual* conditions and circumstances of the case and his actions. In this endeavour, it is also useful for him to have knowledge of those constants that are repeated in some form or other from one case to the next. In other words, he attempts to lessen the degree of his subjective ignorance, or the degree of *subjective* randomness. The man of action knows, however, that one can never fully dispel ignorance. It is humanly impossible to ascertain all the factors influencing both within and from outside the case, and thus to eliminate all the surprises and their attendant risks, and be the 'sovereign master' of the case, the Kingdom of God on Earth. Even if the causes of the case are worldly, the cases are too complex for godly tampering to succeed. The man of action also knows that his own actions affect the course of events. Likewise, he knows that his actions have unintended consequences, because they are conjoined with other actors' actions in the case and other conditions of the case. But, because the man of action aims to influence the case, he also aims to influence the course of events, avoiding unpleasant surprises and eliminating risks. He cannot achieve perfection, but this does not prevent him from influencing *the degree of the humanly objective aleatory*, as well as i) specifically influencing his own case and ii) generally influencing the degree of its aleatoriness.

   i) The man of action can adapt a case and conjuncture such that the 'unpleasant surprises' do not affect him, but rather, for instance, his competitors. He can attempt to utilise the aleatory to his own benefit, to control it more skilfully than the other actors in the case. (As will become evident in Chapter 5.3, some of the most interesting passages in Machiavelli's texts deal with how to arrange unpleasant surprises for one's opponents and how to gain the most for oneself from them.)
   ii) Because the man of action is able to adapt his conjuncture, he can also influence the degree of the aleatory. He can adapt the conditions of his

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[134] Cf. Matheron 1994, pp. 534 and 537.

conjuncture so that the events within it are not as arbitrary as they were previously. Because it is possible to influence the degree of the aleatory through one's actions, then the aleatory must obviously be also something other than subjective ignorance. In this sense, the aleatory is 'humanly objective', even though, from the imaginary God's point of view, the case would be 'objectively non-aleatory'.[135]

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[135] The term 'humanly objective' comes from Gramsci, who states the following about it: 'Does it seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity? But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of "standpoint of the cosmos in itself" and *what could such a standpoint mean*? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God, precisely in its mystical conception of an unknown God. … Objective always means "humanly objective", which can be held to correspond exactly to "historically subjective": in other words, objective would mean "universal subjective"' (Gramsci 1975, pp. 1415–16; my emphasis). With regard to the issue of aleatoriness, the above quote implies that it is useless to debate whether aleatoriness is 'subjective' or 'objective' in the absolute meaning that refers to 'God's viewpoint' or the 'objective onlooker'. Instead, the historical analysis of aleatoriness becomes meaningful. In this case, aleatoriness refers to the historical conditions of each conjuncture, which, in their complexity, are difficult to perceive and on the basis of which the man of action must make decisions. These conditions are the 'objective reality' for the man of action, a reality that he can influence with his own acts and projects and thus change it. Gramsci indeed discusses, under the heading 'Machiavelli', the concepts of 'prediction [*previsione*]' and 'perspective [*prospettiva*]': 'It is certain that prediction only means seeing the present and the past clearly as movement. Seeing them clearly: in other words, accurately identifying the fundamental and permanent elements of the process. But it is absurd to think of a purely "objective" prediction. Anybody who makes a prediction has in fact a "programme" for whose victory he is working, and his prediction is precisely an element contributing to that victory. This does not mean that prediction need always be arbitrary and gratuitous (or simply tendentious). Indeed one might say that only to the extent to which the objective aspect of prediction is linked to a programme does it acquire its objectivity: 1. because strong passions are necessary to sharpen the intellect and help make intuition more penetrating; 2. because reality is a product of the application of human will to the society of things (the machine operator's will applied to his machine); therefore if one excludes all voluntarist elements, or if it is only other people's wills whose intervention one reckons as an objective element in the general interplay of forces, one mutilates reality itself' (Gramsci 1975, pp. 1810–11). It is important to emphasise that 'prediction' also involves an analysis of the past and present, as well as formulating a subsequent political 'programme' on the basis of it. In other words, the person undertaking an analysis analyses that same situation, the historical, 'objective' conditions he strives to change 'for the better'. According to Gramsci, it is generally thought that 'prediction' requires that reality be regular and follow laws such as natural scientific laws. In Gramsci's opinion, however, such laws must not or, in fact, cannot be assumed. One must ask how it is possible to influence the historical reality, instead of speculating about the absolute laws that possibly influence it. 'For it is generally thought that every act of prediction presupposes the determination of laws of regularity similar to those of the natural sciences. But since these laws do not exist in the absolute (or mechanical) sense that is imagined, no account is taken of the will of others, nor is its application "predicted". Consequently everything is built on an arbitrary hypothesis

In order to understand better the problematic of the aleatory in Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, it is indeed important to note that the difference between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' interpretation must not be presented as a *general* differentiation, nor should it be assessed in *absolute* terms, that is, from the hypothetical point of view of an omniscient god, but, rather, from the human point of view. Then it would be possible to differentiate between the *humanly* objective and the subjective aleatory. One talks about the humanly objective aleatory when it is a matter of complex cases that no rational theory can explain (such a theory, and the 'laws' it contains, can fail). Man can, however, influence – albeit without any guarantee of success, and sometimes even falling from the frying pan into the fire – the degree of complexity of any situation, *both* by increasing awareness of it – decreasing the degree of the subjective aleatory – and by *adapting the particular case* so that it causes fewer surprises – decreasing the degree of the humanly objective aleatory. The almighty god does not need to undertake such research and adaptations because, as a perfect being, he knows perfectly all the laws that influence even the most complex situation, even though these would, from a human point of view, in their aleatoriness, be cases completely beyond perfect control.[136]

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and not on reality' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1811). In the case of 'prediction' it is not a question of studying the conjuncture from the outside and understanding its development on the basis of presumed influential laws. Prediction refers to the activity of change based on the conditions and opportunities of the conjuncture, the results of which are humanly objectively aleatory because the acting subject may succeed in influencing how his conjuncture turns out, even though he cannot with certainty completely succeed in his actions.

[136] It is undoubtedly possible that, from the point of the omniscient God, reality is also aleatory; that is, from *all* viewpoints absolutely objectively aleatory. In such a case, the idea then arises of a kind of 'pure coincidence', of something occurring which is completely unanticipated. For such complete unanticipation to be possible, in principle one should not – even from the viewpoint of the omniscient God – be able to present *sufficient* reasons for the occurrence. The events would be absolutely underdetermined. Even though God would indeed know completely the history of the case and its present situation, he would not, based on these, be able to predict the future, because, in this case, it would not be determined by the past and the present. It is here that one could speak of *absolute indeterminism*. On the other hand, one can see that *relative indeterminism* is linked to the fact that from the human viewpoint it is impossible to present such an extensive theory (together with its laws) that takes everything into account (in the universe) to such an extent that the future, with all its encounters, could be known in advance (or even explained after the event). From the point of view of absolute indeterminism, not even an omniscient God is capable of giving an explanation. However, such an idea is, at least to some extent, in conflict with the definition of 'omniscience'. On the other hand, such an idea refers to an innocent

ii) As opposed to the *historian*, the man of action's primary interest towards the past and the analysis of history is not characterised by explaining or understanding what has *already happened* (the *fait accompli*). As in the case of the *revolutionary leader* Lenin (2.4.), the man of action carries out *situational analyses* in order to devise strategies of action that would serve his projects, *as directed from the present towards the future*. Unlike for the man of action, for the historian, the particular case does not become meaningful, as either a threat or opportunity, for his own personal future. Even if the historian were to agree with the 'Althusserian' viewpoint – according to which history is characterised by the primacy of the aleatory and not the primacy of necessity – the case he studies is irrevocably a *fait accompli*.[137] And even if the historian does not mystify, for instance, the birth of a nation as the result of an irrefutable teleological series of events, the actual events he studies are, nevertheless, a 'locked' past (though the interpretations of it will vary). For the man of action, on the other hand, the aleatory becomes meaningful as both present and future threats and opportunities, aiming to avert the former and trusting and utilising the latter. For him, his own case becomes meaningful as the playing field of several promising and threatening opportunities of the present moment, which open towards the future. The man of action is not a man of *virtù* (a 'virtuoso') because he is able to *explain* cleverly what has already occurred, but rather because he manages better than others both to benefit from the aleatory and, by means of his knowledge and skills, to control, thus getting by in aleatory situations by anticipating surprises and even manipulating them to the detriment of other less skilful actors.

The position of the man of action in relation to the historian is indeed both enviable and daunting. The position is enviable because, unlike the historian, he himself has the opportunity to influence the course of events.[138] This

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occurrence and the existence of 'pure' or absolutely objective chance. Unlike what Petronius claimed, there really would be no reason for chance.

[137] Even though the interpretations of the cases of the past vary, the case itself *as a case* – no matter how it is interpreted – has ended. Instead, the interpretations of what has taken place are conjoined as part of the conjunctures of the interpreters – not the people who lived through the case being studied. On the different interpretations of history, as well as the relation between history and the present, see Hill 1993, pp. 270–83.

[138] Of course, the historian can also aim to influence the course of events, but, in this case, the influence is not directed at the case he is studying but at the conjuncture of the present moment in which he presents his interpretation.

is indeed the central viewpoint of Althusser's aleatory materialism, which constitutes the real opportunities for political action that emerged already in his analysis of the revolutionary leader Lenin. Lenin could influence the course of events in Russia in 1917, but nothing in that conjuncture guaranteed that the revolutionary activities of the Bolsheviks would succeed. On the other hand, nothing absolutely prevented it from succeeding. The success of the Bolsheviks was indeed an aleatory opportunity, the utilisation of which required, in addition to apposite situational analysis, also timely action.

On the other hand, the position of the man of action is daunting because his *fortuna* may, despite all his skilful actions, begin to decline, that is, if his actions conjoin in the case such that there are unintended consequences that crush his plans and ultimately destroy him. This is what happened to the most *virtù*-filled Cesare Borgia, who, at the decisive moment, fell ill and lost his aleatory opportunity to unite northern Italy under the hegemony of Romagna. On this Althusser comments:

> Machiavelli's wish is simply that, in an atomized Italy, the encounter should take place, and he is plainly obsessed with this Cesare, who, starting out with nothing, made the Romagna a Kingdom, and, after taking Florence, would have united all Northern Italy if he had not been stricken with fever in the marshes of Ravenna at the critical moment, when he was heading, despite Julius II, for Rome itself, to strip him of his office.[139]

Even though the man of action can influence the course of events, he himself is not the centre point of the events, the person who could perfectly control their course. When proposing that the aleatory turns and opportunities of reality create the possibilities for the birth of new kinds of human figures, individuals, conjunctures and states, Althusser does not forget the possibility that also a *catastrophe* could occur. In this viewpoint, history does indeed present itself as a game without beginning or end and as the unpredictable changes of fortune in games, and which have no Sense [*Sens*] but which also does not lack sense [*sens*]:

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[139] Althusser 1994c, pp. 544–5; Althusser 2006a, p. 172.

This makes it all too clear that anyone who took it into his head to consider these figures, individuals, conjunctures or States of the world as either the necessary result of given premises or the provisional anticipation of an End would be mistaken, because he would be neglecting the fact (the '*Faktum*') that these provisional results are doubly provisional – not only in that they will be superseded, but also in that they might never have come about, or might have come about only as the effect of a 'brief encounter', if they had not arisen on the happy basis of a stroke of good Fortune which gave them their '*chance*' to 'last' to the elements over whose conjunction it so happens (by chance) that this form had to preside. This shows that we are not – that we do not live – in Nothingness [*le Néant*], but that, although there is no Meaning to history (an End which transcends it, from its origins to its term), there can be meaning *in* history, since this meaning emerges from an encounter that was real, and really felicitous – or catastrophic, which is also a meaning.[140]

However, human life is not completely meaningless, but rather the sense of history is contained within those encounters which occur in human life and which humans in their life produce and cause. For example, the birth of a nation-state is not at all a teleological process expressing the *Sense of history* but rather is, in its aleatoriness, a complex and contingent series of events, though one that should not be explained afterwards as an expression of the Sense. History must be understood as a process which, for people who have lived in its different stages, has opened up and become meaningful through their actions and on a horizon created by their actions, which with regard to the future is open, yet in its openness, obscure. But this, however, does not mean that there would not be any dominant 'senses' – such as, for instance, hegemonic ideologies – that would have an effect in a fixed state.[141]

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[140] Althusser 1994c, p. 567; Althusser 2006a, p. 194; Althusser's emphasis.
[141] The previous quote (Althusser 1994c, p. 567; Althusser 2006a, pp. 194–5) contains a critical reference to Sartre's existentialism, namely, that in the development of his theories in his first important work *L'être et le néant* (Sartre 1943; cf., e.g., the chapter 'The Problem of Nothingness', pp. 33–116) he does not take into account those historical 'minds', such as dominant ideologies and structures, which actually influence the lives of individuals. Only two alternatives are left for Sartre as the basis of life: either an absolute Mind (e.g. God) or an absolute mindlessness (e.g. *néant*). The latter forms the starting point of Sartre's existentialism, while the former refers to essentialism. With this choice, Sartre's existentialism becomes for the individual an abstract philosophy based on the abstract juxtaposition of the individual and society, or ego and the other. In his later works, such as his magnum opus *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 1991

Summarising the argument, Althusser's aleatory interpretation of Machia-
velli opens up viewpoints in two directions: firstly, Althusser's critique offers
a means to subject to critique such philosophies of history and explanations of
the past in which past events (e.g. the emergence of nation states) are explained
teleologically or essentialistically, for instance, as expressions of the Sense
of History. Secondly, Althusser presents Machiavelli (as well as Lenin) as a
theoretician of praxis, from whose writings a view opens up onto the present
aleatory praxis of the man of action. Machiavelli and Lenin teach us how to
answer the question *What is to be done?*[142] Seen from this viewpoint, fatalism,
determinism or historical-philosophical approaches are not meaningful or
simply one of many possible future orientations. As Hume also proposed,
from a human point of view, and particularly that of a man of action, the
aleatory (chance in Hume) is part of the effective truth and, at the same time,
also the 'humanly objective' reality which can be influenced through one's
actions.

In his autobiography, Althusser offered a personal example of a *virtù*-minded
man of action, Robert Daël, who during the Second World War was in the same
German prisoner-of-war camp in Schleswig as the young Althusser.[143] Daël,
who had been chosen as the leader amongst the prisoners, was able to organ-
ise skilfully the conjuncture of the prison camp so that it 'produced' the conse-
quences he wanted. Even though it could not be guaranteed that Daël's organ-
isational work would succeed – indeed, it carried great risks – it demonstrated
that not even difficult circumstances made effective action impossible. Even
though the prison camp placed severe conditions and limitations on Daël's
actions, at the same time the conjuncture also offered opportunities for action.
The good *fortuna* of Daël and the other prisoners was not completely at the
mercy of the German guards, but, rather, the French could organise the con-
juncture of the camp so as to produce 'merciful' effects.

[1960]), Sartre tries with the help of the theories of Marx and Freud to free himself from
such dualisms. As was stated earlier, Althusser shows that Sartre failed in this attempt
(see Althusser 1972a, pp. 19–23, 42–6 and 95–8; Althusser 1976b, pp. 43–5, 59–61 and
97–9). For a discussion of Sartre's subject-centred critique of philosophy, cf. in particular
Haug 1991.

[142] Matheron 1994, pp. 534 and 537.
[143] Cf. Althusser 1993c, Chapter 10.

Not even the prison camp was characterised solely by imperatives and necessities. The aleatory and the opportunities it provided had their place, even in this conjuncture of extremely limited opportunities. From the viewpoint of the Germans, the aleatory state of the conjuncture of the prison camp was a threat: not even they could ever be sure that the situation would remain under control the whole time, though this was, of course, their aim.

As will become clear in the next sections (4.5. and 5), one can interpret the *praxis of the prince* as a project to found an extensive and durable 'Italian' state. The goal of such a project was to reduce the aleatory nature of the Apennine peninsula by means of the union between the prince and the people. This was a historical solution to reduce the degree of the humanly objective aleatory of the chaotic conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula.

4.5. The praxis of the prince: the project and strategy of the new prince

In *Machiavel et nous*, Althusser looks at the case of the new prince wishing to found a state – in Machiavelli's case, an extensive and centralised Italian state. The very aleatory situation of the Apennine peninsula indeed opened up opportunities for the project of a new prince. On the other hand, in this project it was a question of providing a 'political form' for a peninsula in a state of high aleatoriness.[144]

In other words, the high degree of the aleatory in the conjuncture of the peninsula opened up an opportunity for a project for change, the goal of which was the reduction of that very same aleatory. Even though Althusser highlights the aleatory characteristics of Machiavelli's cases and the necessary conditions for the action contained within them, he also suggests how the aleatory could be controlled or 'tamed'.[145] Unlike, for instance, the numerous nobility [*Grandi*] of the city-states, Machiavelli himself did not take advantage of the aleatory circumstances of the Apennine peninsula, but rather defined

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[144] Althusser 1995a, p. 128; Althusser 1999, pp. 75–6.
[145] In his autobiography (Althusser 1993c, Chapter 10) and war-camp prison diaries and letters (Althusser 1992b) Althusser describes how he, at times still a practising Catholic, became a prisoner of war in spring 1940, and from January 1941 until May 1945 he was incarcerated as prisoner No 70670 in the camp Stalag XA in Schleswig in northern Germany.

them as a political problem. On the other hand, solving this problem required the skilful utilisation of the aleatory nature of the conjunction. The aleatory was, in other words, neither only 'good' nor only 'bad', but both a threat and an opportunity. Which of these is *primary* depends from what or whose viewpoint and in *what kind of historical situation* the aleatory is studied at any given time.

4.5.1. Machiavelli and Polybius

In the second chapter of *Machiavel et nous*, 'Théorie et dispositif théorique chez Machiavel' ['Theory and theoretical dispositive in Machiavelli'], Althusser puts forward two 'philosophical' theses about Machiavelli's view of history.[146]

> *First thesis*. The course of natural and human things is immutable: … The world does not change.[147]

> *Second thesis*: … So everything is in continual, unstable motion, subject to an unpredictable necessity. This necessity is represented by the mythical conceptual figure of Fortune.[148]

The first thesis refers to the *immutable constants* (but not laws) of history, such as the unreliability of humans or that man does not do good voluntarily. The second thesis refers to the *constant of the unpredictability of change and instability*, to the fact that both time and people change unpredictably. According to Althusser, these two theses obviously contradict each other. At the same time, they are extremely general, which is why he defines them as 'philosophical' theses. In order to solve the contradiction, one must present a third thesis, which is the synthesis of the two:

> *Third thesis*. … Machiavelli furnishes it [the solution] in the synthesis of the immutable order of things with their continual change: in a *cyclical* theory of history. This is presented at the beginning of *The Discourses*.[149]

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[146] Cf. Machiavelli 1950, I.2.
[147] Althusser 1995a, p. 78; Althusser 1999, p. 34.
[148] Althusser 1995a, p. 80; Althusser 1999, p. 35.
[149] Machiavelli 1950, I.2; Althusser 1995a, p. 80; Althusser 1999, p. 35; Althusser's emphasis.

The third thesis, referring to a Polybian cyclical theory of history, is a synthesis of the first two theses, in which the eternal constants of change are encapsulated, and which the variations in governments [*variazioni de' governi*] follow:

> This theory is taken directly from Polybius. It is a theory of the necessary *cycle* human history endlessly undergoes in passing from one form of government to another; a theory of the cycle, and no longer a typology of governments, categorized under two rubrics: the good and the bad.[150]

No form of government in history has been permanent, but rather they go through a continuous circle of development and corruption. Machiavelli described this in the second chapter of Book One of *The Discourses*. Althusser justifiably remarks:

> By means of the third thesis on the cyclical character of history, Machiavelli seems to have achieved, brought off, a 'synthesis', in the vulgar-Hegelian sense, between the first thesis (immutable order) and the second (universal mobility).[151]

Does this mean that Machiavelli has based his thesis (e.g. *The Discourses*) on such a simple philosophy of history where the circle of forms of government inevitably renews itself? If this were the case, then Machiavelli's thinking really would resemble the vulgar Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis models of the philosophy of history. Althusser remarks, however, that, even though Machiavelli's thesis resembles such models, something else must also be taken into account:

> It would appear that everything has been said: everything except the *modality* of this theory in Machiavelli's text; everything save the use Machiavelli makes of this cyclical general theory, and the theoretical function he assigns it.[152]

Though Machiavelli's model resembles, in terms of its content and form, the classic 'Polybian' model, the way in which he *positions* his model in his writings is new. Machiavelli does not settle for analysing how historical cases repeat the

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[150] Althusser 1995a, pp. 80–1; Althusser 1999, p. 36; Althusser's emphasis; translation modified.
[151] Althusser 1995a, p. 83; Althusser 1999, pp. 37–8.
[152] Althusser 1995a, p. 83; Althusser 1999, p. 38; Althusser's emphasis.

model. He studies how and under what conditions it would be possible in his own case to be *liberated* from this circle of necessities. According to Althusser's interpretation, liberation requires two things:

  i) one must create a form of government that differs qualitatively from all known forms of government;
  ii) one must move from the terrain of the philosophy of history to that of political practice.

The former (i) creates a problem or sets a demand for the organiser of the state, the political 'contextual' intervention of the new prince; and the latter (ii), for Machiavelli's own 'textual' political intervention.

i) Even the good, existing forms of government are not good enough for Machiavelli as a model or ideal type because not a single one of these is (or has been) *durable*.[153] One must create a durable form of government – one that endures the whims and surprises of *fortuna*. This means that it is no longer a matter of the form of government [*gouvernement*] but qualitatively of a new type, the State [*État*]:

> What, then, of what might be called Machiavelli's fourth thesis, but I prefer to call his position? This in turn constitutes a negation of the third thesis, but a very peculiar negation, since it does not merely deny, but completely *displaces* it. Therewith is confirmed the idea that what interests Machiavelli is (1) not the governments of the cycle, but a quite different government; (2) not governments, but the duration of the state; and (3) not the cycle of endless recurrence, but the wish to rely on it *so as to escape it* – the will to be *emancipated* from the immutable necessity of the endless cycle of the same revolutions in order to create not a government that is going to degenerate to pave the way for its successor, but a *state that lasts*.[154]

Deliberating on the conditions for a new kind of state does not mean, however, that Machiavelli is considering the kind of philosophical utopias that he

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[153] Althusser 1995a, pp. 84–5; Althusser 1999, p. 39; cf. Machiavelli 1949, I.2., pp. 99–100; Machiavelli 1950, I.2, p. 114.
[154] Althusser 1995a, pp. 87–8; Althusser 1999, p. 41; Althusser's emphasis.

himself, in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, regards as alien to reality and therefore useless. According to Althusser, Machiavelli does not propose a philosophical or political utopia or an ideal image of a durable state, but simply studies theoretically the conjunctural conditions for what, up to that point, had been unthinkable and impossible to realise:

> I would simply say that Machiavelli's utopia is quite specific, distinguished from every other utopia by the following characteristic: it is not an ideological utopia; nor is it *for the most part* a political utopia. It is a *theoretical* utopia, by which we mean that it occurs, and produces its effects, *in theory*. Indeed, it merges with Machiavelli's endeavour to think the conditions of possibility of an impossible task, to think the unthinkable. I deliberately say *to think*, and not to imagine, dream, or hit upon ideal solutions.[155]

ii) The fourth thesis (the 'durable state') that overturns or transcends the third thesis (the 'eternal circle') is, according to Althusser, not a thesis in the meaning of the three previous theses, but one by which Machiavelli takes a new kind of *position* in the theoretical field, a change of terrain from that of utopias or philosophies of history to that of reflection on political practice.[156] This change is evident in Machiavelli's relationship to antiquity. His view of antiquity is not the Renaissance-idealised philosophical antiquity or an antiquity of enlightened political ideals, but, rather, the political practices of the men of action of Sparta and Rome. Machiavelli does not look for moral virtue [*vertu*] from antiquity but the real conditions of political power [*puissance*], that is, *virtù*:[157]

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[155] Althusser 1995a, p. 101; Althusser 1999, p. 52; Althusser's emphasis.

[156] In *Sur la philosphie*, Althusser defines 'position' as follows: '. . . I want to emphasise that what constitutes a philosophy is not its demonstrative discourse or its discourse of legitimation. What defines it is its position (Greek *thezis*) on the philosophical battlefield (Kant's *Kampfplatz*): for or against such-and-such an existing philosophical position, or support for a new philosophical position' (Althusser 1994b, p. 35; Althusser 2006a, pp. 256–7). In relation to the critique of theoreticism that Althusser presents in his self-critique, this means that philosophical theses must be assessed not only within theory but also within their theoretical and political context.

[157] Expressing it in the terminology Althusser used during the 1960s, Machiavelli gives an interpretation of the 'theory' of politics of the men of action of ancient times, but it is theory present in their texts in a 'practical state'. Even though Althusser lets it be understood that Machiavelli's theory of political practice is based on theoretical reflection, one can read between the lines that, in his eyes, Machiavelli's theory of political practice exists, at least partly, in a 'practical state'.

> He [Machiavelli] seeks not *virtue* [*vertu*], but *virtù*, which has nothing moral about it, for it exclusively designates the exceptional political ability and intellectual *power* of the Prince. … Accordingly, the discrepancy that makes it a utopia is a discrepancy not between the narrowness of the current socio-political 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.[158]

The substitution of *vertu* with *virtù* means subjugating the moral virtues to politics, and to their political study, as well as paying attention to the factual-political effectiveness of moral virtues. In articulating such an 'effective truth', Machiavelli was not guided by the philosophers of antiquity and their moral theories, but rather by the 'repressed' descriptions of the use and practices of morality, justice and religion in the effective political truth found on the lines, between the lines and behind the lines – in a practical situation – in the writings of the men of action of antiquity.[159]

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[158] Althusser 1995a, p. 100; Althusser 1999, pp. 51–2; Althusser's emphasis.

[159] Friedrich Nietzsche states in *Twilight of the Idols* that Thucydides's 'ulterior motives' and Machiavelli's *The Prince* offered him a 'realistic' alternative to Plato's idealistic philosophy: 'Plato is boring. … I find him deviated so far from all the fundamental instincts of the Hellenes, so morally infected, so much an antecedent Christian – he already has the concept "good" as the supreme concept – that I should prefer to describe the entire phenomenon "Plato" by the harsh term "higher swindle" or, if your prefer, "idealism", than by any other. … In the great fatality of Christianity, Plato is that ambiguity and fascination called the "ideal" which made it possible for the nobler natures of antiquity to misunderstand themselves and to step on the *bridge* which led to the "Cross" …. And how much there still is of Plato in the concept "Church", in the structure, system, practice of the Church! – My recreation, my preference, my *cure* from all Platonism has always been *Thucydides*. Thucydides, and perhaps the *Prince* of Machiavelli, are related to me closely by their unconditional will not to deceive themselves and not to see reason in *reality* – not in "reason", still less in "morality". … For the deplorable embellishment of the Greeks with the colours of the ideal which the "classically educated" youth carries away with him into life as the reward of his grammar-school drilling there is no more radical cure than Thucydides. One must turn him over line by line and read his hidden thoughts as clearly as his words: there are few thinkers so rich in hidden thoughts. *Sophist culture*, by which I mean *realist culture*, attains in him its perfect expression – this invaluable movement in the midst of the morality-and-ideal swindle of the Socratic schools which was then breaking out everywhere. … *Courage* in face of reality ultimately distinguishes such natures as Thucydides and Plato: Plato is a coward in face of reality – consequently he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has *himself* under control – consequently he retains control over things' (Nietzsche 1990, pp. 117–18, Nietzsche's emphasis).

> He [Machiavelli] declares that his own antiquity is precisely the one sacrificed, forgotten, repressed: the antiquity of *politics*. Not the antiquity of philosophical theories of politics, but that of the concrete history and practice of politics. This is the antiquity he rescues from oblivion with passion, in denouncing the ideological contradiction of his time. Celebrated in the guise of fine art and literature, practiced in jurisprudence and medicine, antiquity is spurned in politics.[160]

That Machiavelli positioned himself in the terrain of political practice is evident, according to Althusser, in the first twelve chapters of *The Prince*, not only in the examples Machiavelli chooses from antiquity but also in the examples from his own time. His formulation of the problem always ultimately arose from the existing Italian conjuncture.[161]

Formulating the conditions for the founding of a durable state is a task that Machiavelli lets the new prince decide about, even when his explicit object of study is antiquity. In other words, Machiavelli studies in the writings from antiquity the problematics of founding and sustaining a state in order to formulate theoretically the conditions for the political practice of the new prince. From this follows that, according to Althusser, in the case of Machiavelli the 'general' serves the 'specific'. Althusser's thought is noteworthy from the point of view of assessing the importance of Machiavelli 'transcending his own time': that is, he teaches his readers to position themselves within their own 'specific' situation, rather than presenting them with general laws or rules of political practice, as is often thought to be the case with Machiavelli. As mentioned earlier, in Althusser's opinion, Gramsci was the only one to realise Machiavelli's importance as *something other* than 'a modern political scientist' or 'a politician in general'.[162]

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[160] Althusser 1995a, pp. 92–3; Althusser 1999, pp. 45–6; Althusser's emphasis.
[161] Althusser 1995a, pp. 120–1; Althusser 1999, p. 69.
[162] Althusser 1995a, pp. 77 and 120–1; Althusser 1999, pp. 33 and 69; cf. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1572–3.

4.5.2. The conditions for the political project and strategy of the new prince

In a two-page note he wrote in 1986 titled 'Portrait du philosophe maté-rialiste',[163] Althusser refers to the unknown, perhaps even outlaw, hero of American Westerns typical of the popular culture of his own era, someone who jumps on to a moving train without knowing whence it comes or where it is going, then gets off at a small station and heads for the saloon to quench his thirst.

> Saloon, beer, whiskey. 'Where d'ya hail from, bud?' 'From a long way off.'
> 'Where ya headed?' 'Dunno!' 'Might have some work for ya.' 'Okay'.

The hero in the Westerns is the figure of an aleatory materialist, who does not know the beginning or goal of his long journey.[164] He is, nevertheless, a positive

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[163] Althusser 1994c, pp. 581–2; Althusser 2006a, p. 290; cf. Althusser 1994b, pp. 64–5.

[164] Referring to trains, Althusser presents the following definition of the materialist philosopher. 'I thought about my "account" of the materialist philosopher, who "jumps on a moving train" without knowing where it has come from or where it is going' (Althusser 1992a, p. 179; Althusser 1993c, p. 187). A similar characterisation can also be found in *Sur la philosophie*: 'The materialist philosopher … is a man who always catches "a moving train", like a hero of an American Western. A train passes by in front of him: he can let it pass and nothing will happen between him and the train; but he can also catch it as it moves. The philosopher knows neither Origin nor First Principle nor destination. He boards the moving train and settles into an available seat or strolls through the carriages, chatting with the travellers. He witnesses, without having been able to predict it, everything that occurs in an unforeseen, *aleatory* way, gathering an infinite amount of information and making an infinite number of observations, as much of the train itself as of the passengers and the countryside which, through the window, he sees strolling by. In short, he records *sequences of aleatory encounters*, not, like the idealist philosopher, ordered successions deduced from an Origin that is the foundation of all Meaning, or from an absolute First Principle or Cause' (Althusser 1994b, pp. 64–5; Althusser 2006a, pp. 277–8, Althusser's emphasis). Furthermore, with regard to the relation between the idealist and the materialist: '… an idealist is a man who knows where he is going because the train is taking him there. The materialist, on the other hand, is a man who gets on to a moving train without knowing either where it is coming from or where it is going' (Althusser 1992a, p. 210; Althusser 1993c, p. 217; cf. Althusser 1994c, p. 561; Althusser 2006a, p. 188). In connection with the quoted passage, Althusser refers to the idea presented by Dietzgen and made known by Heidegger, according to which philosophy is 'der Holzweg der Holzwege [the way of the ways]', in Althusser's own estimation 'the way of ways which led nowhere' (Althusser 1992a, pp. 210–11; Althusser 1993c, pp. 217–18; cf. Althusser 1972c, pp. 13–14 and 34; Althusser 1971, pp. 35–6 and 56).

hero, not a villain, even if the hero is an outlaw. In the town he gains the trust of the people, reluctantly fastens the sheriff's badge on his chest, presents his own unique interpretation of the law, curbs the villains and schemers who have terrorised the town, returns order for the time being and then disappears into the sunset of the desert without knowing how long his good fortune will continue or whether he will soon be killed by a bullet or arrow in some skirmish.

Nobody or nothing forces the hero to jump on to that particular train nor to get off at that particular station, nor to take on the job of the sheriff. The hero is not a cavalry officer who merely obeys the orders of his superiors, nor is he a city dweller or someone representing the federal state, as perhaps the previous sheriff was, but who was unable to fulfill his legal duties.

Similarly, the new prince represents, for Althusser, a kind of 'aleatory Western hero': we do not know who he is, where he comes from and where he is going. Even though Machiavelli, in several instances, refers to the new prince,[165] who would return the *virtù* of the Italians, expel the barbarians and unite the atomistic and restless peninsula, he does not specify where the new prince comes from, who he is or what his strategy and projects specifically would entail: he is alone and nameless but also free of ties, he comes from 'nowhere' and proceeds into the unknown.[166]

> What is most astonishing in Machiavelli, in the theory that he made of this new prince before founding a new principality, is that this new man is a man *of nothing, without past, without titles or burdens*, an anonymous man, alone and naked (that is, in fact free, without determination – again the solitude, first of Machiavelli, next of his prince – that bears down on him and could impede the free exercise of his *virtù*). Not only is he like a naked man, but

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[165] Cf. e.g. Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 26.
[166] The 'solitude of Machiavelli' also refers to the fact that Machiavelli presented his thoughts without knowing what their effect would be or what kind of historical processes they would be linked to (cf. De Sanctis 1979, p. 378). When he calls for a unified Italy one must note that this state did not open up before him as a 'nation-state', which in the following centuries evolved and received its ideological justification. In other words, if Machiavelli's prince did not understand the nature of the project which Machiavelli was trying to persuade him to follow, then also the possible future character of this project was not clear even for Machiavelli himself.

he finds himself intervening in one place as anonymous and as stripped of every outstanding social and political determination, which could impede his action.[167]

Most essential is that the new prince is alone: nothing defines in advance his course of action, and past generations of rulers do not weigh heavily on his shoulders.[168] He cannot be committed, either ideologically (cf. Chapter 4.3., 'The praxis of *The Prince*') or materialistically, to existing powers and their laws. Not a single one of these, not even the powerful Catholic Church, was, in Machiavelli's opinion, the one to unite Italy. On the contrary, particularly the Church was significantly to blame for the high degree of aleatoriness on the peninsula. The Church was powerful enough to prevent the unification of Italy but, on the other hand, too weak to unite it.[169]

The existing powers and theories – such as the existing rulers and theories of government – are unsuitable as models for the project of the new prince, because the forms of organisation and the ways of thinking they express, which stem from antiquity and the Middle Ages, are inadequate in the practical and theoretical foundation of the project.[170] The project requires questioning and transcending existing boundaries, and a way of thinking that goes beyond what has been considered possible up to that point:

> Machiavelli's insistence on referring to a New Prince and a New Principality is located in this extreme position, where he is condemned to thinking the possible at the boundary of the impossible.[171]

And furthermore, referring to Chapter 6 of *The Prince*:

> *To aim at a much higher point*: for Machiavelli, this is explicitly to emulate the greatest examples in history – Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and so on. But to aim at a much higher point has a further sense, not spelt out but

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[167] Althusser 1993a, pp. 91–2; Althusser's emphasis; Althusser 1997, pp. 14–15.
[168] The title of Chapter 9 of Book Three of *The Discourses* is 'To found a new republic, or to reform entirely the old institutions of an existing one, must be the work of one man only [*Come egli è necessario essere solo a volere ordinare una republica di nuovo, o al tutto fuor degli antichi suoi ordini riformarla*]'.
[169] Machiavelli 1949, I.12, pp. 130–1; Machiavelli 1950, I.12, p. 151; cf. Machiavelli 1949, I, p. 11 and p. 23.
[170] Althusser 1995a, pp. 122–3; Althusser 1999, p. 71.
[171] Althusser 1995a, p. 105; Althusser 1999, p. 56.

practised, by Machiavelli: to aim at a much higher point = to aim *beyond what exists*, so as to attain a goal *that does not exist* but must exist = to aim above all existing principalities, beyond their limits.[172]

The highly aleatory situation of the Apennine peninsula also meant that there was an existing 'political vacuum [*vide politique*]'[173] a free space of movement and action that the new prince had the opportunity to fill. This vacuum, however, was not equivalent to some ready laid table where the new prince could simply take the master's seat: the conditions for the success of the project did indeed exist in the conjunction of the peninsula, but these conditions could not as such guarantee the success of the project. Even though there were indeed 'atoms' in the conjuncture, from which it would have been possible to take hold of the new state, they did not contain the *telos* of fixation. Among these 'atoms' were the different dialects of the Italian language, but this did not include any eternal idea about a national Italian written or general language that would unite the Italians.[174]

The project of the new prince was neither an impossibility nor an inevitable success story but an aleatory possibility. In order to realise it, it is 'necessary *to create the conditions for a swerve*, and thus an encounter, if Italian unity was to "take hold" [*Il faut* créer les conditions d'une déviation *et donc d'une rencontre pour que 'prenne' l'unité italienne*]'.[175]

Later, unlike the heirs of the national state ideological apparatuses, Machiavelli lived and wrote in a historical situation where a national state or national written language did not yet exist, not to mention that these would have had a hegemonic position that would have been taken for granted ideologically. Machiavelli himself could not know what his political utopia would mean when implemented. The expansive regional states that had already been created in Spain, France and even England during Machiavelli's time were not national states in the democratic and/or nationalistic meaning of the word, as later defined in discourses where, for instance, language played an essential role.

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[172] Althusser 1995a, p. 125; Althusser 1999, p. 73; Althusser's emphasis.
[173] Althusser 1995a, p. 103; Althusser 1999, p. 54.
[174] Cf. Althusser 1990a, p. 39; Althusser 1988, p. 478.
[175] Althusser 1994c, p. 544; Althusser 2006a, p. 171; Althusser's emphasis.

A united Italy was a practical possibility and a political necessity which could be realised or not, or simply postponed. The implementation depended on whether a new prince would arise from some unknown corner of the peninsula, one with enough *virtù* and *forza* in order to carry the project through. Such an opportunity had already opened up for Cesare Borgia. However, due to unfortunate encounters, his good *fortuna* had turned bad and his project failed.

Instead of some law of development of history, as expressed by some conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula, guaranteeing the success of the project of the new prince – the new prince himself would, in Hegelian terms, be merely a case of *dotting the i* – it was the lack of such protection from the law of history or the historical-philosophical obedience of the law that offered him the aleatory opportunity to take his project to a successful conclusion. According to Althusser, the *virtù* of the new prince is the 'subjective' element in taking hold of the project of the state, and which must be fitted together with the 'objective' circumstances of the conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula:

> … defining this adventure, is to assume the form of a favourable '*encounter*' between two terms: on the one hand, the objective conditions of the conjuncture X of an unspecified region – *fortuna* – and on the other, the subjective conditions of an equally indeterminate individual Y – *virtù*.[176]

On the one hand, the conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula offered the new prince the opportunity to use his *virtù*, and, on the other hand, the criteria for the assessment of the use of *virtù* was a question of to what extent the new prince could actively shape the conjuncture in the direction he desired:

> What, then, is in question here? It is a question of constituting a factual conjuncture (to begin with, obviously, in the form of a plan, that is, a *strategy*, and later in reality) making it possible to realize, with the felicitous aid of fortune or occasion, an aleatory conjuncture making possible the historical realisation of Italian national unity.[177]

The Italy of the *quattrocento* and *cinquecento* was like an Epicurean vacuum in which the atomistic city-states, with their atomistic elements (e.g. dialects), fell

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[176] Althusser 1995a, p. 126; Althusser 1999, p. 74; Althusser's emphasis.
[177] Althusser 1993a, p. 101; Althusser's emphasis. One interesting meaning of the verb 'constituer' in this context is 'to form a whole from parts'.

without colliding with one another and without joining together. According to Epicurus, deviation from and taking hold of the world occurred without any reason. Applied to the project of the new prince, this means that nothing necessarily prevents or guarantees the unification of Italy into a durable national state. In Lucretius's book *About the Universe*, the existing world is not the only possible world: some other world could have been taken hold of or could take hold of itself in the future. In the same way, Italy was not the inevitable consequence of its atoms but only one possibility which could be realised if a new prince arises from some previously unnamed place, and who can use the opportunity of unification to his advantage. This, of course, requires the taking hold of existing atoms – in this sense, the state does not arise arbitrarily – but these atoms also do not necessarily organise themselves into an extensive and unified state; rather, such taking hold requires *virtù* that carries out this task of organisation – the binding of the city-state atoms into a nation-state, the organisation of the general popular dissatisfaction into the articulation of a collective will, and so forth. The new prince shapes these factual conditions for his action so that the conditions of the deviation and taking hold of the atoms are realised.[178]

4.5.3. The lawless hero

Like the outlaw hero of the Western, the new prince is committed and commits others. But he does this 'willingly'. No existing power or historical mission or commission can define his actions: 'Hobbes will say: freedom is an empty space without obstacle'.[179]

In Chapters 3 and 4 of *Machiavel et nous*, Althusser analyses the means [*moyens*] by which the new prince 'takes hold of' or 'fixes' the aleatory conjuncture. This occurs through the interplay between *virtù* and *fortuna*.[180] The good *fortuna* of the project of the new prince requires that he can, by means of his *virtù*, shape the conditions of the conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula so that also the 'objective' dimension of *fortuna* promotes the favourable development of his 'subjective' *fortuna*. In practice, this means lowering the

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[178] Cf.: 'It was necessary *to create the conditions for a swerve*, and thus an encounter, if Italian unity was to "take hold" ' (Althusser 1994c, p. 544; Althusser 2006a, p. 171).

[179] Althusser 1993a, p. 92; Althusser 1997, pp. 14–15.

[180] Althusser 1995a, p. 128; Althusser 1999, p. 75.

high degree of aleatoriness of the conjuncture, which in turn means bringing the constituent components expressed by the *fortuna* of the Apennine peninsula into a durable political form:

> The peculiarity of *virtù* is to master *fortuna*, even when it is favourable, and to transform the instant of *fortuna* into political duration, the *matter* of *fortuna* into political *form*, and thus to structure the material of the favourable local conjuncture politically by laying the foundations of the new state – that is to say, by rooting itself (we know how) in the people, in order to endure and expand, while remaining ever mindful of 'future power' (*The Prince* VII, 28) and aiming high to reach far.[181]

The key terms in the above quote are 'political duration [*durée politique*]', 'to politically structure [*structurer politiquement*]', 'foundations of the new state [*fondements du nouvel État*]' and 'rooting itself within the people [*s'enracinant dans le peuple*]'. If the new prince is not bound by the existing forces, he himself must articulate them into a new whole. As long as the project of the new prince is at the mercy of unstable aleatory factors, it cannot take hold of or fix its terrain and become enrooted. To borrow Gramsci's terminology, the project must transform from a cyclical movement to an organic movement, the duration [*durée*] of which does not depend merely on aleatory encounters.

Even though the new prince is alone at the beginning of his project, he must, during its course, achieve the respect, trust and friendship of the people; he must become a popular ideological figure who transcends the limits of his individual persona.[182] The prince must be able to move from the stage of solitude on the individual level to the collective 'institutional stage':

> We are at the point where he reaches a decisive conclusion, distinguishing *two moments* in the constitution of a state. (1) The first moment is that of the absolute *beginning*, which is necessarily the deed of one man alone, a 'single individual'. But this moment is itself unstable, for ultimately it can as readily tip over into tyranny as into an authentic state. Whence (2) the second moment, that of *duration*, which can be ensured only by a double process: the

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[181] Althusser 1995a, p. 128; Althusser 1999, p. 75; Althusser's emphasis and reference.
[182] Althusser 1993a, pp. 93–5. On the concept of the 'people' in the Florentine context, and especially that of Machiavelli, see Section 5.6.1.

settlement of laws and emergence from solitude – that is to say, the end of the absolute power of a single individual.[183]

According to Althusser, it is indeed a mistake to think that Machiavelli would talk in *The Discourses* about something else than in *The Prince*, because Machiavelli's position is the same in both works, that is, he analyses the same problem, the conditions of the foundation of a durable state.[184] The difference between the books, according to Althusser, is that the focal point of the analyses in *The Prince* is the first moment of solitude, whereas, in *The Discourses*, the analysis concentrates on the second moment, enrooting and duration. Here, Althusser refers to Savonarola, as 'merely an unarmed prophet' in Machiavelli's texts,[185] who could indeed influence people,[186] but who did not have the power (the means) by which he could factually influence the Florentine-Italian conjuncture, and in this way 'verify' his predictions with this own armed forces. Giving form [*prendre la forme*] to the project of the new prince does indeed require both force [*la force*], fraud [*la ruse*] and laws [*les lois*].[187] Mere cunning does not suffice for the prince to 'realize a popular politics':[188]

> This state, of which Machiavelli says somewhere that it is a 'machine', can, at first sight, be divided into three elements: at one extreme, the apparatus of force, represented by the *army*, at the other, the apparatus of *consent*, represented by religion and the entire system of ideas that the people forms of

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[183] Althusser 1995a, p. 115; Althusser 1999, pp. 64–5; Althusser's emphasis.

[184] Althusser 1995a, p. 117; Althusser 1999, p. 66.

[185] Cf. e.g. Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 19; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 25.

[186] Althusser 1995a, p. 136; Althusser 1999, p. 83. Gramsci states that the 'legislator' must transcend the limits of the individual persona and become a collective will, and utilise the historical circumstances in his actions. If the legislator, the 'individual', does not take into account the collective will and, furthermore, try to organise and reinforce it, he will be, like Savonarola, only an 'unarmed prophet': '1) that the individual legislator … cannot ever undertake "arbitrary", anti-historical actions, because his act of initiative, once undertaken, acts like a force on its own in the determinate social circle, provoking actions and reactions that are intrinsic to this circle beyond apart from the act in itself; 2) that every legislative act, or of directive and normative will, must also and especially be objectively evaluated for the effective consequences that it could have; 3) that every legislator can only be considered as an individual abstractly and for linguistic convenience, because in reality he expresses a determinate collective will that wants to make its "will", which is will only because the collective wants to give it efficacy; 4) that thus every individual that refuses a collective will and doesn't seek to create it, to encourage it, to extend it, to strengthen it, to organise it, is simply an '"unarmed prophet", a vanishing flame' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1663).

[187] Althusser 1995a, p. 151; Althusser 1999, p. 95.

[188] Althusser 1995a, p. 135; Althusser 1999, p. 82.

the Prince; and between the two, the *politico-juridical* apparatus represented by the 'system of laws', the provisional outcome and institutional framework of the struggle between social classes.[189]

Though consent and weapons are indeed the extreme ends of the political practice of the new prince, for Machiavelli they are not antagonistic opposites, because, also in military issues, he gave the dominant position to 'politics'.[190] Althusser indeed agrees with Gramsci's assessment that Machiavelli was the first to realise the primacy of politics in military affairs, including questions concerning the technology of warfare. When Machiavelli criticises on several occasions in the both *The Discourses* and *The Art of War* the use of fortresses in warfare, the question is not only of a 'technical' critique, but also of highlighting a serious political mistake. Machiavelli argues that fortresses are problematic in relation to both one's own subjects and the enemy.[191] Fortresses not only provoke the enemy but also make the ruler more eager and less hesitant to oppress the people, because he can always, when necessary, flee to the shelter of the fortress.[192] This shows that the army is not only a war machine but also the most important state apparatus.[193]

The 'political' is primary in relation to the 'military', but on the other hand this 'political-military' – or 'political apparatus of violence' – is at the same time also the most central state apparatus in the *becoming of the people* [*devenir-peuple*].[194] According to Althusser, this does not mean that Machiavelli wanted a tyranny, where guns, crude power and violence would guarantee the position of the ruler.[195] This *would* have been the case if force and consent were completely different matters. Instead, laws and ideology – just like the army – are, in Machiavelli's vision, the expressions of the prince's one and the same popular politics:

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[189] Althusser 1995a, p. 135; Althusser 1999, p. 82; Althusser's emphasis.

[190] Althusser 1995a, p. 137; Althusser 1999, p. 83.

[191] Cf. e.g. Machiavelli 1950, II.24.

[192] Althusser also criticises the PCF party leadership for such entrenchment (Althusser 1978a, p. 119).

[193] Althusser 1995a, p. 137; Althusser 1999, p. 83.

[194] Althusser 1995a, p. 160; Althusser 1999, p. 102.

[195] Machiavelli states directly in the title of Chapter 10 of Book I of *The Discourses*: 'In proportion as the founders of a republic or monarchy are entitled to praise, so do the founders of a tyranny deserve execration [*quanto sono laudabili i fondatori d'una republica o d'uno regno, tanto quelli d'una tirannide sono vituperabili*]' (Machiavelli 1950, I.10, p. 141).

> The upshot is that armed force is simply the realization of politics in the region of the state that employs violence. Now, *the same politics* is realized in laws and ideology. The force/consent, army/ideology, duality is thus not an antagonistic one ...[196]

In the project for the new prince, the army positions itself as the prince's ideological apparatus, which not only goes to war (the task of foreign policy) but also functions as the 'school and crucible of popular unity'.[197]

4.5.4. A popular ideological figure

As already mentioned, according to Althusser, the prince is the acting political subject in Machiavelli's analysis, but the criteria of suitability for the prince's methods are defined from the point of view of the people. This, however, then raises the question: what kind of ideological principles must the prince employ in order for the people to follow him, and to perceive him as their ideologically popular figure? Furthermore, how do these principles stand in relation to the 'national' character of the project of the new prince? It is important to keep the latter question in mind, so that the analyses of the relationship between the prince and the people do not fall back into a 'Machiavellianistic' interpretation, that is, an opportunistic interpretation.[198]

The instinct of the fox

In analysing the relationship between the prince and the people, Althusser's central starting point is one of the most quoted passages of *The Prince*, in which Machiavelli argues that the prince must be able to appear as both a man and a beast.[199] Such 'performative skills' were indeed taught to the princes of antiquity, by describing how Achilles and other princes were sent to be brought up by the centaur Chiron, the point being that, in making the teacher half-beast and half-man, the prince would learn how to act according to the nature of both. Machiavelli goes on to describe two beasts with different natures, the lion

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[196] Althusser 1995a, p. 138; Althusser 1999, p. 84; Althusser's emphasis.
[197] Althusser 1995a, p. 142; Althusser 1999, p. 87.
[198] Althusser 1995a, p. 70; Althusser 1999, pp. 26–7.
[199] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 55; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 74.

and fox:[200] the lion frightens off the wolves and the fox recognises the traps.[201] As Machiavelli states, 'Those who simply act like lions don't understand the point [*Coloro che stanno semplicemente in sul lione non se ne intendano*]'.[202] According to Althusser, this not only means that the prince must have, in addition to the lion-like force, a fox-like cunning, but also that the instinct of the fox must guide the prince whether he acts as a beast or human. From this follows that 'fox-likeness' is defined as the most important characteristic of the prince.[203] If the prince does not have the instincts of a fox, he will not know when to act as a good person and when to act like a violent beast:

> Sometimes to be moral, that is, clothed with virtues … and sometimes be violent, that is, to make use of force. Or rather, and this point is decisive, to know how sometimes to be moral and sometimes to be violent. Or rather, for this point is even more decisive, to know how to appear to be moral or to know how to appear to be violent ….[204]

Through his fox-like instinct, the prince understands how he must appear for his subjects in each situation in order to receive their approval for his acts:

> In other words, it is the fox's instinct (a kind of half-conscious, half-unconscious intuition) that indicates to the prince what attitude he must adopt in such and such a conjuncture in order to rally to himself the people's assent.[205]

Thus, imitating the fox does not mean that the prince would appear in the eyes of the people to be fox-like, but rather, that in a fox-like manner he can hide his fox-like nature and behave as the conjuncture requires. Machiavelli indeed states that '… one must know how to colour one's actions and to be a great liar and deceiver'.[206] In other words, when appearing before others the prince must not reveal 'the fox's tail under his arm'. When the prince acts as a 'good person'

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[200] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 55; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 74.

[201] In Greek mythology, the centaur [*Kentauros*] is a being described as half-human and half-horse. The most well known centaur, mentioned also by Machiavelli, is Kheiron, the teacher of Achilles. Kheiron was renowned for his sociability towards humans and his skills in medicine, music, battle, hunting and prediction (see Grimal 1991, pp. 89–90 and p. 96).

[202] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 55; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 74; translation modified.

[203] Althusser 1993a, p. 93; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.

[204] Ibid.; Althusser's emphasis.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 75.

he must not reveal to his audience that he is 'only acting'. The audience must believe that what they see is true. This is indeed what they believe if they do not understand the real vulpine practice of the prince, who produces illusions of the truth.[207]

The prince must be a great liar and deceiver, but he must also, with the cunning of the fox, realise when, where and how he must act, and by acting hide his mortality, vulnerability and true intentions. He must act according to the situation and not keep – bull-headedly – to routines that at some point have brought him success, nor must he keep his promises when 'the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist [*che sono spente le cagioni che la feciono promettere*]'.[208] Machiavelli indeed emphasised that the prince must sense the winds and turn with them.

> And so he should have a flexible disposition, varying as fortune and circum-
> stances dictate. … [H]e should not deviate from what is good, if that is pos-
> sible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary.[209]

The prince must not, however, be 'evil' without good reason or 'just for his own amusement', but only when it is necessary. Sensing the winds and carefully turning with them is a different matter from affective actions based on shifting moods. In situational analyses of the conjuncture, and in the decisions he makes based on these, the prince's logic rests, according to Althusser, on the aleatory 'si … alors' ('when … then').[210]

Machiavelli states that everybody understands that honesty is a laudable characteristic, but, in the case of the prince, following this moral and religious virtue may lead to destruction because honest action does not necessarily bring the prince praise.[211] The prince must, however, act honestly, using a kind of 'moral discourse of honesty' to his advantage:

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[207] Althusser 1993a p. 94; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.
[208] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 55; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 74.
[209] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 56; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 76.
[210] Althusser 1993a, p. 106.
[211] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 76. Machiavelli offers several examples of benev-
olent princes, who nevertheless became targets of the contempt of the people or army
and were consequently destroyed: 'One can earn hatred just as easily with a good as
a bad deed' (Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19). Machiavelli describes, for example, the
Roman Emperor Alexander as follows: 'He was a man of such goodness that, among
the other things for which he is given credit, it is said that during the fourteen years he
reigned he never put anyone to death without trial. None the less, as he was thought
effeminate, and a man who let himself be ruled by his mother, he came to be scorned,

A prince, therefore, need not necessarily have all the good qualities I men-
tioned above, but he should certainly appear to have them. I would even go
so far as to say that if he has these qualities and always behaves accordingly
he will find them harmful; if he only appears to have them they will ren-
der him service. He should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word,
kind, guileless and devout. And indeed he should be so. But his disposition
should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how.[212]

The precondition for the success of the prince is indeed that he understands the
factual importance of acting, so that acting is not 'only acting'.[213] If the prince
keeps to the 'truth' and 'goodness' and cannot see their relation to the effective
truth, he will not understand that success is not dependent on whether he is
considered good or bad but on how the people judge his acts and, in particular,
their consequences.[214]

There is indeed good reason to ask what the 'stage apparatus' is like,
which makes many believe in the performances of the 'theatre of politics', as
Althusser calls it.[215] Althusser characterises this 'royal theatre' as follows:

[The Prince's] ideological apparatus is indeed an apparatus, a systematic,
organic structure the purpose of which is to have public effects on the
people. Hence it has, naturally, a material existence: the Prince's costume,
his entourage, the sumptuousness of his life, his palaces, the troops that he
himself commands and all the ceremonies of the regime, calculated to inspire
fear and respect in the people without love or hate, the Prince's acts and
the style of his speeches, and today ... the pitiful media. This is, obviously,
crucial. For the distance that the Prince as fox takes from the appearance or
semblance of his person, which is *apparently without passion*, and from his real

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and the army conspired against him and killed him' (Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19,
p. 83). 'Effeminacy [*effeminate*]' and being under the power of one's mother were obvi-
ously not qualities that enforced the belief of the people and the army in their ruler's
'immortality' and 'supremacy'.

[212] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 56; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 75.

[213] The problem of the young Althusser was specifically that he considered the
terms 'authentic' and 'artificial' as opposites. Consequently, at that time, he did not
understand the 'reality' of the 'artificial' within the effective truth, and therefore did
not understand the effective position of the 'artificial' in the events of the conjuncture
(cf. Althusser 1993c, especially Chapter 10).

[214] Cf. Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 57; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 75.

[215] Althusser 1993a, p. 95; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.

passions, is inseparable from *both* the ceremonies *and* the whole apparatus of appearance that put him at a distance (the same emptiness) from the people; and, with this emptiness, the fear/friendship that he must cultivate in his relations with his people if he wishes to rule *lastingly*.[216]

The expression 'without love or hate' in the above quote refers to Chapters 7 and 19 of *The Prince*, where it becomes clear that the prince must avoid both the hate and love of his subjects, because he can not control by means of his own actions these seemingly opposite feelings and the passions they entail. Machiavelli says of love:

> So on this question of being loved or feared, I conclude that since some men love *as they please* but fear when the prince pleases, a wise prince should rely on what *he controls*, not on what he cannot control. He must only endeavour, as I said, to escape being hated.[217]

The subjects' *hatred* of the prince can become incensed if he does not *abstain* from the wives and property of his subjects.[218] The prince has to govern his passions. Not being able to keep away from the wives and property of his subjects is a symptom of 'human' passions, such as the passion for flesh or property, governing the prince. Trying to seize the property of one's subjects is seen as particularly dangerous because 'men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony'.[219] Such supremacy of the *passions* has characterised the actions of tyrant princes and the nobility. As mentioned earlier, according to Althusser, the historical starting point of Machiavelli's reflections on the 'new prince' is the class struggle characterised by the hatred of the people towards the nobility.[220] As the examples of Lodovico Sforza and Girolamo Savonarola show, sooner or later hatred or love leads to 'the silence of despotism', a popular uprising and eventually the death of the tyrant. Althusser states:

> If he provokes hate or love, the prince appears to be submitted to the passions he can no longer control either in himself or in the people, passions without

[216] Althusser 1993a, pp. 106–7; Althusser's emphasis.
[217] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 17, p. 54; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 17, p. 73; my emphasis.
[218] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 17, p. 72.
[219] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 17, p. 53; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 17, p. 72.
[220] Althusser 1990a, p. 39.

internal limitation. Thus, Savonarola's demagogy of love has unleashed in
the people a true passion of love, which has entailed horrible struggles in
the people and finally – the so-called price not being able to control them –
his own execution. Thus, such people's *hate* for its tyrant and his continual
violence always ends by throwing the people either into the nothingness of
stunned silence (see later Montesquieu: the silence of despotism) or into the
insurrectional revolt of riots, which lead inevitably to the death of the tyrant
and to the loss of his regime.[221]

If the new prince intends to avoid ending up in the vicious circle of hate and
love, he must differ from the nobility like himself (and from the tyrants) and
in the class struggle place himself on the side of the people, becoming their
'ideological popular figure'.[222] Even though Althusser does not directly say
so, it is possible to think that, according to his interpretation, one reason for
the corruption and destruction – the power of the Polybian spiral of evil – of
existing and past principalities or republics has been that the princes, when
driving forward their own interests and without being able to control their
own passions, have not been able to become an ideological state apparatus
and thus constitute a durable state. Althusser indeed remarks, in reference
to Savonarola and Sforza, that they were unable to remain immune to the
peoples' feelings of love (Savonarola) or hate (Sforza), but rather the passions
of the people 'caught up with them'. With a lack of sufficient distance, their
fortuna depended on changes in the people's feelings of hate and love, feelings
that other pretenders to power had the opportunity to influence.[223]

Even though love and hate may seem opposites, in the relation between the
prince and the people they are in fact closely related to one another.[224] The
reason for this is that the prince cannot govern his relation to the people if
it is characterised primarily by hate or love. Thus the power of the prince is
dependent upon the changing – and therefore aleatory – feelings of the people.
This can be compared to Kant's view regarding the *autonomy* of the will, which
merely guarantees that moral solutions are not based on external effects and

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[221] Althusser 1993a, p. 94; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17; Althusser's emphasis.
[222] Althusser 1993a, p. 110.
[223] Althusser 1993a, p. 106; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17. Savonarola is a good example
of how the few of Florence turned the love of the people for this unarmed prophet into
hatred when he no longer fitted into the plans of the few.
[224] Althusser 1993a, p. 106; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.

internal emotions.[225] If the position of the prince depends on the emotions of the people or if their emotions direct his decisions, he will be unable to regulate his relationship to them autonomously.

The prince's use of power must be aimed not at love and hate but rather fear, respect and loyalty:[226]

> Hatred thus possesses a class signification. In the formula 'fear without hatred', the phrase 'without hatred' signifies that the Prince demarcates himself from the nobles and sides with the people against them.[227]

Althusser's thought here is that *both* the prince *and* the people gain from the prince's separation from the nobility: the people are protected from the nobility, while the prince is protected from the hatred of the people (which shifts and condenses towards the nobility) and the ambitions of the nobility. Unlike Seneca,[228] who appeals to the 'common good' when persuading the prince – Emperor Nero! – to befriend the populace, for Machiavelli it suffices that the prince is allied 'for his own good' to the people. As is evident in Chapter 9 of *The Prince*, the power of the prince who relies on the people is on a firmer basis than the one who is grateful to the nobility for putting him where he is.

> A man who becomes prince with the help of the nobles finds it more difficult to maintain his position than one who does so with the help of the people. As prince, he finds himself surrounded by many who believe they are his equals, and because of that he cannot command or manage them the way he wants. A man who becomes prince by favour of the people finds himself standing alone, and he has near him either no one or very few not prepared to take orders. In addition, it is impossible to satisfy the nobles honourably, without doing violence to the interests of others; but this can be done as far as the people are concerned. The people are more honest in their intentions than the nobles are, because the latter want to oppress the people, whereas they want only not to be oppressed.[229]

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[225] Kant 1988, e.g. pp. 44–5.
[226] The French noun 'crainte' is here very descriptive because it means fear, respect and the desire not to do something. One may think that when the many fear and respect their prince they will not undertake any actions against him.
[227] Althusser 1995a, p. 158; Althusser 1999, pp. 100–1.
[228] Seneca 1964, pp. 36 and 39.
[229] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 9, p. 32; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, pp. 41–2.

The fear and respect that the people feel towards the prince forms the bond in the union between them. If, on the other hand, the prince forms a union with the nobles, this cannot be based on fear and respect because the nobles consider themselves the prince's equals. For them, the prince is only 'one of us'. In order to satisfy the nobles, the prince inevitably has to commit an injustice towards others (the people), so that, in their eyes, too, he comes across as the representative of the nobles. As already mentioned, this leads to the prince's downfall.

The question that Althusser proposes to Machiavelli can now be formulated as follows: How can the prince achieve a situation where he is feared yet not hated and respected yet not loved by the people? The answer is short: by keeping his *distance* from the people.[230] This will succeed if the prince is sufficiently fox-like to keep his 'real' intentions and 'human' passions hidden. This, in turn, requires that the prince is able to make a difference between his 'real' self and his public image. Thus, these two differences presuppose one another: if the prince is unable to keep his real passions hidden, to control them, he will also be unable to retain a distance based on the fear and respect of his subjects.[231]

Althusser refers to the notion of keeping a distance when talking about 'the prince's distance as a fox compared to how he *appears*, how he *seems* to be personified, *without passions* and real feelings'.[232] According to Althusser, this also means that the prince must not take a passionate attitude or passionately interfere in the class struggle between the nobles and the people.[233] It was mentioned earlier how keeping a distance does not mean that the prince would take an impartial stance towards this struggle.[234] He must place himself on the side of the people, without, however, identifying with them. Though Althusser does not say so, undoubtedly the nobles are equal with the prince also because they do not believe what they see in his ideological popular theatrical performances. They see behind the set pieces and understand that the theatre of the prince in all its effectiveness is 'only theatre'. They are not enthralled by the theatre of the prince but understand what the power of

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[230] Althusser 1993a, p. 94 and p. 106; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Althusser 1993a, p. 107; Althusser's emphasis.
[233] Althusser 1993a, p. 94.
[234] Cf. Althusser 1995a, p. 158; Althusser 1999, pp. 100–1.

enchantment is based on. Expressed with Machiavelli's own words, this is due to the fact that the nobles (*pochi*, few) assess matters 'with their hands' and not just 'with their eyes', like the people (*molti*, many):

> Men in general judge by their eyes rather than by their hands; because everyone is in a position to watch, few are in a position to come in close touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what. And those few dare not gainsay the many who are backed by the majesty of the state.[235]

This can be summarised as follows:

  i) The prince must see to it that the nobles cannot 'get their hands on him'. This can be achieved if he relies on the people. In other words, the prince can keep the nobles at arm's length with 'his masses'.
 ii) The nobles do not believe what they see, because being like the prince, they understand the real 'fox-like' nature of his performance. The people do not see the fox tail under the prince's arm, and therefore he can govern them – unlike the nobles – with his theatrical performance.

The people must believe what the prince shows them, but, unlike the 'Aristotelian theatre' criticised by Bertolt Brecht, where one tries to get the audience to identify with the actor, the people must not identify with the representation of the prince.[236] Identifying with the prince would bring about his destruction because the people would then begin, like the nobles, to consider him one of them, an ordinary mortal governed by similar passions (such as lusts for the flesh and property) as they themselves are. Althusser refers to this threat when he talks about the people's passion 'infecting' the prince: 'If the prince does not control his passions, he cannot control the passions of the people – worse, he unleashes them and winds up being their first victim, and his state perishes with him'.[237]

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[235] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 57; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 76.
[236] Cf. Brecht 1991, e.g. pp. 550–7. Althusser greatly respected Bertolt Brecht, even though he does not refer to him in the context of Machiavelli. According to Althusser, Brecht's critique of the theatre is comparable to Marx's critique of philosophy as well as his views about a new kind of philosophical practice (Althusser 1995a, p. 546). Althusser explicates the connection in this context in his essay 'Sur Brecht et Marx' written in 1969 and published posthumously (Althusser 1995a, pp. 541–58).
[237] Althusser 1993a, p. 106; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.

According to Machiavelli, the prince must appear as a supreme figurehead, whom the people believe in, respect and fear but with whom they do not identify. The prince must 'confuse men's brains',[238] and, as in the example of the Emperor Severus, impress both his soldiers and the people with his *virtù* so that the latter are 'left astonished and stupefied' and the former 'respectful and content'.[239]

The prince is a kind of omnipotent *deity*, whom ordinary mortals believe in, yet fear and are unable to identify with.[240] One must note, however, that here one could not talk about the people identifying with the god-like prince, because identification is something that occurs between *humans*. What is more important, according to Machiavelli, is identifying with the *fortuna* of the prince. The people must believe that their destiny is tied to a higher force, that they need their prince. It is not a matter of an equal relationship but dependency:

> … a wise prince must devise ways by which his citizens are always and in all circumstances dependent on him and on his authority; and then they will always be faithful to him.[241]

The prince can also lose his honour if he is considered capricious, frivolous, effeminate, or timid and irresolute.[242] Also the lowly birth of a prince can lead to his downfall,[243] or if he is 'brutal and beastly', as in the case of the Emperor Commodius, who 'forgot his dignity, often descended into the amphitheatres to fight with the gladiators, and did other ignoble things hardly worthy of the imperial majesty …'.[244] Commodius did not imitate a beast, but rather he *was* a beast, even in a very public space, on the arena of an amphitheatre.

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[238] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, p. 55; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 74; translation modified.

[239] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 19, p. 62; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19, p. 84.

[240] Cf., e.g., Bloch 1973, which sheds light on the beliefs of people during the Middle Ages and the early centuries of modern times regarding the supernatural and divine abilities of the ruler, especially from the viewpoint of the 'healing touch'.

[241] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 9, p. 34; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, p. 45.

[242] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19, p. 77 and pp. 81–2.

[243] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19, p. 86.

[244] Ibid.

Displacements and condensations

If Christians' fear of God has been produced and reproduced through the church, clergy and ecclesiastical ceremonies, then the fear and respect of the 'prince-god' is produced by his court, the splendour of his life, his entourage, as well as the state ceremonies – which Althusser calls the 'first ideological state apparatus'.[245] It is an 'apparatus' or 'systematic, organic structure',[246] because the prince does not in the eyes of the people present himself as an 'individual persona' but rather as 'super individual' institutions and practices that produce fear and respect.

According to Althusser, Machiavelli's view of the prince as a fox is at its basis congruent with the central psychoanalytical idea that the analyst takes a distance from his or her *counter-transference* [*contre-transfert*] in order to control it.[247] Althusser characterises – though only preliminarily – the relationship between the prince and the people as a game of *transference* [*transfert*] and *counter-transference*, as a mechanism, game or play (the latter two corresponding to the French *jeu*), where the prince represents the 'analyst' and the people the 'analysand':

> This astonishing conception, once it has been made explicit, coincides with
> the most profound analytic experience, that of distancing oneself from one's
> own passions, or to be more exact from one's own counter-transference.[248]

By means of his fox instinct, the prince can control his counter-transference with the people. The evidence for the success of such control is that the

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[245] Althusser 1993a, p. 106.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Althusser 1992a, p. 234; Althusser 1993a pp. 94–6 and 107–8; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17. In the early years of psychoanalysis, at the beginning of the twentieth century, transference was seen as something unfortunate, disturbing the therapy by undermining the patient's 'objective' view of herself and her relationships (such as her relationship to the therapist). On the other hand, Freud proposed already in 1912 that transferences are an essential part of the therapeutic process and not only disturbances of it. According to him, the analyst must indeed focus on interpreting the transferences of the patient, where she directs feelings originally concerning her father, mother, brother, sister or some other close person, towards the therapist. By analysing transferences, it is possible to access the conflictual human relationships and the problems arising from these that affected the patient's childhood. This requires that the analyst also control her own counter-transference and not be spontaneously pulled into the patient's transferences (Rycroft 1972, pp. 25 and 168–9).
[248] Althusser 1992a, p. 234; Althusser 1993c, p. 242.

transferences that the people aim towards the prince express fear and respect rather than love and hate. This does not mean, however, that the people would not at all feel hate (or love), but rather that the hate (or love) must be aimed at something other than the prince. According to Althusser, relationships of transference-countertransference are indeed – as the name indicates – about the 'transformation and displacement [*transformer-déplacer*]' of feelings.[249] If the prince can control the transference of the people with his counter-transference he can channel and shape the people's feelings of hate in the direction he desires.[250]

Althusser indeed emphasises that the condition for the popularity of the prince is that he does not belittle the feelings of the people – 'the religious and moral ideology of the masses' – but takes them into consideration in his political practice.

> He [the prince] must … take charge of it [religious and moral ideology],
> accept responsibility for the ideological effects of his own political practice,

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[249] Althusser 1993a, pp. 110–11. Althusser also discusses Spinoza's notion of the control of the passions as a process in which negative 'sad' passions are replaced by positive passions of 'joy' (Althusser 1993a, p. 96). Indeed, for Althusser, Spinoza is, along with Machiavelli, one of those important philosophers from whom it is possible to find several things that Freud would much later make well known, such as the problematics of transferences (cf., e.g., Althusser 1992a, p. 234; Althusser 1993c, p. 242).

[250] Althusser's views on transferences have interesting connections with his theory of ideology, according to which, ideology has no history, but man's relationship to reality is always imaginary. With regard to the problematics of transferences, this would seem to mean that ideological apparatuses and their practices produce transferences and counter-transferences. Thus ideological apparatuses can be characterised as apparatuses of transference and counter-transference. In Althusser's posthumously published essay 'Sur le transfert et le contre-transfert' he states that 'All individuals act on the basis of transference … this law is universal' (Althusser 1993b, p. 177). From this one may deduce that the relationships between subjects are always based on transferences because all relationships are ideological relationships. Certain psychoanalysts have proposed, however, in contradistinction to Althusser's viewpoint, that transference is a phenomenon which the analysand can rid herself of through therapy (cf. previous footnote). Thus the transference relationships projecting the human relationships of the past onto present relationships would be replaced by real relationships (Välimäki 1996, pp. 121–54). Althusser, in turn, strongly denies that the transferences would be limited to therapeutic relationships, because 'there is no reason to assume that the alteration-transference processes would not come about in everyday life, too; in other words, outside all treatments. These are absolutely a part of everyday experiences and no self-indulgent claims of psychoanalysis can deny this obvious fact' (Althusser 1993a, p. 111). This claim, however, leaves open the question of whether there can also be such everyday relationships and practices that are not based on transferences and would thus not be ideological relationships in the meaning Althusser intends.

anticipate them, and inscribe them in it. And since the prince is literally the
public fate 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 constitu-
tion, in the association of subjects and their education.[251]

Princes are, however, prisoners of their noble position, unable even here to
retain a distance from themselves, that is, to see *themselves* as they appear
through 'vulgar' eyes.[252] As mentioned earlier, such self-analysis is a necessary
condition for the prince to be able to control the game of transference and
counter-transference of feelings, and, in this way, shape his image so that it
is both frightening and awe-inspiring. Althusser writes about this with regard
to the analyst as follows:

> . . . the psychoanalyst must keep a vigilant eye, when a treatment is ending,
> on his counter-transference, which can sometimes prevent an analysis from
> coming to a successful end. The psychoanalyst must therefore analyse his
> own counter-transfer. But how? The usual answer is: by means of self-
> analysis.[253]

Self-analysis is an inseparable part of the training and therapy practice of an
analyst. But who could offer the prince such training? The answer is contained
in the dedication at the beginning of *The Prince* (as discussed in Chapter 4.3.):

> . . . just as men who are sketching the landscape put themselves down in the
> plain to study the nature of the mountains and the highlands, and to study
> the nature of the mountains and highlands, and to study the low-lying land
> they must put themselves high on the mountains, so, to comprehend fully
> the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to comprehend fully the
> nature of princes one must be an ordinary citizen.[254]

Even though the prince indeed knows the people, he only knows them from his
own noble vantage point, whereas the starting point of popular action is that
the prince would understand the feelings that the people project onto him and

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251 Althusser 1995a, p. 154; Althusser 1999, pp. 97–8.
252 Althusser 1995a, p. 76; Althusser 1999, p. 31.
253 Althusser 1993b, p. 183.
254 Machiavelli 1949, p. 2; Machiavelli 2004, p. 3.

how this *senso comune* can be shaped in the direction he desires. Even though this is a matter of the analysis of the people's gaze, it ultimately concerns the prince's *self-analysis*, because he aims through his own deeds to influence the people's gaze. Unlike the people or the prince, Machiavelli himself is not the prisoner of a single position. Like a landscape painter, he can put himself in both a lowly position to study the prince and in a high position to study the people. Thus Machiavelli's own position *shifts*.[255] According to Althusser, this however does not mean that Machiavelli would be 'neutral'. On the contrary, when stating that one must be 'popular' in order to understand princes, Machiavelli reveals his own class position.[256] The issue here is not only about the fact that princes do not know themselves but, above all, that princes can be understood only from the 'popular' viewpoint. As became evident earlier, the comparison to the landscape painter is, of course, a rhetorical operation, which helps Machiavelli to justify in his own ideological conjuncture why it is necessary to present the action of the prince from the viewpoint of the people.[257]

4.5.5. The dialectic of the interests of the prince and the people

Because Machiavelli formulates the political practice of the prince from the viewpoint of the people, the prince's ideological actions must also be assessed from the same viewpoint, namely, in light of the unification of Italy. The questions arise, however, of why nothing *guarantees* that the prince *actually* acts in the interests of the people, or why there is no guarantee that the prince will not swing towards tyranny? On these issues, Althusser himself speaks about the subjective conditions for the *virtù* of the prince, and that no class tie forces him into an action which is in the interests of the people – as Althusser puts it: 'he [the prince] is not himself the *people*'.[258] In terms of the above lack of guarantees, at least the following viewpoints should be mentioned.

Firstly, it is obvious that the people are not capable of controlling the actions of the prince. One cannot trust the judgement of the people because they live under the influence of the existing ideologies – those of the prince or

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[255] Cf. Althusser 1995a, p. 63; Althusser 1999, p. 21.
[256] Althusser 1995a, p. 67; Althusser 1999, p. 25.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Althusser 1995a, p. 70; Althusser 1999, p. 26; Althusser's emphasis.

the nobles. Machiavelli indeed proposes that the mob [*la plebe*] 'deceived by an illusive good, desire their own ruin'.[259] Though Machiavelli claims in the final chapter of *The Prince* that the people suffer from the oppressions of the barbarians, and are ready for a change, this wish for change is not manifested, as Gramsci puts it, in a *collective will*. It is not a matter of merely the 'simple consciousness' of the inferiority of the situation,[260] or a 'cry of passionate urgency' as Gramsci also states.[261] It is because of this basic level of awareness of change – the people are, as Althusser puts it, 'those who do not know' – that the people *themselves* cannot convert their bare and passionate feelings into a politically effective consciousness and collective will. In other words, the people themselves do not know what must be done and what kind of politics is in their real interest. When Althusser and Gramsci criticise the 'democratic' interpretation proposed in *The Discourses* – according to which the book's 'negative enculturation' only strengthens the negative moralistic approach of the people towards political practice – they also refer to the fact that the people, under the influence of the moralistic-religious ideology, do not always necessarily understand that the political actions of the new prince occur in their best interests.

On the other hand, Althusser argues that the prince must respect the existing ideological beliefs of the people.[262] He must not, with a lion's roar, cause disquiet amongst the people, but rather, with a fox-like cunning, he must persuade them to accept his actions. Respect for the people's prevailing ideology is not a value in itself, but the ideological strategy of the prince-fox, where he uses existing ideologies and ideological practices to his own advantage. Because these ideological apparatuses and their practices also express the power and interests of the existing nobles, who act against the interests of the people, the playing field becomes the scene of an ideological struggle between the prince and the nobles for control of the *one and the same* ideological practices for the one and the same effective truth. The prince and the nobles are engaged in an ideological struggle for the hegemony of controlling the everyday beliefs (*senso comune*, in Gramsci's sense) of the people.

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[259] Machiavelli 1949, I.52, p. 206; Machiavelli 1950, I.52, p. 247.
[260] Althusser 1995a, p. 71; Althusser 1999, p. 27.
[261] Gramsci 1975, p. 1556; Gramsci 1971, p. 127.
[262] Althusser 1995a, p. 154; Althusser 1999, p. 97.

Because the people in Machiavelli's case cannot control the actions of the prince, or even know their own best interests, Machiavelli's views must not be compared directly to the ideas of later centuries regarding the sovereignty of the people. Even if the *praxis* of the prince were formulated from the viewpoint of the people, they are not political actors that could, through their own institutions, control his actions (or the government), for example, by proposing parliamentary interpellations. If, in the case of the *praxis* of the prince, it is at all possible to speak about 'control' by the people, this could be characterised as control on an emotional level, which is evident – from the prince's point of view – in the negative or positive transferences in relation to him. But, even in this case, the prince is the one who *interprets* the transferences that express hate, love, respect or fear, whereas the people only 'experience' them through their passions.

Machiavelli's new prince can indeed be characterised as an early enlightened ruler who attempts to interpret exclusively the 'common good of the people'. The people do not have the institutionalised means by which they could contest the interpretation of the prince, but any 'contestation' is manifested such that the ideological apparatus of the prince loses its authority in the eyes of the people, or other ideological-political powers manage to persuade the people to join them against the prince – and thus perhaps against themselves and their own real interests.

As the next chapter will show, the people are both a threat and an opportunity for the new prince. By relying on the people, the prince can control the nobles. On the other hand, the people can turn against the prince. Why this would happen is not a simple matter. The people would not necessarily abandon the prince because he has ceased to work in their interests. The nobles could also have managed to turn the people against the prince, even though his *praxis* would indeed have been in the 'real' interest of the people. On the other hand, nothing naturally guarantees that the prince would act in the common good of the people.[263] On the contrary, the princes Machiavelli had in mind were those in his own lifetime (e.g. the Medicis and the Sforzas) who had worked against the interests of the people. One must keep in mind, however, Althusser's remark that tyranny in the end has always led to the destruction

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[263] Cf. Althusser 1995a, p. 115; Althusser 1999, p. 65.

of tyranny.[264] In other words, due to its instability, tyranny has proved to be a bad form of government also for the tyrant himself.

The reason behind Althusser's argument that nothing guarantees that the outcome of the actions of the prince will not be tyranny, instead of something for the common good,[265] probably has to do with the influence of different kinds of aleatory factors. If the prince does not actually work for the best interests of the people, such a standpoint cannot be deduced directly from the reactions of the people, because, even in this case – as in the relationship between the people and the nobles – it is possible that the people respect and love the prince – even if he were to act against their real interests – if he can *convince* them that his actions are in the common good.[266]

In order to better understand these problems, one must keep in mind, how-ever, that, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli does not assume that the prince should fully understand or be aware of what kind of project he is persuaded to par-ticipate in. The prince does not need to know that with the second, 'collective' moment[267] he should make himself unnecessary! His 'enlightenment' does not need to be complete or transparent to himself; it is enough when he realises that *the friendship of the people is to his own advantage in the struggle against the other powerful nobles*.

Thus, Machiavelli does not moralistically assume or demand that the new prince should be a great benefactor who, after having realised the sufferings

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[264] Althusser 1993a p. 94; Althusser 1997, pp. 16–17.

[265] Althusser 1995a, p. 115; Althusser 1999, pp. 64–5. The risks of tyranny – the fact that the new prince indeed plots against the people – can be compared to Rousseau's ideas of the *social contract* and *general will*. According to him, nothing absolutely prevents the annulment of the social contract with the dispersion of the general will into particular wills and the contradiction of wills that follows from this.

[266] As Stuart Hall has shown, in his analyses that have been very much influenced by Gramsci's thinking, Thatcherite 'authoritarian populism' appealed to the common sense of the 'ordinary' British people much more efficiently than the 'matter-of-factness' of the Labour Party (Hall 1988, pp. 35–57). Thatcher had come to power in 1979, and even though the 1980s and early 1990s showed that the Thatcherite project was in a drastic way directed against the English 'molti', it was undeniably more successful than the British Left in persuading people to support it. Hall's analysis refers to the fact that the central watershed does not necessarily lie between 'image politics' and 'factual politics'. Instead, one must ask what kind of political projects have 'image politics' as a subfactor, and what do people aim for with it. As Gramsci emphasises, also 'intellectual and moral reform' requires that political and intellectual leaders are able to act in a way that appeals to people's common sense but at the same time criticises it in terms of solidarity.

[267] Cf. Chapter 4.5.; Althusser 1995a, pp. 115–16; Althusser 1999, p. 65.

of the masses, begins, *through the kindness of his heart*, to further their cause. Instead of appeals to goodness, Machiavelli argues that the prince should aim to become the 'people's prince', with all those personal benefits that friendship of the people brings with it. When the prince relies on the people and the people are his support, he does not need to worry about nobles like himself.[268]

The convergence of the interests of the prince and the people cannot guarantee to solve the above mentioned problem, namely, that the prince can acquire the respect and friendship of the people by 'deceitful' means, by persuading them to act against their own real interests. Reality is, in this sense, ultimately an aleatory and unstable playing field. But whether or not the friendship of the people towards the prince is in their own 'real' best interest, Machiavelli's view is that the prince should and indeed must rely on the people and not his equals if he wishes to succeed in his aleatory conjuncture. At the same time, the prince may also unwittingly act in the best interests of the people. There are no guarantees that this will happen, nor is Machiavelli able to present any on paper. He merely offers an assurance, by means of 'logical' arguments, that the guarantee of *fortuna* for *both* the prince *and* the people is at least better than if the prince were to align himself with the nobles.

In other words, in forming the people into 'a people', as his organised subjects in his durable state, the prince obtains an ally far more trustworthy than the nobility. The people become 'a people' under the protection of the prince, and their conditions for action (peace and safety) are better in the principality than in a state governed by the nobles, who forward only their own interests.

In the next chapter (Chapter 5), I will discuss the idea of whether the people and a durable state are the prince's best 'weapon' against the nobles. This idea also refers to the fact that an extensive and centralised state is not only the culmination point of the interests of the people but also a means by which the prince can control powerful nobles, and at the same time – also 'unwittingly' – produce a historical and social situation that improves the people's opportunities for action. In other words, one should not interpret Machiavelli's analysis of the praxis of the prince through moral criteria, but rather interpret *The Prince* as a work where the viewpoint of the advantage of

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[268] Cf. Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 18, pp. 56–7; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 76.

the people is 'marketed' for the new prince by appealing to his 'common sense' and hunger for power.

But, before moving on to these questions, it is necessary to discuss the *law*, the third instrument of the state, as well as to summarise the central viewpoints of Althusser's aleatory interpretation of Machiavelli.

4.5.6. The state and the law

Particularly in the so-called republican interpretations of Machiavelli, starting with Rousseau, it has been emphasised that Machiavelli's ideal, despite the thesis of *The Prince*, was not an enlightened 'principality', but rather a form of government where the law would have a higher standing than individual persons in positions of power; in other words, the law would also control the latter.[269] This interpretation is not completely refuted by Althusser or Gramsci: however, both emphasise the 'two moments' of the state, the second of which, the 'collective moment', could also be called the 'republican moment'.[270] The advantage of Althusser's and Gramsci's two-stage interpretations, compared to the republicanist interpretations, is that the *historical* (and dialectical) nature of both Machiavelli's views on the state and, above all, his 'method', as well as the *dynamics* contained in his view of the concept of the state, are highlighted.[271]

Even though Althusser and Gramsci do not dispute that Machiavelli's thinking contains obvious republican tendencies, on the other hand, they emphasise the historically *utopian* nature of the republican moment. The historical situation on the Apennine peninsula was such that a move towards the collective moment of the republic, and the collective will it required, was not *possible*. Before this could happen, it was *necessary* to go through the 'moment of solitude' of the new prince – but where no 'law' exists to guarantee that the result would not have been a shift towards tyranny.

In other words, the 'organisation' or thorough 'reformation' of a republic based on the law necessarily requires as a form of transition an 'enlightened prince' or 'legislator' who, by means of power, persuasion and cunning, leads

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[269] For a general review of Machiavelli and republicanism, cf. Gisella, Skinner and Viroli 1990. For a critique of the republicanist interpretation, cf. Mansfield 1996.

[270] Althusser 1995a, pp. 115–16; Althusser 1999, p. 65.

[271] Neal Wood also emphasises Machiavelli's dynamic and conflict-focused view of politics and the state. See, for example, Wood 1968, p. 85.

the people towards the republican collective moment. Such an interpretation can also be applied to the following passage from *The Discourses* – Machiavelli's most 'republican' work:

> [W]e must assume, as a general rule, that it never or rarely happens that a republic or monarchy is well constituted, or its old institutions entirely reformed, unless it is done by only one individual; it is even necessary that he whose mind has conceived such a constitution should be alone in carrying it into effect. A sagacious legislator of a republic, therefore, whose object is to promote the public good, and not his private interests, and who prefers his country to his own successors, should concentrate all authority in himself …[272]

In the above quote, there are also indications that, in the case of Machiavelli, what is most essential is not necessarily the differentiation between monarchist [*regno*] and republican [*republica*] forms of government. However, it is essential to note the difference between the individual moment of founding a republic *or* monarchy and the collective moment – based on the law – as well as whether the individual founder of the republic or monarchy acts for the benefit of himself and his family or for the common good. (At this point, Machiavelli is not necessarily too far from the differentiation between the forms of state proposed by Aristotle in *Politics*, based on the criterion of whether they work for the individual or common good.)

What this means is that, particularly in the 'moment of solitude', the new prince is lonely also in the sense that *only* he can interpret the real interests of the people, whereas with the 'rootedness [*enracinement*]' of the 'collective moment' the people gradually learn to understand what their own interests are. They *become 'a people* [*devenir-peuple*]' as a political actor in a new kind of state.[273]

According to Althusser, the interests of 'a people' are imprinted in the constitution of the state. It is in the constitution that the interests of 'a people'

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[272] Machiavelli 1949, I.9., p. 119; Machiavelli 1950, I.9, p. 138; cf. Machiavelli 1949, I.58, p. 220; Machiavelli 1950, I.58, p. 265. Also the title of Chapter 55 of Book One of *The Discourses* is in this sense very illustrative: 'Public affairs are easily managed in a city where the body of the people is not corrupt; and where equality exists, there no principality can be established; nor can a republic be established where there is no equality'.

[273] Althusser 1995a, p. 160; Althusser 1999, p. 102.

are institutionalised in relation to its 'class enemy', the powerful nobility. The law is also the absolute condition for the state's durability and its capacity to expand, because then the state is no longer dependent upon the practice of the prince. In other words, the prince has made himself superfluous:

> To the second moment corresponds the metaphor of taking root: this is the concrete, organic moment either of the penetration of the laws thus decreed into the antagonistic social classes, or of the production of laws by popular struggle against the nobles. 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*.[274]

According to Althusser, one should not think, on the basis of the second moment, that Machiavelli was a republican like the encyclopaedists, Rousseau, Foscolo or the many ideologists of the *Risorgimento*. Even though the second moment described in *The Discourses* could be defined as a republican moment, Machiavelli's *position* there is the same as in the first moment described in *The Prince*. In both works, Machiavelli discusses the same issue, the conditions for the founding of a durable state.[275] After discussing this, Althusser returns to his viewpoint that Machiavelli's political problem arises from his own conjuncture. As mentioned earlier, even though Machiavelli does present in the first twelve chapters of *The Prince* examples from antiquity, their purpose is only to support the lessons of the Italian examples of his own time.[276]

In these chapters, Machiavelli carries out an analysis of his own conjuncture by utilising the analysis of past cases. His central objective is to assess, in the light of existing and past examples, what kind of a new principality would not only be possible but also a good one. According to Althusser's interpretation, the only suitable alternative in founding a principality is a completely new one acquired by means of the new prince's own weapons of *virtù* or *fortuna*. Old principalities simply do not work: they are an expression of feudal power structures and ways of thinking, oriented towards the past, as Althusser indeed states.[277] In this context, Machiavelli's historical utopianism

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[274] Althusser 1995a, pp. 115–16; Althusser 1999, p. 65; Althusser's emphasis.
[275] Althusser 1995a, p. 117; Althusser 1999, p. 66.
[276] Althusser 1995a, pp. 120–1; Althusser 1999, p. 69.
[277] Althusser 1995a, p. 130; Althusser 1999, p. 77. In connection with this, Althusser refers to Renaudet's book *Machiavel* (Renaudet 1956) (see also Althusser 1995a, pp. 122

and thinking reaching for the 'limits of the possible' – with the metaphor of skilful archers, who, when their target seems too distant, 'aim a good deal higher than their objective'[278] – come into the picture, because such a new principality and new prince who acts by relying on his own weapons and *fortuna* do not exist:

> … to aim above all existing principalities, beyond their *limits*. … The Prince does not pre-exist the New Principality; the New Principality does not precede the New Prince. They must begin together, and this beginning is what Machiavelli calls an 'adventure': 'this adventure of passing from private citizen to ruler'.[279]

According to Althusser, one could think that Machiavelli's viewpoint is 'completely utopian', particularly when he rejects all the existing alternatives. But it is important to note that Machiavelli's utopianism is defined from the starting point of the existing political conditions, with regard to which no kind of compromise is possible. Furthermore, when Machiavelli speaks about the new prince without actually naming him – instead presenting an abstract theory about the encounter of *virtù* and *fortuna* in the prince-subject – the anonymity of the prince is not the result of a theoretical process of abstraction (from the specific to the general) but

> … the *abstract* form of the theory is the index and effect of a *concrete* political stance.[280]

Machiavelli left the new prince and principality unidentified or simply loosely defined not because these would have stood for anonymous 'generalisations' of existing princes and principalities, but rather because the existing princes and principalities could not offer the components for the definition and identification of the new prince and new principality:

> He [Machiavelli] rejects them all on account of their historical impotence.[281]

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and 166; Althusser 1999, p. 109).
  [278] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 6, p. 17; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 6, p. 22.
  [279] Althusser 1995a, pp. 125–6; Althusser 1999, p. 73; Althusser's emphasis; translation of Machiavelli (Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 4, pp. 22–3) altered by Althusser.
  [280] Althusser 1995a, p. 129; Althusser 1999, p. 76; Althusser's emphasis.
  [281] Althusser 1995a, p. 130; Althusser 1999, p. 77.

According to Althusser, Machiavelli's silence has indeed a *positive* political meaning. It shows that the future of Italy cannot be built on existing powers but rather one must reach beyond these borders ('to aim above all existing principalities, beyond their *limits*').[282] Thus Machiavelli's utopianism is based on the existing 'effective truth', which he at the same time takes as the object of his subversive critique.

Pope Alexander VI's son, Count Valentino Cesare Borgia,[283] was, for Machiavelli, the only example or model for the historic 'new prince'. According to Machiavelli, Borgia could have united Italy, if an 'extraordinary and inordinate malice of fortune [*una estraordinaria ed estrema malignità di fortuna*]' had not befallen him.[284]

The advantage of emphasising the two moments in the foundation of the state is also that the *processual* and *aleatory* nature of founding and maintaining a state are emphasised. Althusser's interpretation emphasises that the state is not a static organisation, but a complex *process*, for the renewal of even the most stable state requires its simultaneous production. In other words, in Machiavelli's view, the most central factor is not the state as a *fait accompli* but the aleatory nature of the founding and renewing of the state.[285] In this

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[282] Althusser 1995a, p. 125; Althusser 1999, p. 73; Althusser's emphasis.

[283] For a thorough presentation of the different stages of the Borgia family, cf. Mallet 1987.

[284] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 22; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 28.

[285] The difference between republicanist and aleatory interpretations of Machiavelli can also be defined as follows: in the former interpretation the emphasis is on issues sustaining peace and harmony, whereas the latter interpretation discusses the elements of chance that lie behind peace and harmony as well as the struggles and conflicts characterised by this, which Althusser refers to with the expression 'l'accumulation primitive politique' (Althusser 1990a, p. 35; Althusser 1988, p. 475). Emphasising peace, expansion and the 'moment of passivity' at the cost of the struggles and conflicts that preceded them was a central methodological solution for which Gramsci criticised Croce's writings *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (1928) and *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono* (1932): 'With respect to these two works [*Storia d'Europa* and *Storia d'Italia*], the questions at once arise: is it possible to write (conceive of) a history of Europe in the nineteenth century without an organic treatment of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars? And is it possible to write a history of Italy in modern times without a treatment of the struggles of the Risorgimento? In other words: is it by accident, or is it for a tendentious motive, that Croce begins his narratives from 1815 and 1871? That is, that he excludes the moment of struggle; the moment in which the conflicting forces are formed, are assembled and take up their positions; the moment in which one ethical-political system dissolves and another is formed by fire and by steel; the moment in which one system of social relations disintegrates and falls and another arises and asserts itself? And instead to assume take up placidly as history the moment of cultural

interpretation, Machiavelli shows himself mainly as the theoretician of the aleatory game between change and durability [*durée*]. In this context, the threat to the state comes from changes to existing laws, which become invalid and lead to chaos.[286]

With the collective moment of the law and the republic, the state is no longer merely dependent on the *virtù* of the prince and the 'fortunate' aleatory encounters, but can itself 'endure'. However, not even this can guarantee that some surprising event occurring at the 'wrong moment' would still not destroy the state – and, at the same time, also open up new possibilities for action for those who do not approve of the existing state. The state is not a self-evident fact, in that 'nothing guarantees that *the reality of the accomplished fact is the guarantee of its durability*'.[287] History is 'the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact',[288] where one never knows where or how the revocation will occur. Althusser encapsulates this in the statement that '... one day new hands will have to be dealt out, and the dice thrown again on to the empty table [*un jour viendra où les jeux seront à redistribuer, et les dés de nouveau à jeter sur la table vide*]'.[289]

The central instrument of the taking hold and rooting of the state is the military. Apart from the apparatus of violence, the military is also the political-ideological 'crucible', the central task of which is to unite the unorganised multitude into 'a people', to uphold the process of their 'becoming people':

> In these conditions we can appreciate why the army is the quintessential
> instrument of state power – not only of the exercise of state power, but of
> the state's very existence; and why it is assigned the preponderant role –

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or ethical-political expansion?' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1227; after the quote there follows Gramsci's own preliminary outline for a history of Europe: Gramsci 1975, pp. 1228–9).

[286] Althusser 1994c, p. 567; Althusser 2006a, p. 194. Also of interest here is the use of the word 'stato' in reference to the *maintenance of a position*, as evident in Machiavelli's expression 'mantenere lo stato [to maintain a position]'. Yet another similar type of expression in Machiavelli's texts is 'avere molto stato' in reference to the prince (see, e.g., Machiavelli 1949, p. 617). Maintaining a position requires the continuous reproduction of its conditions; in other words, the reproduction of the duration of the state against the ever-looming 'Polybian' process of corruption.

[287] Althusser 1994c, p. 547; Althusser 2006a, p. 174, Althusser's emphasis.

[288] Ibid.

[289] Ibid.

> not only military, but also political and ideological – 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.[290]

With regard to the 'becoming-people of the people', one must keep in mind that, in the ideological-political practice of the prince, the question is not only about governing a 'ready' people and the reproduction of this control, *but also about the production of a people*, which Althusser describes with the term 'devenir-peuple'. The prince and his new principality are a 'tool' or instrument by means of which the people as a *multitude* [*molti*] can be taken hold of as a durable 'people' – and ultimately a 'nation', in the formation of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Machiavelli does not propose any formalistic or generally applicable 'theory of the state', 'state philosophy' or a classification of the forms of government, but discusses with regard to his own case those historical opportunities and necessities which are required in order to produce a nation and take hold of a durable state.

If one wishes to pick out something 'generally applicable' from Machiavelli, the 'general theory of the state' would not be it: rather, it would be the way in which he sets out questions and political problems to be solved by the political actor-subjects of each historical situation. According to Althusser, Hegel understood this in Machiavelli's works. Machiavelli did not 'speak' to Hegel as a philosopher of the state but as a writer who laid out the political problematics of the unification of Italy. Hegel also 'identifies' with Machiavelli, not as a philosopher but as an intellectual or man of action who was occupied by the future of his own political conjuncture – in Hegel's case, that of early nineteenth-century Germany.[291]

What the interpretations of Hegel, Gramsci and Althusser have in common is an emphasis on the 'effective truth', rather than the truth about practical matters. In their interpretations, the often quoted expression from Chapter 15 of *The Prince* – 'to represent things as they are in an effective truth, rather than as they are imagined' – is applied to Machiavelli's own writings. *The 'truth' lies in things, in historical practices, not outside them* – not *post-festum* or *a priori*, as in a philosophical truth, which, for instance, some philosophical system would promise to reveal or to show to the practical actors.

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[290] Althusser 1995a, p. 160; Althusser 1999, p. 102.
[291] Althusser 1995a, p. 49: Althusser 1999, p. 9.

When Machiavelli says that he does not wish to present a fantasy image of a state this means, assessed in the light of the interpretations of Hegel, Gramsci and Althusser, that he does not even attempt to propose, for instance, what kind of form the unified Italian state should have. In fact, he has no existing models that would provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for solving this issue. Unlike the pupil of the ideological state apparatuses of nation-states, Machiavelli did not have at his disposal an existing 'nation-state' or 'representative democracy' for which he could have striven with his writings. An extensive and durable state was for him an aleatory possibility, but like the new prince, Machiavelli could not know in what kind of development and justification processes of the historical national states of future centuries his theories would be possibly positioned:

> Machiavelli casts a harsh light on the beginnings of our era: that of bourgeois societies. He casts a harsh light, too, by his very utopianism, by the simultaneously necessary and unthinkable hypothesis that the new state could begin anywhere, *on the aleatory character of the formation of nation states*. For us they are drawn on the map, as if for every fixed in a destiny that always preceded them. For him, on the contrary, they are largely aleatory, their frontiers are not fixed, there have to be conquests, but how far? To the boundaries of languages or beyond? To the limits of their forces? We have forgotten all this. When we read him, we are gripped by him as by what we have forgotten, by that strange familiarity, as Freud called it, that of something repressed.[292]

4.6. Epilogue: Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli

If Althusser's 'Epicurean' interpretations of the aleatory and the conjuncture are compared to his earlier views, it is obvious that the former are in many places connected with his views on the nature of history or the under- and overdetermination of conjunctures. In his work on the concepts of over- and underdetermination, Althusser did indeed strive to understand why all historical cases are 'exceptions' and why a 'pure' case (which could be considered a 'model' for the capitalist mode of production) cannot be found any-

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[292] Althusser 1990a, p. 36; Althusser 1988, pp. 475–6; Althusser's emphasis.

where. In the case of over- and underdetermination, it is important to note that, in each case, its own specific dynamics also have an influence. A particular case, for instance the Russian conjuncture in 1917, did not merely passively receive influences from different directions. Even though national and international factors over- and underdetermined the Russian conjuncture, this in turn influenced how the national and international factors influenced Russian conjuncture. Likewise, the events of the Russian conjuncture, such as the October Revolution, influenced rather decisively in the future development of the supranational conjuncture.

As was discussed earlier (2.2.), along with over- and underdermination, history must not be thought of as a linear development of the 'system', as a kind of 'Universal History'.[293] Instead, one should think in terms of 'many histories' or the 'lack of a centre', something which Althusser refers to when he states in the 'Soutenance d'Amiens' that the working class and the capitalist class have their own history and yet they still clash.[294]

Geoff Waite has claimed, but without any further substantiation, that, with Althusser's concern in his later writings with aleatory materialism, there was a turn in his thinking in a Nietzschean direction.[295] Even though Althusser no longer uses the vocabulary he used in the 1960s and 1970s – for instance, he no longer uses the terms over- and underdetermination – this does not necessarily mean a turn in direction where a new-found enthusiasm about the aleatory would set aside questions concerning structure or laws of development. Rather, Althusser strives to further develop his earlier views about political action and interventions, particularly by applying and developing ideas

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[293] Cf. Balibar 1996, p. 115.

[294] Althusser further developed the aleatory dimensions of this idea when analysing Marx's concept of the mode of production (see Althusser 1994c, pp. 569–76). The capitalistic mode of production and its social classes only come about with the 'fixation [*prise*]' that follows the collision of elements that have up to that point been in various 'atomistic' states. This collision and the fixation of its consequences is not a teleological or causally determined chain of events. It is rather a matter of a process in which a complex group of different acts, circumstances and conditions produce the capitalist mode of production. The fixation of the capitalist mode of production, however, does not mean that the aleatory comes to an end: the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production may fail or become endangered (there are no guarantees that it will succeed) if its production in continuously new areas is not successful. Thus the capitalist mode of production is not a 'fait accompli' that radically differs from the aleatory process that gave birth to it, but rather this process continues in the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

[295] Waite 1996, p. 398; cf. also pp. 416–19.

from Machiavelli. At the same time, it is important to note that the aleatory interpretation of historical-political reality does not mean that conjunctures are about complete chaos, without any kind of order or hierarchy between issues. Instead, with the help of the concept of the aleatory, Althusser continues the critique, familiar already from Heidegger, of the concepts of 'original cause', 'centre', 'telos' and so forth, and the philosophies based on these.

Thus the targets of Althusser's critique are those philosophies that justify the forms of reality that have taken hold by presenting them as 'correct', 'natural', or 'necessary' results of the historical development. The point of contention is a group of effective ideological doctrines and forms that specifically produce and express the tendencies and structural factors that prevail in a conjuncture. Althusser outlines such *tendencies* and *structural factors* and the conditions for both subjecting to critique and changing the ideologies articulated within them. The concept of the aleatory opens up theoretical opportunities for such a critique and action for change in which the question is by no means about an abstract speculation with chance that forgets these doctrines and forms.

This issue will also be discussed in the next chapter, where I look at the questions of the organisation and control of the aleatory. These analyses are set at the level of factual events, structures and other factors of the conjunctures, rather than at the philosophico-cosmological level concerned with the concepts of 'pure coincidence', original causes or other concepts of the philosophies of history.

In the next chapter, I will analyse more concretely Machiavelli's discussion of the alliance between the prince and the people [*molti*] from the point of the view of the aleatory and its 'taming' effect: the establishment of a 'stable people' or the conversion of the people as a *multitude* [*multitudo*, *molti*] into 'a people' is one solution to the highly aleatory historical situation created in an oligarchy. The emphasis in the chapter is on Machiavelli's texts, my interpretation partly inspired by the writings of Althusser (as well as Gramsci) as discussed in the previous chapters, but also partly developing these ideas further.

Chapter Five

The Subversive Machiavelli

5.1. The art of war and the art of politics

In the previous chapters, I argued that, in order for a man of action such as a prince to act, it is not enough that he has knowledge of the *general* features of his own case, because he has to operate with the *specific* features and surprising events of his own case. This requires influencing the degree of the 'subjective' and 'humanly objective' aleatoriness of the case. The 'subjective' and 'objective' views of the aleatory nature of the case do not, however, refer to completely different issues but are intrinsically connected with each other, particularly in the case of the man of action. This connection is expressed by the fact that in order to influence the degree of the 'humanly objective' aleatoriness, the man of action must decrease the degree of 'subjective' aleatoriness. In other words, the precondition for the success of the projects and strategies of the man of action is that he can make an analysis of a situation, estimate and predict the consequences of his own acts, and influence the conditions of his conjuncture – which includes other *men* of action – so that the conjuncture 'produces' favourable consequences for him and is shaped in accordance with his own desires.

The man of action is not, however, the central point of his own conjuncture; that is, he is not the complete master of himself and his own situation. The conjuncture indeed manifests itself as a kind of dynamic game or battlefield where the different actors or groups of actors (such as princes, factions, armies and states) strive as best they can to utilise the aleatory, averting its negative effects, such as unpleasant 'surprises', and channelling them so that they befall the other actors. Each actor also devises surprises and 'unpleasant encounters' for others, whilst, at the same time, striving to predict surprises that others have devised for him, and so forth.

Thus the 'blow of fate' may also befall the man of action himself. He can never be certain that the consequences of his actions and plots are in accordance with his own plans. He cannot even be certain where he will find himself in the future or in what condition he will be. A good example of this is Machiavelli's new prince who, when acting for the good of the people, does not fully comprehend the nature of his own actions. However, in relying on the people for 'his own advantage', he will at the same time, partly without knowing it, also promote the common good and in this way, with the birth of the collective moment, make himself superfluous. On the other hand, the approval of the people does not guarantee that their object of approval will not be a devious tyrant who promotes his own interests in the name of the common good, and whose actions indeed remove the opportunities for action by the people – and eventually himself.[1]

Neal Wood has argued that, for Machiavelli, political *virtù* is closely connected to the skills required in warfare, that is, *virtù militare*. This is evident in the fact that most of the 'virtuoso' men of action that Machiavelli discusses are soldiers.[2] The point, however, is not that *virtù* is only connected with war

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[1] Cf. also Hanna Pitkin's work *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Pitkin 1984) in which the problematics of *virtù* and *fortuna* are analysed, particularly from the viewpoints of the feminine and masculine. Pitkin states that the sexually coloured relation of masculine *virtù* (cf. especially Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, pp. 105–6) to feminine *fortuna* is in its nature less violent than rape, but stronger than seduction (Pitkin 1984, p. 292). For a history of the figures of *virtù* and *fortuna*, cf. Münkler 1984, pp. 300–28. Münkler defines *virtù* as a goal-oriented, rational political action which takes place in an arbitrary and senseless history depicted by the mystical form of Lady Fortuna, who is represented as being blind: '*virtù*, the crystalline energy of goal-setting political subjects, and *fortuna*, the quintessence of chance and the lack of meaning of history, thus form the fundamental opposition of Machiavelli's political theory' (Münkler 1984, p. 316).

[2] Cf. Wood 1967, p. 165; Wood 1968, pp. 85–6.

and the skills of warfare. War is the archetype of the battle between *virtù* and *fortuna*. For Wood, *virtù* represents the masculine attempt to control all things, while *fortuna* represents feminine irrationality.[3] Furthermore, according to this reading, Machiavelli believes that the 'political' situations in peacetime contain features connected to warfare, and success in such situations requires similar skills and preparedness as in successful warfare:

> Indeed politics is a kind of war, and civil society is essentially a battleground for individuals and parties struggling for power. The traditional distinction between friend and foe used to describe the relation between the citizen and his city's enemy is now applied by Machiavelli to relations between fellow-citizens. The model of civic life is always military life and the model of civic leadership is always military leadership. Founding a new commonwealth, the reform of a corrupt state, conspiracy for the overthrow of government, the prevention of conspiracy, are fundamentally military situations, as appraised by Machiavelli.[4]

In the above quote, Wood refers to the *virtù* of founding states, renewing corrupt states and implementing conspiracies. On the other hand, he emphasises those parts in *The Discourses* where Machiavelli links the corruption of the state and the loss of *virtù civile* of the citizens. The development of *virtù civile* requires the right kind of upbringing, organisation and circumstances. If these conditions do not exist, 'peoples' will be destroyed and they will lose their ability to act. On the other hand, *virtù civile* is an important condition in the struggle against ending up in the vicious circle of corruption. According to Wood, *virtù civile* is not different from *virtù militare* – on the contrary:

> Conditions of war and struggle between peoples will be perpetuated as long as men are trained to be warriors, are imbued from birth with military values, and live in states that are organized for aggrandizement.[5]

Machiavelli's idea is that imbuing men with *virtù militare* and the related combat skills does not lead to the destruction and atrophy of the state, but enables it to expand and thrive. When *virtù militare* disappears, the conditions for peacefully sustaining the state also disappear. Thus *virtù militare* is not

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[3] Wood 1967, p. 170.
[4] Wood 1967, pp. 170–1.
[5] Ibid.

merely something necessary in times of war but also something that lays the foundation for *virtù civile*. As Wood states in another context, Machiavelli's viewpoint differs decisively in this regard from the classical idea that the basis for society is the state of peace and that political action is a question of the 'management of common matters' *between friends*, whereas conflict is characterised as an 'unnatural or exceptional state of affairs'. Instead, with Machiavelli, every friend is a potential enemy, and therefore the conflicts and acts of violence between 'friends' are an essential part of political practice. Peace and war are not opposites but different moments of one and the same political practice.[6]

Wood's viewpoint, however, has been criticised. For example, in a response published five years after Wood's original article, Ian Hannaford criticised his central idea, namely, that the model for civilian life stems from military life.[7] Hannaford does not deny Machiavelli's unusual degree of interest in military matters, but argues, nevertheless, that

> Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* is not a military one, that his model of civic life and leadership is not military leadership and that his *politico* is certainly not analogous to an ironmaster pouring molten metal into the form of a warrior.[8]

In support of his counter-argument, Hannaford discusses those chapters in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* that, according to him, show that equally important as *virtù militare* are those virtues aimed at 'public political purposes – state service, the establishment of legitimate "political" authority, and the maintenance of the highest and noblest conceptions of classical liberty and citizenship'.[9]

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[6] Wood 1990, pp. lvii–lix. Cf. Wood 1968, p. 85: 'While traditional thinkers like Plato and Aristotle had clearly recognized the existence of conflict within the polis, they thought of it as an unnatural condition arising from the domination of the human soul by the baser appetites. Since the nature of the soul was thought to be a harmony of parts under the rule of reason, social conflict represented a defection of the psyche from nature. Consequently, a social organization was recommended in which a harmony, if not a unison of parts, would replace all antagonisms, and in which civic education would mould healthy, harmonious human souls'. The thinking that emphasises the naturalness and ideality of the harmony of Plato and Aristotle instead offers material for ideologies where conflicts are solved 'imaginarily' or denied altogether by judging them as unnatural states in society, instead of trying to understand conflicts by studying their material conditions and solving them through interventions.

[7] Hannaford 1972, p. 185.

[8] Hannaford 1972, p. 186.

[9] Hannaford 1972, p. 187.

According to Hannaford, a good example is Cincinnatus, as described in the Third Book of *The Discourses*. After his victorious war, he returned to manage his estate. This Roman, and others like him, were not virtuous simply because they were war heroes but, above all, because they did not confuse military *virtù* with political *virtù*. They understood that leading and maintaining a state during times of peace requires different skills and characteristics from warfare. They established laws to guarantee peace in their political society, strived for the legitimate use of power instead of tyranny, and placed military responsibility under political responsibility.[10] Hannaford concludes that Wood was wrong to draw parallels between political *virtù* and military *virtù* or to equate the methods of peace-time politics with those of warfare:

> One cannot deny that Machiavelli's description of war is all that Professor Wood says it is, and Machiavelli exploits it to the full. But he does not say that war is the supreme test of man's physique, intellect and character. Rather, he implies that other situations may call for more guile than military situations, since military situations are relatively simple two-sided affairs in which contestants fight to solve problems they cannot otherwise avoid. Political situations, on the other hand, require the discourse of the agora or forum and politics is but one alternative to a variety of options open to a man of action. Politics is not war and civil society is not a *battleground*. … The relationships between fellow citizens are not friend and foe relationships, and the fundamentally military situations Professor Wood chooses to prove that they were (founding a new commonwealth, reform of a corrupt state, conspiracy) are all examples of situations where Machiavelli clearly recognizes the apolitical nature of situation and is content to leave seizure and maintenance of power to those who know how to use weapons. When Machiavelli talks about public service, responsibility, dictatorship, accusation, liberty, legislation and maintenance of the authoritative state, he is less optimistic about military virtù.[11]

Hannaford's critique is, in that regard, to the point: in Wood's interpretation, the differences between the states of war and peace are covered over by what they have in common. It is obvious that canons and muskets are used in the 'agora' only in exceptional circumstances; for example, in support of ultimata.

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Hannaford 1972, p. 189; Hannaford's emphasis.

Furthermore, people usually do not form opposing groups that differ from each other as clearly as would two armies heading into battle. Instead of battles and struggles, the skills of negotiation, compliance with the law, and the use of power based on persuasion are highlighted in Machiavelli's descriptions of non-corrupt states. Likewise, it is true that Machiavelli emphasises how the men should willingly return home after the war. If they are not a paid army but soldiers mobilised from the population, and who also have a profession or position in civilian life, re-adapting to civilian life is not difficult.[12]

Hannaford assumes, based on a description of peace-time politics, that the peaceful and law-abiding life would occur in a neutral and conflict-free situation. It thus escapes him that the 'legitimate "political" authority' is not necessarily a neutral matter, but that 'legitimacy' can also be understood as a *displaced* form of struggle and conflict. Hannaford also does not take into account what Felix Gilbert characterises as the 'most revolutionary argument' of Machiavelli's observations concerning war.

> This thesis of the close connection and interrelationship between political and military institutions is the most revolutionary argument of Machiavelli's notions.[13]

One can indeed say that Machiavelli's central objective, the army – formed from the ruler's own subjects, who are fighting for their own state – is not simply a tool of 'foreign policy' in the expansion of the state, but also a central condition for creating 'a people' and producing *virtù civile* – while a mercenary army led by a *condottiere* and fighting only for money is a hindrance to these.[14] As Althusser states, along with the prince's ideological apparatus and the law, the army is the central location for 'politics' in a durable state. The army is, in addition to being a war apparatus, also a political apparatus, the task of which

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[12] Cf., e.g., Machiavelli 1990, Chapter 1. According to Felix Gilbert, at the beginning of the modern era elements of both old feudal and new professional soldiers were combined in the armies of the super powers, such as France, Aragon and England, whereas the vanguard of the Italian economy, the Italian city-states, relied entirely on professional soldiers, in which case 'soldiering became a profession of its own, entirely separated from any other civilian activity' (Gilbert 1986, p. 14).

[13] Gilbert 1986, pp. 26–7; cf. also p. 29.

[14] On the history of the mercenary armies and their leaders, the *condottieri*, in Italy from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, cf. Mallett 1991, pp. 22–45. Mallett remarks that, with the changes in states and warfare at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the agreements between the *condottieri* and the rulers were of longer duration than they had been in previous centuries (Mallett 1991, pp. 40–4).

is to function as the basis of both good laws and 'anything else good' in a state.

> Although I have elsewhere [e.g. *The Discourses*, I.4 and II.10] maintained that
> the foundation of states is a good military organization, yet it seems to me not
> superfluous to repeat here that, without such a military organization, there
> can neither be good laws nor anything else good.[15]

On the very first lines after the dedication in *The Art of War*, Machiavelli states:

> Many are now of the opinion, my dear Lorenzo [di Filippo Strozzi], that no
> two things are more discordant and incongruous than a civil and military
> life.[16]

According to Machiavelli, such an opinion is understandable because the
person wearing a military uniform often seems to differ significantly from
everyone else. When studying the matter more closely, and particularly when
familiarising oneself with the institutions and ordinances [*ordini*] of antiquity,
one notices, however, that

> … there is a very close, intimate relation between these two conditions, and
> that they are not only compatible and consistent with each other, but neces-
> sarily connected and interrelated. For all the arts that have been introduced
> into society for the common benefit of mankind, and all the ordinances that
> have been established to make them live in fear of God and in obedience to
> human laws, would be vain and insignificant if they were not supported and
> defended by a military force; this force, when properly led and applied, will
> maintain those ordinances and keep up their authority, although they per-
> haps may not be perfected or flawless.[17]

Hannaford does not define who exactly belongs to the category of 'fellow citi-
zens', that is, those who get to decide about the matters of the 'common benefit
[*bene comune*]'. Wood's idea about the difference between Machiavelli's think-
ing and that of classical political thinking can also be interpreted as follows:
in the classics on the politics of the *polis*, such as Plato and Aristotle, politics
is defined as the doctrine of the *internal* 'management of common issues' of
the ruling social groups on the agora, whereas Machiavelli emphasises the

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[15] Machiavelli 1950, III.31; cf. Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 12.
[16] Machiavelli 1949, p. 447; Machiavelli 2004, p. 3.
[17] Machiavelli 1949, p. 447; Machiavelli 2004, p. 4.

struggles for who gets to go to the agora (e.g. the *Grande consiglio* in Florence) to decide about 'common issues' and who are ineligible to stand for election and public office. Politics is not only a matter between 'fellow citizens' but also a struggle between the few [*pochi*], the nobility, and the many [*molti*], the people, the important dimensions of which are the struggle for influence on the agora and the question of 'citizenship'.[18]

Wood perhaps too much equates political *virtù* with military *virtù*. Hannaford, on the other hand, strictly differentiates between them. In so doing, he does not pay attention to the partly allegorical similarities between them, that both peaceful political activity and warfare can be seen as a human practice in which one acts in situations characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability. Hannaford also does not take into account the fact that 'legitimacy' and the 'peaceful' political situation – such as the republic – can be seen as a conjunctural response to factors of uncertainty caused by a fundamentally aleatory reality. Even though the objective of the project of the prince is indeed to tame chance (decreasing the degree of the aleatory) by producing an extensive and uniform geographic whole – a collective moment – the result is not a conflict-free state of balance but a possible yet not necessarily inevitable transitional form of class struggle between the nobles and the people.

Here Hannaford's interpretation comes close to the 'republican' interpretation, insofar as he does not pay sufficient attention to *the dynamic* that stands out in Machiavelli's thinking; for instance, the fact that the state of war and the state of peace historically do not strictly differ from each other. Instead, it is a matter of an (aleatory) process and its control by means of open struggle and war or producing a republican constitutionality and legitimacy or ideologically creating respect towards the prince and the friendship of the people. Even though the republican collective moment can indeed be considered a less aleatory situation than the moment of the solitude of the prince – not to mention the condensed moment of conflict of the state of war – also in the republic the question is about accommodating the aleatory and the displaced form of the class struggle between the nobles and the people.

Even though Hannaford is indeed correct in saying that the methods in times of peace are in many ways different form those of war time, it does not follow from this that the art of politics and the art of war do not require force and

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18 Cf. Chapter 5.6.

courage, analyses of the situation based on uncorroborated reports, extremely rapid or timely decisions, and successful strategies and tactics. Warfare must not be understood simply as a fast tempo strike or a *Blitzkrieg* campaign but equally as long-term siege warfare, where it is essential to surround the enemy, tiring it out and weakening its will to fight, as Gramsci proposes.[19]

In Gramsci's view, politics and war are not identified with each other, yet the different stages and types of warfare offer him both historical and metaphorical tools for characterising and understanding the different forms of political struggle.[20] In Gramsci's interpretation, it is obvious that political strategies and tactics are implemented by means of different 'weapons' than those used for military purposes; yet, despite this, in both cases it is about a struggle, albeit different moments of this struggle.

In the following section, I will discuss in further detail certain passages in Machiavelli's texts in order to shed light on the aleatory practice of the man of action as well as his strategic and tactical 'weapons', particularly those of a new prince, with which he aims both to use the aleatory situation to his advantage and to control or by other means tame it. In particular, I will look at Machiavelli's project of the new prince – the man of action *par excellence* – whose objective is to tame the conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula by means of an extensive state that will prove to be 'durable'.

5.2. The destructive current of *fortuna*

At the beginning of Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli refers to the following general belief:

> I am not unaware that many have held and hold the opinion that events are controlled by fortune and by God in such a way that the prudence of men cannot modify them, indeed, that men have no influence whatsoever. Because of this, they would conclude that there is no point in sweating over

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[19] Cf. Gramsci 1975, pp. 122–3.
[20] Gramsci was also interested in the transition process where friends become enemies or former enemies become each other's allies. He describes the transition from enemy to ally with the concept 'trasformismo' (e.g. Gramsci 1975, pp. 2010–34; cf. also Chiaramonte 1987, pp. 136–8).

things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance. This opinion has been more widely held in our own times, because of the great changes and variations, beyond human imagining, which we have experienced and experience every day. Sometimes, when thinking of this, I have myself inclined to this same opinion. None the less, so as not to rule out our free will, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.[21]

Machiavelli does not fully deny the fatalistic assumption – he himself is occasionally inclined towards it – but nevertheless wants to hold on to the belief in man's free will and the premise that it is possible, at least to some extent, to influence *fortuna*. If the possibility of human influence on *fortuna* is denied, the assumption of man's free will then becomes problematic: human action would have no real influence on how events proceed, and instead would be either an expression of providence or a case of 'pure chance', a chaotic course of events which man would be unable to control or understand.[22]

In the above quote, Machiavelli lets us understand that it is not possible to prove indisputably the freedom of will, but, on the other hand, he conditionally states that the idea about a partial freedom of human will 'is probably true'. Here, his viewpoint resembles that of Hume, according to whom, in the case of the common life of humans, a fatalistic notion about reality would not be *meaningful* or *reasonable* because it has negative effects from the point of view of *practical life*. Machiavelli's 'Humean' viewpoint is clearly evident in Chapter 2 of the Second Book of *The Discourses*:

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[21] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, pp. 78–9; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 105.

[22] On the other hand, Machiavelli states in the first chapter of Book One of *The Discourses*: '. . . men work either from necessity or from choice, and as it has been observed that virtue has more sway where labour is the result of necessity rather than of choice, it is a matter of consideration whether it might not be better to select for the establishment of a city a sterile region, where the people, compelled by necessity to be industrious, and therefore less given to idleness, would be more united, and less exposed by the poverty of the country to occasions for discord' (Machiavelli 1949, I.1, p. 94; Machiavelli 1950, I.1, p. 107). At this point, the question is, however, about the historical degree of freedom in human society, not the theoretical-philosophical analysis of the concept of freedom. One of the central ideas in Machiavelli's thinking is that idleness, those living an idle life, and those who do not work, are the basic cause for the corruption and decay of society. The idle have time to plot, whereas for those who work it is sufficient that their life is secure and peaceful.

Reflecting now as to whence it came that in ancient times the people were more devoted to liberty than in the present, I believe that it resulted from this, that men were stronger in those days, which I believe to be attributable to the difference of education, founded upon the difference of their religion and ours. For, as our religion teaches us the truth and the true way of life, it causes us to attach less value to the honours and possessions of this world; … Our religion, moreover, places the supreme happiness in humility, lowliness, and a contempt for worldly objects, whilst the other [pagan religion], on the contrary, places the supreme good in grandeur of soul, strength of body, and all such other qualities as render men formidable; and if our religion claims of us fortitude of soul, it is more to enable us to suffer than to achieve great deeds. These principles seem to me to have made men feeble, and caused them to become an easy prey to evil-minded men, who can control them more securely, seeing that the great body of men, for the sake of gaining Paradise, are more disposed to endure injuries than to avenge them.[23]

From the point of view of the *fortuna* of criminals, the passivity of the majority is a positive thing:[24] they have opportunities for action that they would not have in a conjuncture controlled by an active majority with a worldly inclination. If Machiavelli refers with the term 'evil-minded men [*uomini scelerati*]' to the 'few', the nobility, the Pope and his court of the city-states as well as the barbarians of foreign powers (e.g. the rulers of France and Spain together with their armies), then one could think that fatalism, the belief in providence, the trust in God, the inclination towards other-worldly matters, putting up with insults and so forth, are all expressions of the ideological power of those 'few'. It was mentioned earlier that, according to Gramsci, Machiavelli's objective was also to teach those 'who do not now' about the tools of *Realpolitik*.[25] Fatalistic doctrines and the ideology of the belief in providence do not increase knowledge of such things. These instead can be characterised as the ideological calls of their time, with the help of which criminals keep the people passive,

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[23] Machiavelli 1949, II.2, pp. 237–8; Machiavelli 1950, II.2, pp. 184–5.

[24] Machiavelli does not completely denounce religious faith. For example, in the case of the Romans, he admires their skill in utilising religion to organise the state (Machiavelli 1950, I.13). Likewise he regrets that all piety and religion has disappeared from Italy. Here his critique, however, is directed at the church which, in addition to keeping the country disunited, is responsible for the evilness of Italians (Machiavelli 1950, I.12).

[25] Cf. Gramsci 1975, p. 1608.

thus producing even more opportunities for themselves to commit 'crimes'.[26]

It is undoubtedly easy to respond positively towards the ideological call of fatalism or providentialism in a highly aleatory conjuncture, where human calculations have proved deceptive and reality looks like a battlefield of blind *fortuna*, and where events seem to be beyond the reach of all human understanding and influence. This gives some indication of the fact that the chaotic and highly aleatory conjuncture does not after all open up to the people living within it as a field of opportunities but, rather, is an uncontrollable situation that feeds discouraging and deterministic fatalism. Seen from this viewpoint, the fatalistic and deterministic beliefs or the chaotic feel of the situation are not opposites but expressions of one and the same functionally passive 'spirit of the times'. Perhaps critically referring to Epicurus, one can state that chaos does indeed cause irresponsibility and does, not after all, make way for a freedom of will. In other words, people's belief in fate-like powers beyond man's influence increases in a highly aleatory situation, rather than seeing such a situation as a possibility for action.

But what is the failing in human calculations due to? The reason could be that people are simply bad at calculating correctly or that the complex nature of reality makes calculating difficult or even impossible. At least as Machiavelli sees it in his own conjuncture, as described in Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, the failure is due to the special chaotic circumstances of Italy and the finiteness of man's ability to discern and evaluate [*prudenzia*]. That is to say, there is no man so wise [*prudente*] that he could with mastery follow and anticipate the movements of reality. As Machiavelli sarcastically states:

> Nor do we find a man shrewd enough to know how to adapt his policy in this way; either because he cannot do otherwise than what is in character or because, having always prospered by proceeding one way, he cannot persuade himself to change.[27]

And in the same way in regard to republics:

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[26] Cf. Thucydides 1998, p. 42, who quotes Pericles's speech to his troops. Pericles states that in situations where the two battling sides have equally good fortune, one must not only trust in hope, but rather there are grounds to rely on reason based on facts because this increases one's feeling of superiority and provides better information for the future than mere hope.

[27] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 80; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 107.

… it is impossible to establish a perpetual republic, because in a *thousand unforeseen ways* its ruin may be accomplished.[28]

The following section in *The Discourses*, where Machiavelli refers to the 'winding and unknown roads' of *fortuna*, aptly describes – in surprisingly optimistic tones – the impossibility of the total control of *fortuna*:

I repeat, then, as an incontrovertible truth, proved by all history, that men may second fortune but cannot oppose her; they may develop her designs, but cannot defeat them. But men should never despair on that account; for, not knowing the aims of fortune, *which she pursues by dark and devious ways*. Men should always be hopeful, and never yield to despair, whatever troubles or ill fortune may befall them.[29]

It becomes particularly difficult to follow and predict the movements of *fortuna* and to adapt to the changes when the degree of aleatoriness is unusually high, as in the case of the Apennine peninsula. According to Machiavelli, Italy is indeed the seat and initiator of the changes in *fortuna*, for the dykes and embankments which could prevent or ease the blows and changes of *fortuna* are missing:

And if you consider Italy, which has been the seat of these changes, and who has given the impulse to them, you will see her to be a country without dykes or embankments of any kind: for if Italy had been adequately reinforced, like Germany, Spain, and France, this flood would not have caused the great changes it has, or it would not have happened at all.[30]

Fabrizio Colonna, the main character in *The Art of War*, indeed states that the upheavals in Italy have been both the reason and consequence for why people have become lazy and have decided to depend merely on *fortuna*, so that 'her whims' indeed dominate all matters:

… to rely upon fortuna, rather than their own virtù, for seeing that there is now such a proportion of virtù left among mankind that it has but little

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[28] Machiavelli 1949, III.17, p. 383; Machiavelli 1950, III.17, p. 466; my emphasis.
[29] Machiavelli 1949, II.29, p. 316; Machiavelli 1950, II.29, p. 382; my emphasis.
[30] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 79; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 106.

> influence in the affairs of the world – and that things seem to be governed by
> fortuna – they think it is better to follow her train than to contend with her
> for superiority.[31]

There is no difference, however, between understanding *fortuna* as, on the one hand, uncontrolled circumstances beyond human influence and, on the other, as a subjective success within these circumstances, for they indeed influence each other. The more a person can influence the 'objective' *fortuna* the more his or her own 'subjective' *fortuna* lies within his or her own control. The more a person is at the mercy of the 'objective' *fortuna* of the situation, the less he or she can influence his or her 'subjective' *fortuna*. The relative part of the uncontrolled side of *fortuna* in human life is not carved in stone: a person can through his or her own actions influence the relationship between uncontrolled *fortuna* and controlled *fortuna*.

With the words 'sorte', 'caso', 'cielo' and 'Dio', Machiavelli refers, albeit unsystematically, to the 'uncontrollable' part of *fortuna* which is beyond human knowledge and influence, while using the term *fortuna* for those matters that, at least potentially, are within reach of human knowledge and influence.[32] For example, at the beginning of Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli specifically uses the word 'sorte [chance]':

> … they would conclude that there is no point in sweating over things, but
> that one should submit to the rulings of *chance* [*sorte*].[33]

Even though the humanly controllable part of *fortuna* is, according to Machiavelli, even at its best, only a bit less than half of the total *fortuna*, its actual

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[31] Machiavelli 1949, II, p. 509; Machiavelli 1990, II, p. 80.

[32] For example, when the Romans chose every tenth soldier to be killed by the drawing of lots, the object of the draw could not in any way influence whether the lot would fall on each of the soldiers being disciplined. They were at the mercy of the luck of the draw [*la sorte*], as the last chapter of *The Discourses* tells, referring to the worst of the Roman methods of punishment and discipline: '… where all have merited death, and only every tenth man is punished by lot, these will have occasion to complain only of fate; whilst those who escape will be careful not to commit other crimes, for fear that next time the lot might fall to them' (Machiavelli 1949, III.49, p. 443; Machiavelli 1950, III.49, p. 539). If, for instance, bribery were possible in the drawing of lots, then for the one aware of the bribery it is no longer a question of *la sorte*, while those unaware of the bribery still *assume* that in being chosen it was a matter of blind chance and fate.

[33] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, pp. 78–9; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 105; my emphasis.

percentage in the Apennine conjuncture is even much less than that, which is due to the immense power that 'sorte', 'cielo' and 'Dio' have in this conjuncture.[34]

Machiavelli compares the vicious circle in which the uncontrollable side of *fortuna* grows in *relation* to both its subjectively and humanly objectively controllable parts to the effects of a disastrous flood:

> I compare fortune to one of those violent rivers which, when they are enraged, flood the plains, tear down trees and buildings, wash soil from one place to deposit it in another. Everyone flees before them, everybody yields to their impetus, there is no possibility of resistance. Yet although such is their nature, it does not follow that when they are flowing quietly one cannot take precautions, constructing dykes and embankments so that when the river is in flood they would keep to one channel or their impetus be less wild and dangerous. So it is with fortune. She shows her potency where there is no well-regulated power to resist her, and her impetus is felt where she knows there are no embankments and dykes built to restrain her.[35]

Machiavelli does not claim, however, that skilful actions could *fully* prevent the effects of *fortuna*. One cannot do anything about the fact of *fortuna* itself, that is, its unstable *nature*, but it is possible to accommodate the instability.[36] It

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[34] In the collection of poems by Machiavelli, *Di Fortuna*, Caso and Sorte are the blind and deaf gatekeepers of the castle of Fortune (Machiavelli 1949, p. 710).

[35] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 79; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, pp. 105–6.

[36] This resembles the viewpoint of Boetius (Boetius 480–524), according to which cursing the changefulness of *fortuna* is as naïve as complaining about the change in the weather. Instead, what shows wisdom and farsightedness is to take the changefulness of *fortuna* in the right way. Madam Philosophy [*fueram Philosophiam*], 'the queen of all virtues', who appeared to Boetius in his prison cell, told the unfortunate prisoner about *fortuna* as follows: 'What then is it, man, that has cast down so that you weep and wail so much? You have had on unusual shock, I think. You imagine that fortune's attitude to you has changed; you are wrong. Such was always her way, such is her nature. Instead, all she has done in your case is remain constant to her own inconstancy; she was just the same when she was smiling, when she deluded you with the allurements of her false happiness. You have merely discovered the changing face of that blind power: she who still conceals herself from others has completely revealed herself to you' (Boetius 1973, p. 177). Boetius presents the idea of divine reason, due to which the universe follows regular laws and develops teleologically towards the good: 'The best kindlier of your health we have is your true opinion of the governance of the world, that you believe it to be subjected not to the randomness of chance events but to divine reason …' (Boetius 1973, p. 171). Thucydides in turn argues that people are in the habit of blaming *fortuna* when 'the vagaries of events are probably no less wayward than the minds of men' (Thucydides 1998, p. 55) and something takes place contrary to human calculations.

does not follow from the *general nature* of things that people would not in some *specific* situation act in a way that prevents the effect of such a 'general nature' on the course of events of the conjuncture. Instead of aiming one's interest at the general nature, it is sensible, from the point of view of human action, to analyse and to organise that specific situation where the general occurs or does not occur.[37]

In the case of Machiavelli, interpretations have been put forward, however, based on the assumption that he thought that the laws of human nature guide human actions and influence relationships between people. When it is known how man or human society has acted before, it is possible to say how these will act in the future or how they should or should not act in the future. For example, Felix Gilbert writes as follows when interpreting Machiavelli's views on warfare:

> Nevertheless, there is one aspect in modern military thought that not only cannot be connected with Machiavelli's thought, but is in sharp contrast to it. Machiavelli was mainly concerned with a general norm, valid for the military organizations of all states and times; modern military thought

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Baltasar Gracián encapsulates the view presented by Machiavelli and Thucydides in his aphorism 'the skill of achieving Fortuna': 'There are rules of luck: it is not all chance with the wise: it can be assisted by care. Some content themselves with placing themselves confidently at the gate of Fortune, waiting till she opens it. Others do better, and press forward and profit by their clever boldness, reaching the goddess and winning her favour on the wings of their virtue and valour. But on a true philosophy there is no other umpire than virtue and insight; for there is no luck or ill-luck except wisdom and the reverse' (Gracián 2005, Maxim XXI).

[37] Neal Wood remarks that it is easier to find examples in Machiavelli's texts which show that man's character is to a great extent the result of practice and not a quality defined at birth or according to one's place of birth (Wood 1990, p. 25, footnote 21). Wood presents his remarks in connection with the following rule from *The Art of War*: 'But, to give a rule which may be observed by any state, I say that every prince or republic should select his men from his own dominions, whether hot, cold, or temperate; for we see by ancient examples that good discipline and exercise will make good soldiers in any country, and that the defects of nature may be supplied by art and industry – which in this case is more effective than nature itself' (Machiavelli 1949, I, p. 463; Machiavelli 2004, I, p. 25). Also the following 'general rule [*regola generale*]', which Machiavelli presents, quoting Vegetius, refers to the importance of experience: 'Few men are brave by nature, but good discipline and experience make many so' (Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 613; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 202). Referring to De Sanctis's interpretation of Machiavelli, one can encapsulate the issue as follows: man himself can create laws that control the implementation of the 'laws of human nature' (cf. De Sanctis 1983, p. 516).

emphasized that actions under different historical circumstances must differ and that military institutions will be satisfactory only when they are fitted to the particular constitution and conditions of an individual state. Moreover, Machiavelli's emphasis on the establishment of military institutions and conduct of war according to rational and generally valid rules gave great weight to the rational factor in military matters. … When war is seen as determined by rational laws, it is only logical to leave nothing to chance and to expect that the adversary will throw his hand in when he has been brought into position where the game is rationally lost. … It has since been realized that war is not only a science but also an art. With the end of the eighteenth century and the Age of Reason, there was a sudden recognition of the importance of other than rational factors. … The introduction of these new intellectual trends – of the realization of the importance of uniqueness and individuality, of the recognition of the creative and intuitive element aside from scientific – into military theory is connected with the name of Clausewitz.[38]

The Discourses contains, for example, the following passage, which Machiavelli presents in a self-assured tone:

Whoever considers the past and the present will readily observe that all cities and all peoples are and ever have been animated by the same desires and the same passions; so that it is easy, by diligent study of the past, to foresee what is likely to happen in the future in any republic, and to apply those remedies that were used by the ancients, or not finding any that were employed by them, to devise new ones from the similarity of the events.[39]

It is also obvious that Machiavelli studied the events of ancient times and his own time in order to ascertain general rules that would be of help in predicting and planning future events. He presents examples of such a general rule in the following passages in *The Discourses*:

… we must assume, as a general rule, that it never or rarely happens that a republic or monarchy is well constituted, or its old institutions entirely

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[38] Gilbert 1986, pp. 30–1.
[39] Machiavelli 1949, I.39, p. 181; Machiavelli 1950, I.39, p. 216.

> reformed, unless it is done by only one individual; it is even necessary that he whose mind has conceived such a constitution should be alone in carrying it into effect.[40]

> Many examples in ancient history prove how difficult it is for a people that has been accustomed to live under the government of a prince to preserve its liberty, if by some accident it has recovered it, as was the case with Rome after the expulsion of the Tarquins.[41]

Irrespective of which people *popolo* is in question, it cannot manage to remain free if it is used to living in subordination to a prince; or irrespective of which state is spoken about, its founding requires a 'legislator', who draws up the constitution for others to follow.

Whether the contents of the rules are 'true' or 'untrue' is in this context of no primary interest, but the question is rather about their theoretical nature and status for Machiavelli. As was stated earlier in connection with Althusser's interpretation of Montesquieu, in the light of modern science, general rules refer to theoretical laws that apply in *all* cases or *link* all cases.[42] If the rule is not applicable in some particular case, this case then undermines the theory in which the rule (e.g. the law of causality) is being presented, or then some 'hidden causes' affect the case that the theory does not take into account. For instance, a rock which does not fall when released does not undermine the law of gravity if it is possible to show or assume the existence of another force that works to counter gravity. Such a force – e.g. when a rock is thrown upwards – is not a gravitational anomaly, but rather the causal effect on the stone caused by someone throwing it can be explained within the framework of Newton's basic laws of physics.

Without delving deeper into the issue of modern science, one can still note that its basic starting point is that the course of each individual case can, at least in principle – by sufficiently raising the level of abstraction – be explained with the help of a general theory and the causal laws it entails. In other words, every individual case is subsumed under the ideal case that the theory

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[40] Machiavelli 1949, I.9, p. 119; Machiavelli 1950, I.9, p. 138.
[41] Machiavelli 1949, I.16, p. 137; Machiavelli 1950, I.16, p. 160.
[42] Cf. Chapter 4.2.

describes. Subsumption is indeed possible if that which links it to other cases is of primary interest within the case, and not the unique factors which make the case unique.

Are the general rules proposed by Machiavelli also such generally applicable laws? Though Machiavelli indeed discusses general rules concerning people and human society, after having studied events of antiquity and his own time, he nevertheless does not presume that every individual and human society would necessarily act in accordance with such rules or that some general rule could guarantee the success of one's actions in some future case. Even in the case of the previously cited rule,[43] he accepts that there are provisos, as in his use of 'or rarely [*o rado*]' in the above quote. This is also generally the case when Machiavelli uses the term 'general rule [*regola generale*]'. For example, when concluding that the leader of the army who wants to remain on the battlefield cannot avoid battle when the enemy is determined to fight without worsening his position, Machiavelli does not claim that it *necessarily* would be that way. Even though 'thousands of examples' speak for this general rule, it was the very avoidance of battle in the case of Fabius Maximus that led to the salvation of Rome in the war against Hannibal. Fabius acted against a general rule, and in doing so achieved success. This was due to the special nature of the battle between him and Hannibal, a case where neither dared to attack the other.[44] If Fabius had followed the general rule proposed by Machiavelli, the result could have been disastrous for Rome.

The uncertainty regarding what would be the best strategy in each case is a consequence of what, following Gilbert, can be termed *unique*. No case is exactly like previous cases; but, in each case, there are unique and individual influencing factors, as a consequence of which the means that brought success in some other case may in this case lead to ruin. In other words, individual cases are not 'examples' of some ideal case, but, rather, it is because of the unique features that influence each particular case that it is not possible to explain and to anticipate the course of events by means of generally applicable rules. Even though common features can be found between the cases, this generality is combined with the specific in a way that differs from other cases.

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[43] Cf. Machiavelli 1950, I.9, p. 138.
[44] Machiavelli 1950, III.10, pp. 444–5.

According to Althusser, Machiavelli, a 'materialist philosopher-traveller', does not propose general laws [*lois*] but rather constants [*constantes*] that are generally repeated from case to case, but without 'explaining' them:

> But what transpires when it is not a question of objects which repeat themselves indefinitely and on which experiments can be repeated and rerun by the scientific community from one end of the world to the other? (See Popper: 'A scientific experiment deserves the name when it can be indefinitely repeated under the same experimental conditions'.) Here the materialist philosopher-traveller, who is attentive to 'singular' cases, cannot state 'laws' about them, since such cases are singular/concrete/factual and are therefore not repeated, because they are unique. What he *can* do, as has been shown by Lévi-Strauss in connection with myths of primitive societies, is to single out 'general constants' among the encounters he has observed, the 'variations' of which are capable of accounting for the singularity of the cases under consideration, and thus produce knowledge of the 'clinical' sort as well as ideological, political and social effects. Here we again find not the universality of laws (of the physical, mathematical or logical sort), but the *generality* of the *constants* which, by their variation, enable us to apprehend what is true of such-and-such a case.[45]

It is essential to note here that the status of unique factors is different in Machiavelli's thinking than in modern science. For Machiavelli, these are not awkward anomalies, falsifying factors or something 'specific' that must be parenthesised in relation to something 'general' by raising the level of abstraction. Rather, they have a central, positive and innovative theoretical position in his thinking, as I will show in the following section.[46] In Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli states:

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[45] Althusser 1994b, pp. 65–6; Althusser 2006a, p. 278; Althusser's emphasis.
[46] According to Roger D. Masters, Machiavelli's general rules are not laws that would apply irrespective of time and place: 'Human nature is thus characterized by selfishness and short-sightedness, by ambition and conflict, but sometimes by knowledge and bravery, by virtue and devotion to the common good. The consequence is a world of chance and unpredictability. In many matters, it is not possible to have fixed rules of conduct because of the diversity and complexity of situation' (Masters 1996, p. 56). Masters compares Machiavelli to the Renaissance painters who experimented with different perspectives and changed them in their works (Masters 1996, p. 51). In regard to 'human nature', this means that 'selfishness' or 'short-sightedness', for instance, are linked to the viewpoint or context in which man is studied at any particular moment.

> ... we see that some princes flourish one day and come to grief the next, without appearing to have changed in character or any other way.[47]

Problems arise from a prince's inability to act 'according to the demands of the time [*con le qualità de' tempi*]'.[48] In other words, the prince cannot change his modes of action in accordance with the times. Such a prince would depend solely on his *fortuna*, which would lead to his downfall as his fortune changes. In this context, Machiavelli refers with *fortuna* to a situation where the prince-actor has no *virtù* of his own by which he could anticipate the changing times and adapt accordingly. Thus his personal 'subjective' (good) *fortuna* or happiness [*felicità*] is dependent on 'objective' *fortuna*. As is evident in varied ways in the earlier chapters of *The Prince*, such a prince (or city-state) which trusts his (its) actions to the whims of *fortuna* or the *virtù* of others and does not rely on his (its) own *virtù* will be destroyed if these alien forces turn against him (it).[49]

The central distinction of a prince relying on his own *virtù* is his ability to adapt to the changing times; in other words, the ability to accommodate his own actions within the movement of 'objective' *fortuna* and thus ensuring that the 'subjective' *fortuna* remains good. In order for the subjective *fortuna* of the actor-prince to remain the *same* in relation to both the changing times and the objective *fortuna*, the prince must change his own actions, but if this *relationship changes* it is because man has remained the same even though the objective *fortuna* has changed:

Even though man mostly acts selfishly, it is also possible that, in some cases, he does not do so. Even though Masters in his important study does not emphasises the issue of maker's knowledge, one can still say – in reference to his interpretation in which the multiplicity of perspectives is emphasised – that if we take seriously the issue of *maker's knowledge* in regards to, for instance, the case of *fortuna*, we can avoid the problematics of Machiavelli's views regarding *fortuna* from a seemingly 'universal' or absolutised viewpoint. In fact, the starting point for what is considered a universal viewpoint is the modern research set-up in which *fortuna* (or chance) is seen as the object of study, and which the researcher-subject assumes she studies as if from the generally applicable neutral or 'philosophical' viewpoint of God or a 'neutral onlooker'.

[47] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 79; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 106.
[48] 'I have often reflected that the causes of the good or bad fortune of men depend upon their manner of suiting their conduct to the times' (Machiavelli 1949, III.9, p. 362; Machiavelli 1950, III.9, p. 441; translation modified).
[49] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 106.

> That we cannot thus change at will is due to two causes; the one is the
> impossibility of resisting the natural bent of our characters; and the other
> is the difficulty of persuading ourselves, after having been accustomed to
> success by a certain mode of proceeding, that any other can succeed as well.
> It is this that causes the varying success of a man; for the times change, but
> he does not change his mode of proceeding.[50]

Machiavelli does not, however, offer any specific *modus operandi* or ready
formula for how the actor could achieve or reproduce his good subjective
fortuna. He only states that when striving for glory and riches different people
will proceed differently, and yet all of these can achieve their objective. On the
other hand, though two people may proceed in the same way, one of them may
not achieve his or her goal:

> … two men succeed equally well with different methods, one of them being
> circumspect and the other impetuous. This results from nothing else except
> the extent to which their methods are or are not suited to the nature of the
> times.[51]

Machiavelli warns against acting always and everywhere in the same way
because different times require different methods. In some cases, success re-
quires caution, while in other cases caution may lead to ruin. This all sounds
obvious, yet it refers to an essential and enduringly valuable dimension in
Machiavelli's thinking, which can be summed up as follows:

> *The man of action must be sensitive to the unique features of his own case if he wishes*
> *to succeed.*

As stated earlier, a sensitivity towards 'particulars [*i particulari*]' is not fully
possible, because the times change too rapidly and understanding becomes
too difficult for a person or state to succeed every time. The difficulties are
due to the unique individual features of a case, which – due to the reasons just
mentioned – come to the individual actor or an entire republic as surprises and
unpleasant encounters, which he/it cannot prepare for in advance.[52]

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[50] Machiavelli 1949, III.9, p. 364; Machiavelli 1950, III.9, p. 443, my emphasis; cf.
Machiavelli 1949, III.31, p. 414; Machiavelli 1950, III.31, p. 501.
[51] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 80; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, pp. 106–7.
[52] Machiavelli 1950, III.17, pp. 465–6; and Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25.

It is because of surprising factors that the changes and blows of *fortuna* cannot be fully understood or controlled by means of a general law or logic.[53] Machiavelli refers allegorically to this issue in his poem *Di fortuna*:

> She times events as suits her;
> she raises us up,
> she puts us down without pity,
> *without law or reason*.[54]

Machiavelli pays considerably more attention to the unique and surprising features of the events he describes as well as the dramatic effects they have on the course of events, than is evident, for instance, in Gilbert's 'modern' interpretation which emphasises the 'general'. It is clear, for instance, from the dedication at the beginning of *Florentine Histories* that the descriptions of events of the past must be sufficiently detailed for them to be of any use to the reader:

> ... because if anything in history delights or teaches, *it is what is presented in full detail*. If any reading is useful to citizens who govern republics, it is that which shows the causes of the hatreds and factional struggles within the city, in order that such citizens having grown wise through the sufferings of others, can keep themselves united.[55]

If the description is only of a general nature, the reader is not offered the opportunity to ascertain the specific details of the described event, and would thus be unable to *compare* it to his or her own case (of which there must also be adequate knowledge). The man of action cannot be convinced of whether the past case is sufficiently similar to offer him the *relevant* guidance when he considers his own strategy of action.

From the previous point there also follows another 'unmodern' feature of Machiavelli's thinking. This has to do with his *position* as a writer and *man of action*, as well as his intellectual-political position in his own writings. Even though Machiavelli formulates general rules, he does not attempt to create a generally applicable theory from them, nor are his interests primarily 'theoretical'. Instead, he offers his own rules as *support for the sense of judgement* of those who aim to succeed in their own case.

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[53] Cf. Althusser 2006a, p. 278.
[54] Machiavelli 1989, p. 746; my emphasis, translation modified.
[55] Machiavelli 1989, p. 1031; my emphasis.

What, specifically, can Machiavelli offer these men of action? On the one hand, he can offer general rules (or constants), based on experience – his own experience and from reading history – about what kind of inclinations and tendencies human life and actions 'usually' have. But, on the other hand, he warns the man of action reading his texts not to trust too much in his teachings or the experiences that the past offers. Machiavelli does not present formulae for how one should proceed in certain cases but rather puts forward questions and problems *that the actor himself must take into account and attempt to solve*.

Phenomenologically speaking, the viewpoint of the man of action regarding the particular case refers to the *horizon of the lifeworld*. Thinking in this way, Machiavelli's texts open a view into the phenomenological questions of action and highlight the problematics of action as they open up to the actor in his lifeworld, rather than as the action would appear to a researcher, for instance, in the light of some generally intended 'theory of action' or 'behavioural science'. The last lines of the dedication in *The Art of War* show that Machiavelli was aware of the difference between his own position as a writer and the actual position of men of action.

> Although treating an art which I never professed may perhaps seem a presumptuous undertaking, I cannot help thinking myself more excusable than some other people who have taken its actual exercise upon themselves. *For an error in my writings may easily be corrected without harming anybody, but an error in their practice may ruin a whole state*.[56]

But, although Machiavelli is 'merely' a writer, who only guides and assists men of action, he does so by *simulating their own viewpoint*. Unlike in modern theoretical presentations or interpretations of Machiavelli (e.g. Gilbert), the subject and object of knowledge in Machiavelli's thinking are not separate things; rather, the question is about the *maker's knowledge*, where the 'subject' (actor) of his knowledge is also the 'object' (the actor, as well as the actual conditions of his actions) of his knowledge. In his writings, Machiavelli attempts to increase the actor's degree of self-reflexivity by highlighting the actual conditions of his actions. In other words, in his writings, Machiavelli opens up the problematics of the conditions of the action from the viewpoint of the actor in order to support his self-understanding (cf. 4.4., where 'anticipating the future' is closely

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[56] Machiavelli 1949, p. 448; Machiavelli 2004, p. 5, my emphasis.

linked with the planning and implementation of the action strategies concerning the future instead of passively 'watching events from the sidelines').[57]

If the 'general rules' proposed by Machiavelli are interpreted as general laws [*lois*], from the modern viewpoint, the interesting and most essential dimensions of maker's knowledge are cut away from his thinking and his interest in such details about cases and corresponding surprises to which the *man of action* must necessarily adapt if he does not want to be crushed under the wheels of *fortuna* goes unnoticed. Even though history (or rather 'histories [*istorie*]') is indeed the 'great teacher' for Machiavelli, it cannot offer certain truth, laws or casuistic guidelines that would guarantee the success and safety of the man of action. Even a description that goes into details can only present evidence for or against certain modes of action; but, even then, in the same breath, it warns against trusting too much in formulae that earlier brought success. Referring to Rousseau, one can indeed note that one must follow certain rules 'but the chief rule is this – be able to break the rule if necessary'.[58]

When, for instance, Machiavelli discusses the problematics of *fortuna* he does not even attempt to build a general philosophical theory about *fortuna* or define in a generally applicable way what *fortuna* in its 'essence' actually is. Instead, he discusses the issue of *fortuna* as a man of action would encounter it.[59] Unlike, for instance, in the field of astrology of Machiavelli's time, the

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[57] For example, army commanders have 'maker's knowledge' of warfare, but this does not mean that such knowledge, coming from experience, would be a reflective knowledge. Rather, maker's knowledge is characterised by a *lack of reflection*. In other words, it is a question of a *skill* that the maker 'knows and commands' even though he would not necessarily be able to explain what he did when he carried out some deed or manoeuvre that brought him success. Differing from this, Machiavelli tries to explicate what the main issue is in a particular act and to convey this reflective knowledge in his support for the actor's future deeds. Referring to Gilbert (1986), one could say that maker's knowledge is a kind of 'intuition'. Machiavelli by no means dismisses such an idea as something mythical, outside the bounds of rational observation, as Gilbert seems to understand it, but, on the contrary, strives in his texts to understand rationally the intuitive elements of warfare.

[58] Rousseau 1993b, p. 111.

[59] Even though Anthony Parel (Parel 1992, e.g., pp. 153–8) emphasises that, for Machiavelli, chance and accidents are central subfactors of reality, he interprets Machiavelli's texts as if the latter would have attempted to construct a systematic theory of *fortuna* based on the Renaissance cosmology. Even though Parel can justifiably discuss Machiavelli's connections to the cosmological and anthropological theories of his time, he does not pay attention to the position of maker's knowledge evident in Machiavelli's writings. Most essential from the viewpoint of the 'maker' is not to know or to understand the cosmic original causes or cosmological nature of the movement of *fortuna*, but, rather, to try in one's own practices to cope with the surprises and encounters brought

fluctuations of *fortuna* are not, in his opinion, (at least not primarily) due to the transcendent heavens, the conjunctions of the stars, but rather the immanent worldly conjunctures that are born and change with the struggles between actors. From the immanent or worldly viewpoint, the changes in *fortuna* are not about the worldly effects of a *conjoining* occurring in another system (e.g. in a star system visible from Earth), but, rather, the whims and surprises of *fortuna* are an essential contributing worldly factor to the life of the man of action.[60]

5.2.1. The actor's prudence

On the basis of the above argument, one can understand why Machiavelli emphasises that the prince must be very prudent [*avere tanta prudenza*] so as to correctly *estimate* his powers in relation to those of the enemy:

> Everyone may begin a war at his pleasure, but cannot so finish it. A prince, therefore, before engaging in any enterprise should well measure his strength, and govern himself accordingly; and he must be very careful not to deceive himself in the estimate of his strength . . . [61]

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about by *fortuna*. Maker's knowledge is in Parel's interpretation reduced to an 'activist approach towards politics' – '[B]ut we must wonder whether his [Machiavelli's] stand on Fortune amounts to anything more than an appeal to an activist approach towards politics' (Parel 1992, p. 157). But, here, 'activism' is not equivalent to (or even a simulation of) the position of the man of action in Machiavelli's writings. Parel also states that Machiavelli's view on history is cyclical, from which it follows that not even in this regard could he be considered 'modern', essential for which is a linear view of historical time: '. . . Machiavelli's new political science presupposes a definite view of history. This presupposed view of history is not a modern one. It is cyclic, and very much dependent upon the three-fold causality operating in human affairs: the human, the elemental or natural, and the celestial. The "things of the world" and "human things" (two of Machiavelli's favourite phrases) are subjected to the necessary pattern of rise and fall' (Parel 1992, p. 156). Such an interpretation, however, disregards those passages in Machiavelli's writings where he emphasises those actions through which any claim to have discovered a general law of 'human nature' can be refuted – or maybe only contingently and without any guarantee of success, yet nevertheless to a sufficient degree from the point of view of the man of action or the state. In Althusser's view, Machiavelli believes that under the leadership of the new prince a durable state can be founded, as a consequence of which it would be possible to disengage from the vicious circle of Polybian forms of state. This does not mean, however, that the disengagement would be final but, rather, that it is possible to resist the movement of the wheel of *fortuna* through human deeds and actions (the durable state).

[60] Cf. Chapter 4.4.
[61] Machiavelli 1949, II.10, p. 256; Machiavelli 1950, II.10, p. 308.

In order to estimate one's own powers, one must know the powers of the other actors influencing the case, so that the *relationships of power* in the conjuncture become clear. Machiavelli offers an example of such an analysis in the Chapter 12 of Book II of *The Discourses* entitled 'Whether it is better, when apprehending an attack, to wait it at home, or to carry the war into the enemy's country'. He discusses two competing views of a situation involving 'men intimate with warfare', where the braver of two roughly equally strong rulers has begun an attack against the other. According to one view, the defender should await the enemy on his own territory, whereas, according to the other view, he should go out to meet the enemy on the enemy's territory.[62]

In Machiavelli's opinion, it is possible to justify both viewpoints. According to him, the matter cannot, however, be solved without knowing what sort of state is involved in each case, whether it is an armed or unarmed people, and so forth.[63] In the case of France and Italy, one should never wait, thus offering them the possibility of penetrating deep into one's territory, even though, in a campaign outside one's own territory, it is more difficult to maintain the supply lines. The home territory does not offer sufficient additional advantage because an unarmed people cannot destroy the enemy, even on its home territory. On the contrary, the enemy troops create chaos in the economy, which is very destructive in the case of a state that relies on a paid army.[64] On the other hand, in the case of an able-bodied country trained for warfare, there are also strong grounds for waiting:

> … it is said that by awaiting the enemy many advantages are gained, for without inconveniencing your own people you may cause great inconvenience to the enemy in the supply of provisions and all the other things that an army requires. By the better knowledge of the country you can impede the enemy's designs; and the facility of uniting all your troops enables you to oppose him with greater numbers, whilst he has not been able to withdraw all his forces from his own country. And then in case of defeat you can more readily reorganise your army, because many of your soldiers will escape, finding ready places of refuge near at hand. Nor have you to send

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[62] Machiavelli 1950, II.12, pp. 314–16; cf. II.23 and II.27.
[63] Machiavelli 1950, II.12, pp. 314–17.
[64] Machiavelli nevertheless remarks that 'there is not a more ineffectual and hazardous mode of defending a city than to do it in a disorderly and tumultuous manner' (Machiavelli 1950, III.30, p. 499).

> to a distance for reinforcements, so that you are enabled to employ all your
> forces without risking all your fortune …[65]

Machiavelli indeed criticises the 'idle princes' and 'listless republics' of his own time, because they strive at all costs to avoid battle, *presuming* that in this way they follow the example of Fabius Maximus, who 'by delaying battle saved the Roman republic'.[66] In Machiavelli's opinion, however, they have not understood that the advice that Maximus offers is *mostly* useless and even harmful because in attempting to avoid battle the enemy can then decide where the fighting will take place. The idle princes and listless leaders of the listless republics do not always understand the *difference* between their own situation and that of Maximus, but, instead, arrogantly believe they lead a similar state as Rome and that they themselves are similar skilful rulers as their Roman predecessors.

As Machiavelli sees it, they should undertake battle *even though it would lead to defeat*, because that is a lesser disgrace than losing without a battle. The reputation of a coward or quitter is detrimental also from the point of view of future peace negotiations. According to Machiavelli, it is indeed usually better to undertake a battle than to avoid it, but, in certain cases, such as with a state that is well armed and used to warfare, it is sensible and possible to postpone or even to avoid battle.

5.3. The aspects of *fortuna*

After the passage in *The Prince* where Machiavelli compares *fortuna* to violent rivers,[67] he concludes that men prosper as long as *fortuna* and strategy are in accordance with each other, and that the successful actor has to be ready to change strategy with the circumstances of *fortuna* in order to continue to succeed. In other words, the degree to which *fortuna* can or cannot be controlled varies not only with the time of the conjuncture but also between different actors that affect the same conjuncture. What, from one person's viewpoint, is subjectively and/or humanly objectively controllable *fortuna* may appear to

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[65] Machiavelli 1949, II.12, p. 262; Machiavelli 1950, II.12, p. 316.
[66] Machiavelli 1950, III.9, p. 444.
[67] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, pp. 105–6.

another as an uncontrollable *sorte* that goes against his calculations or as God's vengeance or, more consolingly, as 'God's will' or as guidance in the form of divine providence.[68] Here, as also in the relationships between 'criminals' and other people, it is a matter of taking advantage of *fortuna* and the *game* or *battle* for control of it.

When a man of action (or an entire state) can guide and control *fortuna* with embankments and dykes, he (or it) at the same time can also channel the uncontrollable force of the current of *fortuna* on to the plains of other actors or other fields, giving them a surprise for which they had not necessarily been able to prepare.[69] Even if they had, the current of *fortuna* looks for a free channel – the plain without dykes and embankments – where it can cause destruction.[70] Machiavelli's texts offer numerous examples of 'lucky opportunities' that came as surprises but, in fact, were events or conjunctures set up by cunning and virtuoso actors, yet which the undiscriminating actor believed were his own doing: an excellent opportunity, a lucky coincidence or in the worst case the blow of fate.

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[68] In astronomy, the word 'aspect' refers to the internal relationship between two objects seen from a third object. It is not possible to define in an absolute way the conjunction of heavenly bodies except from some *aspect*. Applying Machiavelli's thinking, one can indeed argue that the conjuncture – also the nature of *virtù* and *fortuna* – appears differently for different actors.

[69] For Machiavelli, the term 'current' was not merely a metaphor. This is shown by the Florentine attempt to redirect the flow of the River Arno so that it would lead to the destruction of the people of Pisa in the war between Florence and Pisa in 1503. It is possible that in addition to Machiavelli, also Leonardo da Vinci participated in the planning of this later abandoned project (see Masters 1996, for example pp. 4–6 and pp. 18–20).

[70] Thucydides offers a concrete example of the skilful use of dams and locks when he refers to the actions of the Persian general Megabyzus in the Peloponnesian war. 'The Athenians and their allies remained in Egypt, saw many kinds of warfare, and experienced all its changing fortunes. At first, the Athenians controlled Egypt, and the King sent Megabazus the Persian to Sparta with money, in hopes of bribing them to invade Attica so as to draw Athenian troops out of Egypt. The plan met with no success, and money was being spent to no purpose, so Megabazus made his way back to Asia with what was left of it. Then the King sent another Persian, Megabyzus, son of Zopyrus, to Egypt with a large army. He marched overland and defeated the Egyptians and their allies in battle. He drow the Greeks out of Memphis and ended up by isolating them on Prosopitis Island, where he besieged them for eighteen months. Finally, Megabyzus diverted the water from the channels around the island and dried them up. The island was now joined to the mainland for the most part, and the Greek ships were high and dry, so he crossed the channel and took the island with infantry' (Thucydides 1998, p. 42).

One must indeed emphasise that the two modalities 'possible' (or 'possibility': *occasione*) and 'necessity [*necessità*]' occurring in connection with *fortuna* are neither neutral, 'objective' philosophical concepts which would describe the 'natural course' of events nor worldly expressions of heavenly conjunctures. Instead, these modalities are connected with *immanent* human situations of struggle in which army commanders and other men of action *actively* strive to create opportunities and necessities both for their own troops and the enemy.

For example, the army commander who plans to conquer a city can judge how difficult it will be by knowing to what extent the citizens are under the *necessity* of defending themselves:

> If he finds that to be very urgent, then he may deem his task in proportion difficult; but if the motive for resistance is feeble, then he may count upon an easy victory.[71]

If it is a question of the seizure of a city due to a rebellion by its inhabitants, seizing it is more difficult if the latter do not have to fear punishment. Those who are used to a free life will defend more tenaciously than those who are used to living oppressed. Machiavelli concludes that the attacker must by all means strive to make the defence unnecessary in the eyes of the inhabitants.

> … a captain who besieges a city should strive by every means in his power to relieve the besieged of the pressure of necessity, and thus diminish the obstinacy of their defence. He should promise them a full pardon if they fear punishment, and if they are apprehensive for their liberties he should assure them that he is not the enemy of the public good, but only of a few ambitious persons in the city who oppose it.[72]

In the previous example, the strategy of the attacker is to prevent or remove the feeling of *necessity* among the besieged. In other words, the situation must not become *meaningful* in the consciousness of the besieged through the modality of *necessity*. For example, the Veientes furiously defended themselves against the Romans until a tribune had the idea to open an escape route for them:

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71 Machiavelli 1949, III.12, p. 371; Machiavelli 1950, III.12, p. 451.
72 Machiavelli 1949, III.12, p. 372; Machiavelli 1950, III.12, p. 452.

... when they saw the way open for their escape, they thought more of saving
themselves than of fighting.[73]

The possibility of escape was indeed a *trap* that undermined the defensive will
of the soldiers and caused the destruction of the Veientes. Machiavelli does
not mention whether the Veientine leaders tried to prevent their soldiers from
escaping or whether they too considered the situation as a 'true' opportunity
to escape along with their soldiers. If the leaders had tried to stop the soldiers
from escaping, this would probably have required closing off the escape route,
in other words, returning the *necessity* for defence. But, in turn, this could have
inspired mutiny, in which case producing the *necessity for defence* would have
shown a bad sense of judgement on the part of the Veientine leaders. Like Sun-
Tzu in *Art of Warfare*,[74] and Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, Machiavelli remarks in his
book *The Art of War* that it is very difficult to stop an entire fleeing army and
turn it back on the attack (in Tolstoy's novel it was a case of turning back the
fleeing French troops).[75]

At least for the Veientine soldiers, the possibility of escape seemed a lucky
situation, and not using it would, in their opinion, have been a waste of an
opportunity provided by *fortuna*.

According to Machiavelli, leaders may fall into traps such as these if, for
example, they are blinded by the greed for gain. It becomes evident in Chap-
ter 48 of Book III of *The Discourses*, entitled 'Any manifest error on the part of
an enemy should make us suspect some stratagem', that the commander of an
army should always be suspicious of any obvious mistake made by the enemy:

... it is not reasonable to suppose that men will be so incautious.[76]

Yet, despite the improbability of obvious mistakes, such lures are nevertheless
taken because

... the desire of victory often blinds men to that degree that they see nothing
but what seems favourable to their object.[77]

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[73] Machiavelli 1949, III.12, p. 373; Machiavelli 1950, III.12, p. 454.
[74] Sun-Tzu 1993, pp. 170–1.
[75] Cf., Machiavelli 1949, p. 544; Machiavelli 2004, p. 119.
[76] Machiavelli 1949, III.48, p. 442; Machiavelli 1950, III.48, p. 537.
[77] Ibid.

Essential in the art of setting traps is that the enemy is provided such tempting opportunities for victory that, blinded by the possibility of rapid victory, they no longer use reasoning but simply act guided by unleashed passions. For example, the Florentines were so enthralled by their desire to win in the war against Pisa that they did not understand the real objectives of their Pisan prisoner Alfonso del Mutolo:

> When the Florentines, in 1508, went to besiege Pisa, Alfonso del Mutolo, a citizen of that town, who had fallen into their hands, promised, if they would grant him his liberty, to deliver to them one of the gates of Pisa. His offer was accepted, and he was set free. Afterwards he came several times to confer on the subject with the deputies of the commissaries, but never concealed his visits, coming openly and accompanied by several Pisans, whom he left apart whilst conferring with the Florentines. From this circumstance his duplicity might readily have been conjectured; for it was not reasonable that he should have treated a matter of this kind so openly if he had been acting in good faith. But the eager desire to possess Pisa so blinded the Florentines that, under his guidance, they advanced to the gate of Lucca, where, by the double treason of the said Alfonso, they lost in a discreditable manner a number of their officers and men.[78]

The signs of betrayal were obvious, but the Florentines' passionate desire for victory prevented them from seeing them.[79] Instead, they thought that capturing del Mutolo had opened up an opportunity for them to defeat Pisa. But in fact del Mutolo was able to skilfully interpret the passions of the Florentines and even inflame them with his suggestions. He pretended that, in his personal yearning for freedom, he would betray his fellow Pisans. Through his scheming, he not only did a great service to his fellow townsmen but also liberated himself – something which, according to Florentine opinion, he sincerely strived for – but not by betraying his fellow Pisans, as the Florentines believed, but by leading the Florentine attack into a trap. Thus del Mutolo's double deceit yielded him a double victory.

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[78] Machiavelli 1949, III.48, p. 442; Machiavelli 1950, III.48, p. 538.
[79] Machiavelli also states that offers of peace can blind the army so that it will no longer see the battle as inevitable (cf., Machiavelli 1950, III.12, p. 452).

Machiavelli also presents examples of opposite situations, when there is good reason to force the enemy into a *position of necessity*; that is, giving them little or no time to deliberate on the issues and, instead, forcing them to make rash decisions.

> … when one prince wishes to obtain something from another, he must not, when the occasion permits, give him time for deliberation. But he must act so as to make the other see the necessity of prompt decision, and that a refusal or delay may cause an immediate and dangerous indignation.[80]

Similarly, the French king's military commander Gaston de Foix requested the Marquis of Mantua to hand over the keys to fortresses commanding a route de Foix wished his army to take, but without giving him time to consider the consequences of such an action. If the Marquis had more time to weigh up the consequences, he would have realised that, with the help of the keys, de Foix improved his position in the battle against Pope Julius II, who at the time was holding the Marquis's son a prisoner. By handing over the keys, the Marquis naturally made his own position in negotiations with the Pope more difficult.[81]

A different type of example presented by Machiavelli regarding the organisation of necessities and opportunities deals with conspiracies [*congiure*] against the sovereign or republic.[82] Even though the target of a conspiracy would become aware of it, the person in question must not reveal too quickly what he knows about it. He must first, in all silence, find out as much as possible about the power of the conspirators and assess his own powers in relation to them. A premature exposure of an extensive and strong conspiracy is dangerous because it necessarily makes the conspirators ruthless in their actions.

Therefore, the conspirators must be left to their own devices so that they believe that they have adequate time to implement their plan. Instead of creating the feeling of inevitability and the need for haste, the conspirators must be allowed a suitable opportunity to act at a particular moment in the future, thus giving the object of the conspiracy adequate time to prepare

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[80] Machiavelli 1949, III.44, p. 437; Machiavelli 1950, III.44, pp. 532–3.
[81] Machiavelli 1950, III.44, p. 534.
[82] Cf. Machiavelli 1950, III.6. Machiavelli uses the word 'congiure' for a conspiracy, the verb form of which is 'congiurare' which means literally 'swear together'. He indeed notes that a plot may be formed by a single individual or by many, yet 'the one cannot be called a conspiracy, but rather a determined purpose on the part of one man to assassinate the prince' (Machiavelli 1950, III.6, pp. 412–13).

and gather his forces against the conspirators, as he knows when they are most likely to strike and when they can be caught in the act. Machiavelli does not suggest what would be the 'favourable opportunity' for catching the conspirators – one might think, for example, that the best time would be at the public appearance of the prince – but, rather, he offers examples of princes and other men of power who took rash action when the conspiracy was revealed to them. For example, the Florentine commissary Guglielmo de'Pazzi acted in haste when he heard about a conspiracy against Florence. Immediately after having heard of the conspiracy, the commissary captured a conspirator in Arezzo, but then the others 'immediately took to arms, declared the independence of Arezzo, and made Guglielmo prisoner'.[83]

Conspiracy theories are characteristically *states of emergency* in which various surprising events have an important role. Machiavelli argues that the more unusual the case is, the greater the mistakes that people make.

> … but men not accustomed to the affairs of this world often commit the greatest mistakes, and especially in matters that are so much out of the ordinary course as conspiracies.[84]

It is particularly difficult for people to adapt to sudden changes in plans. Wars and conspiracies are characterised particularly by sudden events. Any plans within them may have to be changed very quickly, in which case 'everything falls into disarray and everything falls into defeat'.[85]

The angle taken by Machiavelli in his analysis is primarily that of an active actor. By means of *simulation* he describes, for example, what kind of problems and risks are involved in creating and implementing conspiracies. In other passages, on the other hand, counteractions to conspiracies are monitored; for example, what the state must do in order to avert attack. But whichever viewpoint is in question, Machiavelli offers advice both to the ones carrying out the attack and the those preventing it – that is, to all actors irrespective of their role.[86] For the prince who fears conspiracies, it is, of course, useful

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[83] Machiavelli 1950, III.6, p. 435.
[84] Machiavelli 1949, III.6, p. 346; Machiavelli 1950, III.6, p. 420.
[85] Machiavelli 1950, III.6.
[86] According to Wood, *The Prince* can be roughly divided into two parts. In the first part (Chapters 1 to 11) the emphasis is on matters related to making conspiracies, while in the second part (Chapters 12 to 26) on matters related to averting conspiracies (Wood 1991, p. lxvi). He also adds that the chapter in *The Discourses* titled 'On Conspiracies'

that he is aware of the problematics of undertaking a conspiracy, while, for the attacking state, it is useful that its leaders know the character of the country that is being attacked. For example, if the population in a state under attack is unarmed and not used to warfare and thus strives to meet the attacker as far away as possible from its territory, the attacker following a similar logic should avoid battle until he has managed to penetrate sufficiently deep into the enemy territory. In the opposite case, of the population being used to warfare and being well armed, the attacker should try and lure it away from its home territory, for instance, by arranging some tempting opportunity to attack them outside the borders of its territory.

As the example of Alfonso del Mutola and the Florentines shows, in the heat of action, the parties in the battle often cannot see clearly the intentions and motivations or the strengths and weaknesses of their enemy. Because the parties try their best to impede the enemy's actions by blinding its sense of judgement, the situation can become a very unpredictable, volatile and fast-changing conjuncture, the development of which nobody can predict. The complexity of the situation is indeed greatly increased by the fact that every actor *reciprocally* defines through his own actions and deeds the position of the other parties in the conjuncture. The most skilful plot may not succeed according to the original plans if the enemy does not passively wait to see what will happen to its *fortuna* as a result of the actions of the other side, but plots and counterplots for the demise of the other side. Thucydides argues that the more a war is prolonged the more unpredictable its course will be. Here he refers to the Athenian ambassadors' speech to their allies at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, warning them against the dangers of war. In this speech, as in many other moments of the Peloponnesian War, the war manifests itself as a conjuncture with a particularly high degree of aleatoriness; and as the war is prolonged and the unintentional consequences of the actions accumulate, the degree of aleatoriness continues to rise:

> Deliberate slowly, then, for this in no trivial matter, and do not, persuaded
> by the opinions and complaints of others, bring trouble on your own house.
> Assess before you are actually in it how great is the incalculable element of

(Chapter 6) is the first systematic Western presentation on the skill of conspiracies (Wood 1991, pp. lxvi–lxvii).

war, how it tends to degenerate into a gamble the longer it lasts. We are only at the start, but which way it will go is a stab in the dark. When people go to war, they do first what should be done last by going into action. Then, when they have setbacks, they grope for talks.[87]

According to Machiavelli, wars must be 'short and sharp', which was something understood particularly well by the Romans. They undertook a battle as swiftly as possible and if they won it, the conquered enemy strived to make peace as quickly as possible to avoid complete annihilation.[88] According to Gilbert, Machiavelli emphasised the brevity and sharpness of war because as the war becomes prolonged and the eagerness for battle declines, control of the troops becomes more difficult, discipline becomes lax and the soldiers begin to think only of saving their own skins.[89]

Thucydides further states that war does not follow a 'stated plan', but 'it improvises itself for the most part out of chance material as it goes along'.[90] The essential condition for success in situations of war – though not one that can guarantee success – is indeed cold-blooded action *in accordance with the unique characteristics of the situation*, where one is not frightened by surprises and unlucky coincidences. Due to the unpredictability arising from the lack of absolute rules, Thucydides emphasised the importance of *lesser issues* in warfare:

> War is unpredictable. Attacks usually come fiercely and suddenly, and often a smaller force defends itself better out of fear than a larger one that is unprepared out of overconfidence.[91]

Machiavelli indeed sees that the greatest merit of the military commander is his ability to anticipate the actions of the enemy. What makes this merit particularly great is that anticipation is extremely difficult, but when it succeeds and is combined with timely action it can be very decisive in the battle. On the other hand, even winning the battle does not necessarily guarantee final victory, if the victor does not *know* he has won. Such a deficit in knowledge opens the possibility for fatal errors:

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[87] Thucydides 1998, p. 31; cf. also p. 74 and p. 151.
[88] Machiavelli 1950, II.6, p. 299.
[89] Gilbert 1986, p. 25.
[90] Thucydides 1998, p. 74.
[91] Thucydides 1998, p. 63.

> For it has happened many a time that, when a battle has lasted until nightfall, the victor thinks himself beaten … as happened to Brutus and Cassius, the latter of whom perished in consequence of just such an error. For although the wing commanded by Brutus had been victorious, yet Cassius thought that it had been defeated, and that consequently the whole army was beaten; so that, despairing of his safety, he killed himself.[92]

In the battle between the Roman and Equean armies, both sides thought they had lost and thus retreated. The Roman centurion Tempanius, however, heard from wounded Equeans that their captain had abandoned their camp:

> Upon this news, he [Tempanius] returned to the Roman intrenchments, and saved them, and afterwards destroyed those of the Equeans, and then marched to Rome victorious.[93]

The lesson of Machiavelli's example is that in a battle between two armies that are in a state of chaos, the victor will be the one who 'is first *informed* of the condition of the other'.[94] It is not necessarily decisive who actually won the battle, because it is possible to turn the battle to one's advantage even after having lost it, if one finds out that the other side has not yet realised that it has been victorious.[95] Even at the moment of 'defeat' one must not surrender but, rather, continue the battle, because it is never certain that it will not be possible after all to win as a result of some unexpected encounter or at least to reduce the negative consequences of defeat by showing courage to the very end:

> … a prince who has an army composed of various materials, and finds that from want of money or friendly support he can no longer keep his army together, must be utterly demented if he does not take his chance of battle before his army shall have fallen to pieces; for by waiting he is sure to lose, but by trying a battle he may possibly be victorious.[96]

In other words, though weapons and other 'materialist' means would indeed be used up, there is still a possibility to play with knowledge and other

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[92] Machiavelli 1949, III.18, p. 384; Machiavelli 1950, III.18, p. 467.
[93] Machiavelli 1949, III.18, p. 385; Machiavelli 1950, III.18, p. 468.
[94] Machiavelli 1950, III.18, 468, my emphasis.
[95] An interesting work on the 'impossible victories' of war history is Perret 1997.
[96] Machiavelli 1950, III.10, p. 447.

'non-materialist' tools, the material importance of which, however, is anything but small. If one knows that the enemy does not know that they have won, it is still possible to turn the defeat into a victory.

5.3.1. *Kronos* and *Kairos*

The importance of being sensitive towards the unique characteristics of a situation can be further explained with the help of the ancient Greek differentiation between *Kronos* time and *Kairos* time. While *Kronos* refers to chronological or sequential time, *Kairos* refers to the 'timely moment' of action. Chronologically speaking, however, *Kairos* time might require either waiting patiently for a long time or immediate and rapid action; which course of action one chooses will depend on the particular situation.[97] One could say that, for Machiavelli, time in the *Kairos* sense is linked with the 'suitable moment [*aspetto la occasione*]' and its 'skilful utilisation [*la uso meglio*]'.[98]

Thus, for example, any rapid attempt to remove a danger that has already become a threat to the state might instead widen the danger and increase its negative consequences (cf. the hasty attempt to avert a conspiracy after it has been revealed):

> … when any evil arises within a republic or threatens it from without, that is
> to say, from an intrinsic or extrinsic cause, and has become so great as to fill
> everyone with apprehension, the most certain remedy by far is to temporize

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[97] In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines the relation between *kairos* and the 'good' as follows: '… since things are said to be good in as many ways as they are said to be (for things are called good both in the category of substance, as God and reason, and in quality, e.g. the virtue, and in quantity, e.g. that which is moderate, and in relation, e.g. the useful, *and in time, e.g. the right opportunity*, and in place, e.g. the right locality and the like), clearly the good cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it would not have been predicated in all the categories but in one only. Further, since of the things answering to one Idea there is one science, there would have been one science of all the goods; but as it is, there are many sciences even of the things that fall under one category, e.g. of opportunity (*for opportunity in war is studied by strategy and in disease by medicine), and the moderate in food is studied by medicine and in exercise by the science of gymnastics*' (1096a23–34; my emphasis). In addition to the problematics of the *suitable moment*, it is also interesting to pay attention to the question of Aristotle's view of the *suitable position*. It is obvious that timeliness requires being in the right place, because it would be impossible to be timely if one is in the wrong place (at least when the matter is assessed from the actor's viewpoint).
[98] Cf., for example, Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7.

with it, rather than to attempt to extirpate it; for almost invariably he who attempts to crush it will rather increase its force, and it will accelerate the harm apprehended from it.[99]

In this case, the question is about a danger that has already become, or has been allowed to become, large. The correct solution, however, would be to prevent the dangers lurking in the distance:

> When trouble is sensed well in advance it can easily be remedied; if you wait for it to show itself any medicine will be too late because the disease will have become incurable. … So it is in politics. Political disorders can be quickly healed if they are seen well in advance (and only a prudent ruler has such foresight); when, for lack of a diagnosis, they are allowed to grow in such a way that everyone can recognise them, remedies are too late.[100]

From the point of view of *Kronos* time, of chronological time, the above citations refer to a *Kairos* of active preventative measures in the very beginning of *Kronos* time; when it becomes evident that many people are already aware of the danger, one should not act at that particular moment but rather wait for a later moment in *Kronos* time and the favourable *Kairos* it entails, in which case the possible negative consequences of the preventive measures are less than if one had taken immediate action – if they even then can be endured at all.

Thus the essential criteria for successful action is not whether one acts courageously and rapidly or cautiously and slowly but whether the means of action are in accordance with the situation, whether the action is timely,[101] and whether the actor stands by his decision after having made it.[102]

5.4. Lady *Fortuna* and the young men

At the end of Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli makes the generalisation that it is usually better to be brave than cautious:

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[99] Machiavelli 1949, I.33, p. 167; Machiavelli 1950, I.33, p. 198.
[100] Machiavelli 1949, III, p. 10; Machiavelli 2004, III, p. 12.
[101] Cf., especially Machiavelli 1950, III.9, p. 441.
[102] Machiavelli 1950, II.15, p. 324; and III.6, p. 424.

> … because *fortuna* is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary
> to beat and coerce her. Experience shows that she is more often subdued by
> men who do this than by those who act coldly.[103]

It is thus understandable why Machiavelli ends Chapter 25 of *The Prince* by
placing his hopes in the young rather than the wise and cautious elderly.
Similarly, in *The Art of War*, he very often is of the opinion that young men
are most suited to discuss the skills and duties of war.[104]

Even though elderly people and others with great life experiences have
more experience in general about competent procedures than young people,
they also have more prejudices, ingrained habits, and less courage both to
adopt new procedures and to *act* actively in response to the new, unique and
surprising demands of the aleatory conjuncture.

> Always, being a woman, she [*fortuna*] favours young men, because they
> are less circumspect and more ardent, and because they command her with
> greater audacity.[105]

Even when a position is to be filled that requires the 'prudence of the elderly
[*prudezia di vecchio*]', it is, in Machiavelli's opinion, better to choose someone
young who has already performed noteworthy *deeds* than a wise old person:

> … in electing a young man to an office which demands the prudence of an
> old man, it is necessary, if the election rests with the people, that he should
> have made himself worthy of that distinction by some extraordinary action.
> And when a young man has so much merit as to have distinguished himself
> by some notable action, it would be a great loss for the state not to be able
> to avail of his talents and services; and that he should have to wait until old
> age has robbed him of that vigour of mind and activity of which the state
> might have the benefit in his earlier age, as Rome had of Valerius Corvinus,
> of Scipio, of Pompey, and of many others who had the honours of triumph
> when very young men.[106]

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[103] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 81; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 108.
[104] Machiavelli 1949, III, p. 512.
[105] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 25, p. 81; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 25, p. 108.
[106] Machiavelli 1949, I.60, pp. 224–5; Machiavelli 1950, I.60, p. 270.

Prudence and the lessons of histories or the experience linked with it do not, in the case of Machiavelli, mean single-mindedly sticking to what is old or what has been found to work ('tried and tested' thinking), but rather turning, when the time calls for it, to *virtuoso* skills and the power to act by questioning the methods and laws that previously prevailed. This, however, does not mean rejecting the lessons of the past but, on the contrary, returning to the principles and procedures of those men of action from history that were capable of subversive and courageous solutions. In this sense, a return to the 'ancient' refers to *subversive* action modelled on the texts of antiquity. Machiavelli's aim for reformation is indeed radical in relation to the conservative and reactionary 'new' that his own (pre)modern time represented.

Assessed in the light of Machiavelli's own context, his trust in youth is probably because, like the new prince, they do not have as strong ideological and material ties to the existing powers of the conjuncture of the Apennine peninsula as the older generation has. Even though Machiavelli wants to teach the youth about the 'good old times', his goal is subversive in relation to the corrupt modern times. An example offered by the past is that of *change*:

> But the matter being so manifest that everybody sees it, I shall boldly and openly say what I think of the former times and of the present, so as to excite in the minds of the young men who may read my writings the desire to avoid the evils of the latter, and to prepare themselves to imitate the virtues of the former, whenever fortune presents them the occasion. For it is the duty of an honest man to teach others that good which the malignity of the times and of fortune has prevented his doing himself; so that amongst the many capable ones whom he has instructed, some one perhaps, more favoured by Heaven, may perform it.[107]

One particular 'youth', which Machiavelli presents in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* as an example of a purposeful, courageous and unprejudiced batterer of *fortuna* – but also someone battered by *fortuna* – is the Count Valentino, Cesare Borgia, who, even by sixteenth-century standards, died young. The lessons of this particular example open up in two directions. The life and deeds of Cesare Borgia describe what taking action in an aleatory conjuncture entails. At the

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[107] Machiavelli 1949, II. 'Proemio', p. 230; Machiavelli 1950, II. 'Introduction', pp. 274–5.

same time, we get a picture of what the aleatory project and strategy of a new prince uniting Italy could and should be. In the following section, I will discuss the first of these two directions, after which I will focus on Borgia as the 'new prince' and as a historical example of the project of the new prince that aims to tame aleatoriness, yet is still fundamentally aleatory.

5.5. The rise and fall of Cesare Borgia

As mentioned earlier, Machiavelli criticises the indolent [*oziosi*] princes and republics of his time because they aimed at all costs to avoid or postpone battle. Their attitude, however, does not lead to success, but instead offers the enemy the opportunity to decide where the battle will eventually take place.[108] The mark of a skilful man of action (or state) is indeed that he (it) actively aims to use the *Kairos* time (or *occasione*) to his own advantage and to organise the objective *fortuna* so that 'it may not have occasion, with every revolution of the sun, to display her influence and power'.[109] In other words, through the skilful use of *Kairos* the man of action can battle against the inevitable cycle of *Kronos*. According to Althusser, the central goal of the project of the new prince is to become liberated from the Polybian rise and fall of forms of government. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli characterises this attempt to organise *fortuna* as follows:

> … where men have but little wisdom and valour, fortune more signally displays her power; and as she is variable, so the states and republics under her influence also fluctuate, and will continue to fluctuate until some ruler shall arise who is so great an admirer of antiquity as to be able to govern such states so that fortune may not have occasion, with every revolution of the sun, to display her influence and power.[110]

Machiavelli's account of Cesare Borgia's attempt to unify the Apennine peninsula is also interesting from the point of view of the problematics of aleatoriness, because it highlights its dual nature: on the one hand, Borgia's campaign

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[108] Machiavelli 1950, III.10, p. 446.
[109] Machiavelli 1950, II.30, p. 388.
[110] Machiavelli 1949, II.30, p. 319; Machiavelli 1950, II.30, p. 388; cf. Machiavelli 2004, Chapters 25 and 26.

is an expression of an attempt to organise and tame *fortuna* and, on the other hand, its failure is an indication of how the aleatory encounters may destroy the plans of even the most skilful man of action if he cannot 'enroot [*enracinement*]' his power so that it is no longer strongly bound to the aleatory fluctuations of *fortuna*:

> . . . if we consider the duke's [Cesare Borgia's] career as a whole, we find that he laid strong foundations for the future. And I do not consider it superfluous to discuss these, because I know no better precepts to give a new prince than ones derived from Cesare's actions; and if what he instituted was of no avail, this was not his fault but arose from the extraordinary and inordinate malice of fortune.[111]

According to Althusser, Cesare Borgia was initially a politically insignificant figure, even though he was the son of Pope Alexander VI, a cardinal and, already at the age of sixteen, an archbishop. His insignificance was due to the fact that he was not the ruler of any city-state. In order to gain political influence, he renounced his ecclesiastical titles 'to seek his fortune in the secular world'. Althusser characterises his actions and origins as follows:

> Politically, he is nothing. For want of anything else, his father offers him a piece of the Papal States, a scrap of territory at the outermost bounds, in the Romagna: a place that is not a state, in a political domain bereft of any structure, since it is one of those states wherein there is neither prince who rules nor subjects who are ruled – and, moreover, part of the Papal States. Cesare is going to make a new state out of this politically *shapeless* site and material, and become its New Prince. His political practice combines all the requisite features for success. He starts out with good luck, but in order to transform it into a durable structure through his *virtù*.[112]

Machiavelli presents his analysis of Cesare Borgia's actions and their failures in Chapter 7, 'New principalities acquired with the help of fortune and foreign arms', of *The Prince*. In this chapter, he discusses 'private citizens who become princes purely by good fortune . . .'.[113] For these figures, the rise to power comes easily, making 'the journey as if they had wings', because they did not need to

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[111] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, pp. 21–2; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 28.
[112] Althusser 1995a, p. 131; Althusser 1999, p. 78, Althusser's emphasis.
[113] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 20; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 26.

do anything in order to get power in the first place.[114] However, if rising to power was easy for them, staying in power was doubly difficult, due to the power of alien *fortuna*:

> Such rulers rely on the goodwill and fortune of those who have elevated
> them, and both these are *capricious, unstable* things. They do not know how
> to maintain their position, and they cannot do so.[115]

In other words, the wheel of fortune 'lifts' such rulers into power, but, having passed the highest point, they immediately start to descend because they have no means to combat the rotational movement in fortune. Machiavelli even touches on the meaning of shifting one's position with changes in *fortuna* in his poem collection *Di Fortuna*:

> A man who could leap from wheel to wheel,
> would always be happy and fortunate.[116]

In particular, those princes who rose from private persons to become rulers usually ended up in ruin. Having mostly led their lives as private persons, they did not know how a ruler must proceed in order to preserve his power.[117] Such 'amateur princes' did not master the political praxis of a prince. Because the roots and use of their power were not inherited, not 'ready rooted', they themselves would have to create the solid foundations of their power. The inexperienced princes or rulers, however, were unable to do this:

> … governments set up overnight, like everything in nature whose growth
> is forced, lack strong roots and ramifications. So they are destroyed in the
> first bad spell. This is inevitable unless those who have suddenly become
> princes are of such prowess that overnight they can learn how to preserve
> what fortune has suddenly tossed into their laps, and unless they can then
> lay foundations such as other princes would have already been building on.[118]

Even Cesare Borgia did not inherit his power and prowess as a ruler. It was his father's skill in utilising other actors of the conjuncture and the

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 27; my emphasis.
[116] Machiavelli 1989, p. 747.
[117] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7.
[118] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 21; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 27.

disputes between them, thus creating opportunities for action for his son, which enabled his sudden rise to power. Despite the fact that Cesare's father was head of the Catholic Church, he was not able to offer his son a ready-made principality to rule. Instead, he could arrange some land and allies of the Catholic Church for Cesare, from which his son would be able to found his own state.

In Machiavelli's telling of the story, Alexander VI acquired the French king Louis XII as an ally for himself and his son. The Venetians had been in the process of recalling the French king to Italy so that together they would destroy the principality of Milan led by Francesco Sforza. The Pope further promoted what was, from the point of view of the unification of Italy, a questionable act by promising to annul Louis's first marriage in return for soldiers for the conquering of Romagna. Cesare indeed went on to conquer Romagna and defeat the Colonna family that had ruled there.

At this point, the powerful Orsini and Colonna factions, as well as Louis XII, began to show signs of worry about the actions of Cesare, who had become too successful, and thus turned against him. In order to retain his conquests, 'the duke determined to rely no longer on the arms and fortunes of others'.[119] Cesare undermined the power of the Orsini and Colonna factions by awarding offices, commissions and other honours to their aristocrat supporters and then, at a 'good opportunity', he crushed the Orsinis, having already dispersed the Colonna factions. Here, he took to the cunning of the fox by letting the Orsinis believe that he strived for conciliation, but when the moment of conciliation came, in the last days of 1502, he had the heads of the Orsini factions strangled.[120]

Through his skilful actions, Cesare managed to strengthen his power in Romagna, together with the duchy of Urbino.[121] With the help of his governor, Remirro de Orco, he managed to pacify and to unify Romagna. According to Machiavelli, the earlier rulers of Romagna had been weak and 'quicker to despoil their subjects than to govern them well. They had given them cause

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[119] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 29.

[120] Cf. Machiavelli 1949, pp. 637–43. Machiavelli himself was present at the events that led to the destruction of the Orsinis. He describes these events in a report to the *Dieci*, the council of ten, and in a more complete form in his text 'Descrizione del modo tenuto dal Duca Valentino nello ammazzare Vitellozzo Vitelli, Oliverotto da Fermo, il Signor Pagolo e il Duca di Gravina Orsini' (1503) (Machiavelli 1949, pp. 637–43).

[121] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 30.

for anarchy rather than union . . .'.[122] Though he returned order to Romagna in a short time, de Orco was a cruel man of action, his excessive authority even earning Cesare hatred from the population. In order to get rid of this problem, Cesare established a 'popular' civil tribunal, under an 'eminent president', in which every city had a representative.[123] This tribunal made de Orco a scapegoat on to whom the people's feelings of hatred were displaced and condensed:

> Knowing also that the severities of the past had earned him a certain amount of hatred, to purge the minds of the people and to win them over completely he determined to show that if cruelties had been inflicted they were not his doing but prompted by the harsh nature of his minister. This gave Cesare a pretext; then, one morning, Remirro's body was found cut in two pieces on the piazza at Cesena, with a block of wood and a bloody knife beside it. The brutality of this spectacle kept the people of the Romagna at once appeased and stupefied.[124]

Cesare's actions, particularly in Romagna, indicate to Machiavelli how a new prince must act in order to *enroot* his power. Cesare and his father skilfully utilised party schisms and disagreements between the ruling groups, so that they weakened one another both in absolute terms and particularly in relation to the Borgias. The actions of the nobility in Romagna, such as their capriciousness and cruelty, caused fear and insecurity among the subjects. But, in calming and stabilising the conjuncture, the prince, Cesare, attained the trust and friendship of his subjects.

In other words, due to the despotism and disputes of the Orsinis and Colonnas, the conjuncture of Romagna was characterised by instability and restlessness and with a high degree of aleatoriness. For Cesare, this highly aleatory situation gave him the opportunity to gain power because none of the earlier ruling families were strong and unified enough to oppose him, or popular enough to make the people turn against him. It was easy for him to act as the saviour of the population of Romagna, and who would finally stabilise

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 31.
[124] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 24; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 31.

and pacify this conjuncture burdened by the power of the nobility. What made the task easier was that the population that lived under the capriciousness of the nobility probably expected nothing good of Cesare either:

> And as men, who receive favours from someone they expected to do them ill, they are under a greater obligation to their benefactor; just so the people can in an instant become more amicably disposed towards the prince than if he had seized power by their favour.[125]

Though executing de Orco and placing his split body *on display* was indeed a grotesque and brutal act of violence, it ultimately was a question of performing a skilful, popular-ideological act. By means of this *public spectacle*, Cesare managed to produce the desired ideological displacement and condensation. At the same time as the hatred of the people for de Orco condensed and took hold, their respect was displaced and condensed towards Cesare himself, whose 'popular' reputation was thus strengthened. Cesare became a 'benefactor' who helped the population of Romagna to dissipate their class hatred. If Cesare had defended his vassal, he himself would have fallen prey to the class hatred that the population of Romagna already felt for its earlier rulers, and, at the same time, would have shown that he belittled the feelings of the population. Cesare indeed acted like a skilful analyst who takes seriously the transferences of those he tends to, but does not let himself be carried away by them. Instead, he lets his protégé deal with those 'negative' feelings that arise, for instance, from the relationship of the child to the father in a way that forwards the therapy. Sentencing de Orco to death in the 'popular' court of law indeed shows that Cesare was able to apply the central principles proposed by Machiavelli:

> … every free state ought to afford the people the opportunity of giving vent, so to say, to their ambition; and above all those republics which on important occasions have to avail themselves of this very people.[126]

Machiavelli even goes as far to say that the Prince must be so cunning as to let others take responsibility for unpopular acts:

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[125] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 9, p. 33; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, p. 43.
[126] Machiavelli 1950, I.4, p. 104; cf., I.7; I.8; I.16; I.24; III.6.

> ... princes should delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures and keep in their own hands the means of winning favours. Again, I conclude that a prince should value the nobles, but not make himself hated by the people.[127]

Cesare understood that it was in his own best interests to side with the people (*molti*, 'the many'), against the nobility (*pochi*, 'the few') (de Orco included) in the class struggle between them. The nobility, who were like him, were a continuous threat to his position, but it was possible to form from the people the best possible security against such a threat.

One could indeed say that the high aleatoriness of both Romagna and other areas of the Apennine peninsula was due to the capriciousness of those few in power.[128] Cesare was able to skilfully take advantage of this situation. He showed that he was a more skilful and more judicious man of action than others like him, but he also understood that he had to rely on the population of Romagna, that is, the people, whose lives were made difficult by the unpredictable and arbitrary actions of the nobility.

Taming the aleatoriness of the conjuncture with the help of 'the many' was advantageous not only to Cesare but also for those who benefited from it. From Cesare's point of view, the 'the many' were a stabilising factor and the counterforce to the rule of 'the few'. From the point of view of the 'the many', Cesare was a saviour who would return peace and order to the restless country. Here, Cesare followed the principle emphasised by Machiavelli, according to which 'there is no leeway for the few when the many are firmly sustained'.[129] In other words, as long as the population of Romagna trusted and relied on Cesare, also 'the few' were kept under control.

5.5.1. Cesare's misfortune

Cesare did not manage to enroot his power anywhere else than in Romagna before his father fell ill and died, nor was he able to break his dependency on the *fortuna* of his father and other nobility.

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[127] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19, p. 81.
[128] Cf. Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19.
[129] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 18, p. 76.

Even though Cesare acted in a skilful way when preparing for his father's death and the papal election that would follow, he had not yet reached a situation where unfortunate encounters (the whims of *fortuna*) were no longer able to crush his power base. Apart from his base in Romagna, everything else was still 'up in the air [*in aria*]',[130] and any unfortunate encounters could still destroy his project.[131]

Because Cesare's *fortuna* was still dependent on the Pope, he had to fear that his father's successor would not be favourable towards him but, on the contrary, would endeavour to take back what Alexander had given his son.[132] Cesare guarded against such disastrous consequences in four ways:

> … first, by destroying all the families of the rulers he had despoiled, thus depriving the pope of the opportunity of using them against him; second, by winning over all the patricians in Rome … in order to hold the pope in check; third, by controlling the College of Cardinals as far as he could; fourth, by acquiring so much power himself before Alexander died that he could on his own withstand an initial attack.[133]

Cesare had already been successful in the first three tasks and the fourth was also almost carried through. He was about to become the Duke of Tuscany, he already controlled Perugia and Piombino and he had subjugated Pisa under his protectorate. Furthermore, the French and Spanish, in their battle for the kingdom of Naples, had ended up in a situation where both were forced to vie for his friendship. With the two sides placated, he could attack Pisa, after which Lucca and Siena would surrender, and Florence would have to seriously consider doing the same.[134]

In short, at the time of Alexander VI's death, his son Cesare Borgia controlled almost all of north and central Italy. But then, to his great misfortune, Cesare fell ill. Furthermore, his troops were caught between the armies of the French and Spanish kings:

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[130] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 33.
[131] Cf. Machiavelli's discussion about the danger of mountain passes even for a powerful army. Passes are particularly dangerous because, when marching through, the army cannot utilise all of its power, and its whole *fortuna* is put at risk (Machiavelli 1950, I, p. 23; cf. III, p. 12 and III, p. 37).
[132] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 32.
[133] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, pp. 24–5; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 32.
[134] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 32.

> The duke was a man of such ferocity and *virtù*, and he understood so well
> that men must be either won over or destroyed, and the foundations he laid
> in so short a time were so sound, that, had those armies not been bearing
> down on him, or had he been in good health, he would have overcome every
> difficulty.[135]

Had his health not failed him, Cesare would probably have coped also with
the Spanish and French. Machiavelli actually conversed with Cesare the day
after Julius II was elected.[136] In Machiavelli's opinion, Cesare falling ill at the
worst possible moment can indeed be considered the ultimate reason for his
destruction and the failure of his project to unite Italy. It was because of his
ill health that he made his only mistake in letting an Italian cardinal, instead
of either a Spanish or French cardinal, be nominated as pope. Cesare had not
offended these foreign cardinals, unlike their Italian colleagues. Had the new
pope been French or Spanish, Cesare would also not have had to fear the
French or Spanish armies breathing down his neck. At the decisive moment,
however, he did not 'remember' that, despite good deeds, 'great men' do not
forget past offences – even when they become Pope:

> Whoever believes that with great men new services wipe out old injuries
> deceives himself. So the duke's choice was a mistaken one; and it was the
> cause of his ultimate ruin.[137]

Had he been well, Cesare would not have had such a fatal 'lapse of memory'
and the Italians would not have been able to take revenge on him, and the
spiral of destruction would not have begun.[138] The situation would have
calmed and Cesare would have become the new prince of the united north
and central Italy – if, that is, it is historically justified to believe Machiavelli's
theoretically interesting explanation.

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[135] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 33; translation modified.
[136] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 33.
[137] Machiavelli 1949, Chapter 7, p. 27; Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 7, p. 35.
[138] Cesare Borgia fled to Spain where he was killed in a battle in spring 1507 while in
the service of his brother-in-law the King of Navarre (Mallet 1987, p. 262).

5.6. 'A stable people'

In Chapter 9 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli refers to the 'trite proverb [*proverbio trito*]', 'that he who builds on the people builds on mud'.[139] According to Machiavelli, the proverb is true only in the case where some private 'grand citizen' assumes that the people [*popolo*] could free him from the 'danger from enemies and from the magistrates'. Nothing, however, in this case motivates the people to interfere in this mutual battle among the nobility [*i grandi*].

> But if it is a Prince who builds his power on the people, one who can command and is a man of courage, who does not despair in adversity, who does not fail to take precautions, and who wins general allegiance by his personal qualities and the instruments he establishes, he will never be let down by the people; and he will be found to have established his *power securely*.[140]

Even though the main theme of Chapter 9 of *The Prince* is civic principalities [*pricipato civile*], the following general principle is also put forward:[141]

> A man who becomes prince with the help of the nobles finds it more difficult to maintain his position than one who does so with the help of the people. As prince, he finds himself surrounded by many who believe they are his equals, and because of that he cannot command or manage them the way he wants.

> A man who becomes prince by favour of the people finds himself standing alone, and he has near him either no one or very few not prepared to take orders. In addition, it is impossible to satisfy the nobles honourably, without doing violence to the interests of others; but this can be done as far as the people are concerned. The people are more honest in their intentions than the nobles are, because the latter want to oppress the people, whereas they want only not to be oppressed.[142]

It was also previously established that the nobility do not 'respect' the prince because, in their eyes, he is simply 'one of us'. According to them, anyone

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[139] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, p. 43.
[140] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, p. 44.
[141] Cited earlier in connection with Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli; cf., Chapter 4.5.
[142] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, pp. 41–2.

could *in principle* fulfill his role. In other words, if the prince relies on the powerful few like him, he would be unable to retain a distance from them, so that, when the opportunity arises, they could dispose of him. The prince that has been placed in a position of power by the nobility can be characterised as an unstable interim solution in the battle for power among the nobles, whereas a prince that relies on the people challenges the highly aleatory logic of the whole battle for power. In other words, the prince of the powerful few is a temporary compromise in a particular *trend* of the highly aleatory conjuncture, whereas the prince that relies on the people (the prince of the many) represents a qualitative change in the structure of the conjuncture and the aleatory logic in the fluctuating trends. This could be described as a displacement in the class struggle between the nobility and the people, where the prince becomes the ally of the latter against the former, and in return receives a group of loyal subjects.[143] From the point of view of the position of the nobles, such a situation may well lead to catastrophe, as occurred in the case of the Colonni and Orsini families in Romagna. We can thus summarise the alliance between the prince and the people as follows:

Machiavelli's theoretical *differentia specifica* lies in the fact that he pays attention to the aleatory and arbitrary features of a particular case and the 'personal knowledge' of the man of action who takes such features into account. One can, however, define an essential 'subtype' of such self-reflective 'maker's knowledge', that is, the knowledge and skill of controlling the people with the help of which the prince can lower the degree of the humanly objective aleatoriness of the conjuncture. In other words, the prince's knowledge and skill in governing are essential dimensions of his 'maker's knowledge'. In being able to control the people – for instance, by gaining their loyalty and creating from them a disciplined 'national' army – the prince also succeeds in his battle against other men of action, that is, the nobles like himself.

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[143] Machiavelli states as follows about the battle between the few and the many in the beginning of Chapter 9 of *The Prince*: 'These two different dispositions are found in every city; and the people are everywhere anxious not to be dominated or oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles are out to dominate and oppress the people.' (Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 9, p. 41.)

From the point of view of Machiavelli's historical context, this means that the prince can produce an extensive autocracy in which different 'embankments and dykes' – such as laws and the army – restrict the actions of the nobles and prevent them from getting too close to the prince, while at the same time allowing the people to live and work in peace.[144] In this case, the people are no longer a reckless multitude [*multitudine*] that threatens the prince, but 'a people' disciplined and ideologised by, for instance, an army based on conscription and laws. The degree of the humanly objective aleatoriness of such a 'popular' conjuncture is lower than in one where no power rises above any others to achieve a hegemonic position.

The organisation of a durable state is Machiavelli's concrete historical solution to the problem of the high degree of humanly objective aleatoriness resulting from the oligarchy of the Apennine peninsula. Like Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume and Rousseau after him, Machiavelli is counted among those who assume that it is specifically the many [*molti*] or 'a people [*popolo*]' that has a stabilising and less 'capricious' potential, and with the help of which the aleatory situation created by the few [*pochi*] or nobles – those competing with the prince – could be controlled and tamed.

This idea is evident, for example, in Chapter 58 of Book One of *The Discourses*, titled 'The people are wiser and more constant than princes'. In the beginning of the chapter, Machiavelli mentions the idea favoured by 'Livius as well as all other historians' according to which 'nothing is more uncertain and inconstant than the multitude [*molitudine*]'. In Machiavelli's opinion, however, such 'authorities' are wrong in this matter because they do not make a difference between the reckless and the law-abiding.

An essential criterion is indeed whether or not a prince or multitude is subjugated to the laws: 'Both alike are liable to err when they are without any control'.[145] When either subjugated to the law or when freed from the law, the multitude is more stable and prudent than the prince.[146]

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[144] In the case of Borgia, Machiavelli refers to how other *grandi* were afraid that he would become the only armed man in Italy. If Borgia had been able to attain a monopoly on weapons on the Apennine peninsula, overturning his power would have been extremely difficult (cf. Machiavelli 1949, p. 637; Machiavelli 1989, p. 163).

[145] Machiavelli 1950, I.58, p. 262.

[146] Machiavelli 1950, I.58, p. 265.

The stability of the people can, in Machiavelli's opinion, be seen in the 'universal opinion [*opinione universale*]':[147]

> … we see universal opinion prognosticate events in such a wonderful manner that it would almost seem as if the people had some occult *virtù*, which enables them to foresee the good and the evil.[148]

The viewpoint put forward in the above citation is, in an interesting way, congruent with the definition of chance that Hume proposes in his essay 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' (written 1742), and which again is worth picking up on here. Already in the first lines of the essay, Hume states that any person who claims that some incident is due to chance, at the same time discards all further investigation and remains under the influence of the same ignorance as all other people. Such references to chance do not encourage a search for the unknown reasons that influence the event in question but 'lulls one into the sleep of the ignorance'. On the other hand, the 'skilled writer' may, in volume after volume, exaggerate his knowledge by presenting numerous 'clear causes' for this same event. According to Hume, however, neither of these alternatives is to be favoured. The first leads to passivity and the latter to cheap causal explanations. As an alternative, he proposes the following general rule:

> The distinguishing between chance and causes must depend upon every particular man's sagacity, in considering every particular incident. But, if I were to assign any general rule to help us in applying this distinction, it would be the following, What depends upon a few persons is, in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes: What arises from a great number, may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes.[149]

If, for example, a dice has a slight defect, this may not become apparent after a few throws, but will do so after a series of throws, while the frequencies of results of a faultless dice begin to even out.[150] In a comparable way, the

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[147] As will become clear later, with the terms *universale* or *università* Machiavelli refers to the majority of the people.
[148] Machiavelli 1950, I.58, p. 263, translation modified.
[149] Hume 1987, p. 112.
[150] The complete levelling off of the frequency of each number on the dice would

prevailing passions of a society do not necessarily become evident from a few individuals or a study on the individual level but, rather, regularities can be discerned in the case of large groups ('the multitude').[151]

> In like manner, when causes beget a particular inclination or passion, at a certain time, and among a certain people; though many *individuals* may escape the contagion, and be ruled by passions peculiar to themselves; yet the *multitude* will certainly be seized by the common affection, and be governed by it in all their actions.[152]

From the viewpoint of human societies, chance indeed refers to those exceptions or passions of 'exceptional individuals' that are not comparable to those influencing the large groups – the common sense prevailing in the society at any given time. Individual differences and exceptions – chance and surprises – do not prevent us, however, from seeing prevailing and common passions in the society. In other words, certain general tendencies prevail in society, which are not manifested in the actions of all individuals, but which create the social and general conditions for, amongst other things, the birth of sciences and skills. Seen from a different angle, Hume's idea refers to the point that it is specifically by producing 'public opinion' among the large groups that it is possible to create stability in society, and thus to tame chance.

In his essay, Hume's *viewpoint* on chance is not natural scientific, nor even metaphysical-cosmological. For him, chance is close to the concepts of exception and unpredictability: the passions of an exceptional individual are, in their exceptionality, unpredictable because it is not possible to deduce anything about them from the passions and dominant trends and tendencies of the era, which would be evident when studying the behaviour of large groups.

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require an infinite series of throws, because in the finite series – 'in the long run' – the relative frequency of each number only approaches 1 in 6. From this follows that probability claims cannot be verified or falsified through experience.

[151] Gramsci refers to the law of large numbers when he argues that when assessing the events of history it is not meaningful to seek 'a metaphysical law of determinism' nor to try to pose '"general" laws of causality'. Instead, one must seek 'permanent' effective forces, the criterion for which is a certain degree of regularity. Here also the law of large numbers may be very useful if it is used in a metaphorical sense (Gramsci 1975, p. 1479); in other words, it refers in the case of history to those general tendencies that are not evident in a study on the individual level but are evident on the level of large masses.

[152] Hume 1987, p. 112, my emphasis.

In this context, it is not by chance that Hume uses the term 'multitude' to refer to large groups, though he uses it to refer to the 'commons' of society, in order to differentiate them from the 'cultivated' upper layers of society.

In relation to Machiavelli's thinking, Hume's view can be interpreted to mean that it is specifically 'the many' and its 'public opinion' that represent and promote the stabilising and predictable element in society, whereas the actions of 'exceptional individuals', which are few in number, are aleatory in their unexpectedness. The goals of the latter are characterised by ambition and a continuous striving and readiness to improve their own positions through different tricks and plots, whereas for the majority it suffices that they can undertake their daily tasks and live and think 'as they have always done'. Machiavelli encapsulates this idea in his claim that the people [*populi*] love peace and therefore also unadventurous princes.[153]

If the prince is not a tyrant or capricious in his actions, the people will have no need to look for something else to replace him. John Locke makes a remark that resembles the viewpoints of Machiavelli and Hume regarding those who doubt that ignorant people, who assess matters on the basis of their changeful views, would be capricious and ever-dissatisfied, when, on the contrary, they are suspicious of change:

> To this perhaps it will be said, that the people being ignorant, and always discontented, to lay the foundation of government in the unsteady opinion, and uncertain humour of the people, is to expose it to certain ruin; and *no government will be able long to subsist* if the people may set up a new legislative, whenever they take offence at the old one. To this I answer: Quite contrary. People are not so easily got out of their old forms, as some are apt to suggest. They are hardly to be prevailed with to amend the acknowledged faults, in the frame they have been accustomed to. And if there be any original defects, or adventitious ones introduced by time, or corruption; it's not an easy thing to get them changed, even when all world sees there is an opportunity for it. This slowness and aversion in the people to quit their old constitutions, has in the many revolutions which have been seen in this kingdom, in this and former ages, still kept us to, or, after some interval of fruitless attempts, still brought us back again to our old legislative of king, lords and commons:

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153 Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19, p. 82.

and whatever provocations have made the crown be taken from some of our princes' heads, they never carried the people so far, as to place it in another line.[154]

In other words, a stable people led by the prince are his protection against both the direct intervention of the nobility in his affairs and their hatred. When creating a stable people, the prince disciplines the uncontrollable multitude to become a controlled people, which, in turn, receives the opportunity to live and work in peace. When the prince allies himself with the multitude and does not base his power on the privileges he offers the few, the nobility, the multitude becomes both its own best and the prince's best protection against the nobility. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli proposes that the prince who wants to rely on the nobility [*gentiluomini*] has to bribe them with privileges, castles and estates, but must then keep the rest of the population in order through forceful measures.[155]

This juxtaposition is in an interesting way parallel also to the 'subversive' viewpoint that Spinoza directed at the multitude or masses, as Etienne Balibar characterises it (referring here to Antonio Negri's research on Spinoza).[156] Even though, for Spinoza, the masses are indeed a 'threat' (the fear that the masses are inspired and set in motion) and he has a very negative attitude towards revolution and civil war, on the other hand, the multitude and their feelings are a central starting point in his historical analyses, and indeed a phenomenon he feels has to be taken very seriously.[157]

Spinoza does not moralistically judge or attempt imaginarily (by creating a utopia or theory about a perfect state) to 'stop' the movement of the masses, but, rather, wants to understand the actual dynamics of the masses from the viewpoint of the 'logic' of the imagination, affects and passions that influence them. The masses not only *feel* but also *become inspired*. Becoming inspired is simultaneously – ambivalently – a serious threat and the starting point of *both* a non-moralistic and realistic analysis *and* political position that strive to understand the affective 'fear of the masses'.[158]

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[154] Locke 1982, XIX, § 223, pp. 136–7; Locke's emphasis.
[155] Machiavelli 1950, I.50, p. 242.
[156] Balibar 1994, p. 5; see also Sprinker 1995, especially pp. 205–7.
[157] Spinoza's subversive and compassionate view of the *multitudo* has also been emphasised by Antonio Negri (cf., e.g., Negri 1992).
[158] Balibar 1994, p. 5.

The *realism* and subversiveness of Spinoza's view are specifically based on the idea that he does not deny or disregard the affects of the masses and thus get rid of them. Instead, he outlines those institutions and practices through which destructive affects would be transformed into constructive and rational affects (affects cannot disappear, but they can be transformed).[159] Such a state [*imperii corpus*] can only be just and aim for the common good, because a despotic state, where the masses are kept under control with violence and by force, inevitably ends up in a vicious circle, where violence feeds the fear of the masses and the fear of the masses feeds violence. The state's problem of justice cannot be solved, however, with an imaginary social contract. The measure of justice is to what extent the state institutions can apply the *de facto* affects of individuals to collective affects that produce a common good.[160]

According to Balibar, the problem of the fear of the masses is encapsulated within the question of the material conditions of achieving unanimity:

> The existence of the state is that of an individual or individuals that cannot exist without forging for itself a 'quasi-soul', that is, the analogue of an individual will: 'the body of the state (*imperii corpus*) must be directed as if by a single soul (*una veluti mente duci*), and this is why the will of the commonwealth (*civitatis voluntas*) must be taken for the will for all (*pro omnium voluntate*)' (PT, III, 5). But this unanimity is not acquired automatically … It must be constructed as a function of the constraints that constitute the movements of the minds or souls of the mass (PT, VIII, 41: *multitudinis animos movere*) and of the greater or lesser knowledge or information about the commonwealth that their own instruction and the form of institutions procure for different individuals. The problem of unanimity is identical to that of the material conditions of obedience, hence to that of the conditions that make possible a representation of the multitude in the state, and to that of the condition of an effective power of decision-making.[161]

It becomes clear from the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (published in 1670), written before the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus*, that the greatest threat to the state arises from within.

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[159] Also Althusser emphasises the conversion of sad [*tristes*] affects into joyous [*joyeuses*] affects (Althusser 1993a, p. 107).

[160] Balibar 1994, pp. 17–19.

[161] Balibar 1994, p. 17.

It has never come to the point that the security of the state was less threatened by its citizens (*cives*) than by external enemies (*hostes*) and that those in power (*qui imperium tenet*) feared the former less than latter. The Roman Republic is testimony to this.[162]

In this regard, Balibar suggests that Spinoza borrowed from Machiavelli the idea that, in order to prevent the tendency towards civil war and the vicious circle of violence, the prince's own subjects must be armed:

Whence comes the necessity (taken over from Machiavelli) of arming the people, who themselves represent the principal danger, on the condition of being able to create a devotion and a discipline which become for them like a second nature. Whence comes above all the necessity of limiting the violence of the state against individuals so that it does not lead to the counter-violence of the masses.[163]

Applied to Machiavelli, this means that, among other things, the prince must with the help of the army adapt 'the many [*multitudine*]' so that they live and act according to their 'second nature'. In this case, the army and other state institutions are no longer primarily an oppositional power to the multitude, retaining power through violence or some other means, but rather they are ideological apparatuses which produce and reproduce the 'second nature' of the multitude, which, in Machiavelli's case, is defined as, among other things, *virtù civile* and *virtù organizzato*.

According to Balibar, Spinoza differs, however, on this issue from Machiavelli because the latter, 'notwithstanding his reflection on the organization of the army, limited himself to an analysis of state power as a source or object of political strategy'.[164] For Machiavelli, the multitude is not a political subject in the same sense as an actor, yet he does not exclude the possibility that the multitude could one day become such an actor. In this sense, he indeed differs decisively from his contemporaries Guicciardini and Vettori, who, on the basis of the existing situation, saw that the multitude was not up to the role of being a political subject other than in the sense of being a 'subject [*subjectus*]' under the prince.[165]

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[162] Spinoza 1951, p. 217, cited in Balibar 1994, p. 14.
[163] Balibar 1994, p. 14.
[164] Balibar 1994, p. 23.
[165] According to Ugo Dotti (Dotti 1979, pp. 22–32), in their writings, Guicciardini and

Towards the end of *The Discourses*, Machiavelli indeed enigmatically states that he has not discussed the issue of the founding of the 'most republican states' based on the most extensive popular participation:

> *It is too lengthy and important a matter to attempt here* to discuss the danger of becoming the chief promoter of any new enterprise that affects the interests of the many, and the difficulties of directing and bringing it to a successful conclusion, and then to maintain it. Leaving such a discussion, therefore, to a more convenient occasion, I shall speak here only of those dangers to which those expose themselves who counsel a republic or a prince to undertake some grave and important enterprise in such a manner as to take upon themselves all the responsibility of the same.[166]

Machiavelli does not return to this 'lengthy and important matter' in the remaining chapters of *The Discourses*, nor in his later works. Perhaps he intended at some point to write a text in which he would have outlined an even more utopian and popular state based on the activity of an extensive multitude than the one he proposes in *The Discourses*. Referring to Althusser, one could say that Machiavelli could not have had the prerequisites to think beyond the limits of the possible.

5.6.1. 'A people' and a 'nation' in the context and terminology of the early *cinquecento*

Machiavelli's views on disciplining the many [*molti*] has previously been characterised as a process in which they become 'a people [*il popolo*]'. This characterisation or assumption requires further clarification so as not to assume too hastily that the disciplined multitude fit-for-military-service would be the

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Francesco Vettori emphasise the importance of 'the effective truth [*verità effettuale della cosa*]' and 'realism', and criticise 'imagining things [*immaginazione di essa*]'. Despite the shared realism, the deductions they make based on this are different. To support his arguments, Dotti quotes Vettori's *Sommario della Istoria d'Italia* in which he cynically states that there is not much difference between tyranny and popular rule because, ultimately, all republics and principalities are tyrannies (cf. Dotti 1979, p. 24). Similarly, at least in the case of Florence of his own time, Vettori refused to make any substantial difference between tyranny and the actual 'popular' republic. In Dotti's opinion, this simply indicates Vettori's attempt to justify the power of the aristocracy (Dotti 1979, p. 25).

[166] Machiavelli 1950, III.35, p. 513; my emphasis.

same thing as a 'nation [*nazione*]' or a nation-state [*stato-nazione*], which arose in the nationalistic discourses in later centuries.

One must not rush headlong into defining Machiavelli as an early theoretician of the nation-state, even though he presents ideas that transcend the idea of the city-state in terms of an extensive and centralised state in which its own population forms the army.

In order for the 'stabilising' potential of 'a people' to be understood also within its own historical framework, there is reason to discuss the Italian-European historical context of the early *cinquecento* as well as the vocabulary describing the different social groups within it.[167]

The rule of the Medicis began in Florence in 1434 and ended in 1494 when they were expelled, after which began the 'republic period', referred to at the time as *governo libero* or *vivero popolare*. The most central institution founded in the beginning of that period was the Grande Consiglio (Great Council), which became the 'soul of the city'.[168] Its main task was to select the men for the executive bodies, of which the most central was the eight-member Signoria, the chairman of which was the Gonfaloniere. The Signoria used as their advisors a twelve-man council, Dodici Buonuomini, and a sixteen-man council, Sedici Gonfalonieri di Compagnia. The Signoria prepared all proposals for new laws before they were dealt with by the above two councils, before they were finally approved by the Grande Consiglio. Furthermore, there was a ten-man council, *Dieci*, which focused on warfare and foreign policy, and which also held executive power, as did the eight-man council, Otto di Guardia, which focused on the administration of justice and the Ufficiali di Monte, which was in charge of matters linked with trade and the economy. Florence also had ambassadors and other diplomats tending to its interests in other cities. The leaders of these representatives were called the *Podestà*.

Compared to the situation during the Medici era, the founding of the Grande Consiglio can justifiably be seen as a 'popular' and 'liberatory' turn in the history of Florence. In practice, this meant that the 'middle classes' – the artisans, merchants and others (e.g. the trade guilds) outside the old and wealthy families [*case*] – entered the political decision-making process. Thus,

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[167] As regards the retelling of historical events, in the present study I have made use primarily of Felix Gilbert's *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Gilbert 1965).

[168] Gilbert 1965, p. 9. The Medicis returned to power in November 1512, but were again sent into exile in 1527 when the republic was reinstituted, but only for three years.

also these people became 'citizens [*cittadini*]'. This, however, did not mean that the old aristocratic families were completely displaced, but rather that a conflict emerged between them and the 'middle classes' – as the latter have been called[169] – as well as between those who were eligible for the Grande Consiglio and those who were left outside it. According to Gilbert, the whole republican era was indeed characterised by a dual antagonism, one within the Grande Consiglio itself and the other between those who belonged to it and those who did not.[170]

From the point of view of the problematics of the *popolo*, it is important to note that fewer than five percent of the total population of Florence (women and children included) belonged to the Grande Consiglio. In other words, of the 70,000 inhabitants of Florence, only 3,000 men of at least 29-years of age could participate in the political decision-making process and decide about the assembly of the executive councils.[171] This figure represents between a quarter and a fifth of all adult men. With the establishment of the Grande Consiglio, also men coming from new groupings could achieve official positions and even select each other for these. Thus, even during the period of the popular government of Florence, only this five percent of the population were regarded as fully legal citizens, or put the other way, ninety-five per cent of the population were not regarded as legal citizens of the city.[172]

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[169] Cf., e.g. Gilbert 1965; and Martines 1979, pp. 55–78; p. 86.

[170] Gilbert 1965, p. 19.

[171] The period of office of the members of the executive committees was extremely short. This was because there was a desire to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of the few. It was only in some diplomatic posts that the period of office could last a whole year, whereas the period of office of the members of the Signoria was only two months (Gilbert 1965, p. 14).

[172] Martines states that typical for the Italian 'popular movements' of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – particularly if they achieved their 'popular' goals – was their 'exclusive and sectarian character'. Those without a profession, the poor, seasonal workers, those who had just moved to the city, those not paying taxes, or those belonging to certain professional groups considered of lower status were excluded from the *popolo*, which was allowed to be part of the political power and offices of the city state: 'The *popolo* changed the requirements for citizenship, with an eye to breaking the control of the nobility and richest citizens, but it always insisted that certain conditions be met, although these varied with time and place. Chief among the requirements were: (1) five to thirty years of residence in the city, (2) membership in a guild, (3) property qualifications or minimum tax assessments, and (4) continuous tax disbursements for periods of up to twenty-five years' (Martines 1979, p. 86).

An internal antagonism within the Grande Consiglio emerged between the wealthy and poorer members, the former usually coming from old aristocratic families while the latter represented rising social groupings. In particular, the aristocrats called these 'lower groups' *multitudine*, *populari mercatanti*, *popolo*, *popolo minuto*, or *universale*, whereas the majority of the inhabitants which were not part of the Grande Consiglio were called varyingly *plebe*, *infima plebe* or *vulgo*.[173]

This practice is interesting considering the fact that, despite the use of the term *multitudine*, they only accounted for two to four per cent of the population of Florence! In other words, this group was a 'multitude' only in relation to the aristocratic citizens, who were varyingly called by Roman terms such as *oligarchi*, *grandi*, *patrizi*, *optimati*, *ricchi*, *principali* and *uomini savi*.[174]

One should not assess the popularity of the republican era or Machiavelli's 'popular' viewpoint with absolute criteria, but rather in relation to the preceding oligarchic Medici era. The political procedures of the republican era were based on legally enforced rules, as opposed to the 'pragmatic' practices and privileges of the Medici era. The latter had excluded middle-class groups from eligibility for public office. Allowing the *multitudine* to take up public office in the republic did indeed raise opposition among the aristocrats, who still had significant economic power (hence the expression *ricchi*), and this became evident in the internal conflicts of the Grande Consiglio.

Even though after 1494 the aristocrats no longer had exclusive rights to public office, their experience in running such offices was naturally without comparison. According to Gilbert, the conflicts came to a head with the political and economic crises of the early sixteenth century. These were partly due to the French having returned to Italy (Louis XII in 1499), Florence's war against Pisa, and the activities of Cesare Borgia in central Italy. The aristocrats began to demand a 'narrow government [*governo stretto*]', whereas the middle classes defended 'the broader government [*governo largo*]'. The result was a kind of class compromise, along with which the office of the gonfalonier was changed to a life-long post, even though the maintenance of the office was still bound by

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[173] According to the aristocrats' definition, only the aristocrats themselves and the *multitude* of the Grande Consiglio belonged to the *popolo* of the Florentine population (Gilbert 1965).

[174] Gilbert 1965, pp. x and 19–24.

the decisions of the *Signoria*. Piero Soderini (1452–1522), who had been a supporter of *governo largo*, and came from the urban bourgeoisie, was selected to hold the office, and Machiavelli himself acted as his advisor and second State Secretary (1498–1512) until the return of the Medicis and the consequent banishment of Soderini.

Soderini was loyal to the French king, but after the death of Cesare's father a different influence would be felt. Pope Alexander VI's immediate successor Pius III only lived for 26 days after his election but, during that time, had Cesare arrested. Pius III was succeeded by Julius II, an ally of the Spanish king who ruled in southern Italy (e.g. in Naples), who ordered the expulsion of the French from the north (the unsuccessful Cambra Union in 1508 against Venice and the Sacred League in 1511). Because Soderini's power was a result of a compromise, also the aristocrats managed to get their demands met regarding the *governo stretto*.[175] Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540), himself an aristocrat, was responsible for the theoretical articulation and ideological legitimisation of these demands. He well understood the Florentine 'effective truth' when presenting his double-edged doctrine, according to which one had to try, on the one hand, to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of the gonfalonier and, on the other hand, to form an aristocratic senate with senators serving for life in order to control the multitude.

When arguing for the senate, Guicciardini appealed – like many other aristocrats – to the importance of expertise and experience in managing its affairs. According to him, the ignorance of the multitude was a hindrance to the efficient management of affairs. However, what he perceived as an even more serious threat than this was the gonfalonier elected for life. This was indeed an understandable cause for concern because it was, after all, Soderini who held that post. Obviously Guicciadini's fear was not based on the experiences of the oligarchy from the Medici era but rather on the fact that the 'popular' Soderni was independent of the aristocracy, yet was a Florentine ruler who enjoyed the trust of the multitude – in other words, a kind of new prince.

If Soderini seemed a threat to Guicciardini, for Machiavelli, on the other hand, this gonfalonier was a benefactor and spiritual father, and when his *fortuna* collapsed in 1512 Machiavelli's own *fortuna* declined. According to

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[175] Gilbert 1965, p. 82.

Gilbert, Machiavelli was also a supporter of the *governo largo*, and, like his spiritual father, considered the Grande Consiglio a necessary and important institution:[176]

> Because opposition to the aristocrats was a concomitant of his political influence in the republican period, Machiavelli was a firm advocate of the popular regime. He was convinced that the best form of government was a regime in which *the great masses of citizens* had the controlling power. He justified this belief in various ways: not only did he refute the usual objections to a popular regime, but advanced the cause of the people by more systematic considerations. He explained that few, if any, political societies could exist secure in isolation; almost all societies were involved in competition with others, and the alternative was to expand or to perish. The greatest need of any political society was an army, and the people alone provided the manpower to settle conquered areas and to guarantee the permanency of conquests.
>
> Within the dimensions of the political situation in which Machiavelli lived and wrote, he favoured the Great Council. Like Soderini who, to counter the aristocrats, worked to maintain the Great Council in its original form with its established functions, Machiavelli stressed the usefulness and necessity of this institution.[177]

One can, however, ask what the reference in the above quote to 'the great masses of citizens' actually refers to in the case of Machiavelli's notion of a 'popular regime', as Gilbert characterises it.[178] Gilbert's definition is not only one-sided but also, moreover, ambiguous: on the one hand, it refers to the fact that a large group of the *already existing* citizens should be allowed to participate in decision making and, on the other hand, more radically, to the fact that Machiavelli wanted to *expand* the criterion of citizenship to include parts of the larger population, such as that part of the *popolo* in early sixteenth-century Florence who were deemed ineligible for the Grande Consiglio. Likewise, Gilbert's characterisation is aimed specifically at the existing Florentine *governo*

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[176] Gilbert 1965, p. 156.
[177] Gilbert 1965, p. 178, my emphasis.
[178] Ibid.

popolare and does not so much take into account Machiavelli's 'utopian' ideas about an extensive new type of state that transcends the existing form of the city-state.

In order to clarify Machiavelli's views on citizenship and the state, it is useful to differentiate between two different types of texts among his writings. In the first category I would include *The Prince*, *The Discourses* and *The Art of War*; in other words, Machiavelli's main works in which he presents his utopian ideas about an extensive republic or principality which would transcend the existing form of the city-state, and which would stabilise, strengthen and homogenise the Apennine peninsula which was suffering from a lack of unity and party disputes. In the second category, I would include what I call Machiavelli's 'occasional writings' (e.g. various reports, accounts and letters) as well as those passages of *Florentine Histories* from the beginning of the 1520s onwards written on commission for the Medicis, in which he presents his interpretations and views on primarily the city-state of Florence and its organisation. In this latter category, Machiavelli usually stays within the bounds of what is possible in the context of his own city-state, whereas the writings in the former category are in their generality more 'utopian' (in the meaning intended by both Althusser and Gramsci) and go beyond the context of the city-state. In differentiating between these two sorts of texts, I do not mean that Machiavelli would not slip into more utopian thinking also in his 'occasional writings' or in *Florentine Histories*, but the position of such views is always subordinate to concrete questions of what can be done in the conjuncture in question or what would or would not be wise to say in it.

This is probably why, in questions regarding the relationship between different population groups, Machiavelli's tone is more moderate and cautious when, for instance, he presents to those in power in Florence his recommendations regarding the inclusion of the multitude in the government, compared to his other writings where he looks at the relationships between the aristocrats and other members of the population in republics or principalities. The situation could also be characterised slightly differently; that, in his 'occasional writings', he proposes solutions which, at least to some extent, would bring Florence closer to those ideals which he proposes in the writings from the first category. At the same time, one could not deduce from Machiavelli's 'moderate' proposals what he 'actually' thought of, for instance, the relationship between the aristocracy and the middle classes.

5.6.2. Machiavelli in the Florentine context

In light of the writings aimed at the city state of Florence, it is clear that Machiavelli did not assume that the *entire* 'adult' population (i.e. adult males) should be entitled to participate in decision making and be eligible to hold official positions; that is, to be counted as a citizen of the city. It is equally obvious, however, that Machiavelli opposed – considering it unwise from everybody's point of view – the objective of the aristocrats (including Guicciardini) to strongly demarcate and limit [*governo stretto*] the rights of the other population groups [*universale*] within the citizenry to participate and hold public office. This is evident in the report *Sopra il riformare lo stato di Firenze* which Machiavelli wrote in about 1520 after the death of Lorenzo di Piero de'Medici in 1519, on the request of Cardinal Giulio de'Medici (Pope Clemens VII 1523–34) for Giovanni de'Medici who was then Pope Leo X (1513–21).

Machiavelli's two friends from the Orte Oricellari circle, Zanobi Buondelmonti and Luigi Alamanni, who had become renowned critics of the Medicis, had already replied to the Cardinal's request with their own writings. The Cardinal's request has indeed been considered a cunning move by which he unarmed his opponents while allowing them to 'influence' the organisation of the Florentine government.[179]

Machiavelli repeats in his own text the 'two-moment' idea familiar from *The Discourses*, according to which a single person must autocratically renew the laws of the state, but after the renewal, power must gradually be transferred into more hands. Such a proposal is not necessarily as 'democratic' or radical as it might seem at first glance. According to Hale, Machiavelli wants 'both to eat his cake and have it'.[180]

The Medicis had gradually 'forgotten' Machiavelli's actions during their exile and offered him the shelter of their patronage and commissioned him, for instance, to write the history of Florence. In order to consolidate his position, Machiavelli restrained himself from proposing any 'radical' republican solutions that could have been interpreted as recommendations for expelling the Medicis. With his conservative 'two-moment' proposal, he believed that he would convince both Giulio and Giovanni de'Medici that under their control

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[179] Cf., e.g. Hale 1971, p. 66.
[180] Hale 1961, p. 202.

the citizens could be 're-educated' to form a republican government. On the other hand, Machiavelli proposes that the participation of other groups in the state administration would also be to the benefit of the Medicis, because then nobody would have any reason to make demands for change that would be destructive from the Medici's point of view.

> But to return to the dangers you run if affairs remain as they are, I wish to make a prediction. I say that if an emergency comes when the city is not at all reorganized, one of two things will be done, or both of them at once: either in riot and haste a head will be set up who with arms and violence will defend the government; or one party will run to open the Hall of the Council [= *Grande Consiglio*] and plunder the other party. And whichever of these two things comes about (which God forbid), Your Holiness can imagine how many deaths, how many exiles, how many acts of extortion will result, enough to make the cruellest man – much more Your Holiness, who is most merciful – die of sorrow. There is no other way for escaping these ills than to give the city institutions that can by themselves stand firm. And they will always stand firm when everybody has a hand in them, and when everybody knows what he needs to do and in whom he can trust, and no class of citizen, either through fear for itself or through ambition, will need to desire revolution.[181]

In his proposal, Machiavelli does not specify who would be included as the legal citizens [*cittadini*] nor what the expression *ciascheduno* [everbody] actually means. Instead, he classifies the people [*uomini*] of the republic into three groups, depending on their importance, yet each of these ought to be given their place [*dare luogo*] in the administration of the republic.

> Those who organize a republic ought to provide for the three different sorts of men who exists in all cities, namely, the most important, those in the middle, and the lowest. And though in Florence the citizens possess the equality mentioned above, nonetheless some of her citizens have ambitious spirits and think they deserve to outrank others; these must be satisfied in organizing a republic; the last government, indeed, fell for no other cause than that such a group was not satisfied.

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[181] Machiavelli 1989, p. 115.

To men of this sort it is not possible to give satisfaction unless dignity is given to the highest offices in the republic – which dignity is to be maintained in their persons.[182]

The model of government which Machiavelli proposed already in the text *Sommario delle cose della città di Lucca* is based on the idea that the republic must be founded on three central institutions: the Grande Consiglio, the Senato and the Signoria.[183] The members of the Grande Consiglio (600–1,000 members), which oversees the selection of the other authorities (apart from the Gonfalonier, who holds his position for a fixed period), would represent the lowest level of the citizenry. The members of the Senato (200), which prepares issues of state, would consist mainly of citizens (160) from the middle layer of the citizenry, but even the lowest level of the citizenry would be represented (40). The members of the Signoria (65), which actually implements the issues of state, would primarily consist of members (53) from the top layer of society, but, on the other hand, the middle layer of the citizenry could put forward their own representatives (12) for inclusion. The post of the Gonfalonier would not be for life; he would be elected for three months at a time from among the members of the Signoria. Nevertheless, the Medicis would be behind the appointment of the Gonfalonier; just as in the beginning, they would appoint all the members of the Senato and Signoria. Even later, when their power of appointment would be transferred to the Grande Consiglio, the position of the candidates would be organised so that those selected would be 'safe' from the point of view of the Medicis:

Without satisfying the generality of the citizens, to set up a stable government is always impossible. Never will the generality of the Florentine citizens be satisfied if the Hall [*Grande Consiglio*] is not reopened. Therefore, if one is to set up a republic in Florence, this Hall must be reopened and this allotment made to the generality of the citizens. Your Holiness should realize that whoever plans to take the government from you will plan before everything else on reopening it; therefore it is a good scheme to open it with conditions

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[182] Machiavelli 1989, pp. 107–8.
[183] Machiavelli 1949, pp. 519–25.

and methods that are secure, and to take away from anybody who may be your enemy opportunity for reopening it to your indignation and with the destruction and ruin of your friends.[184]

The above passage, like the whole text itself, is in all its persuasiveness rather ambivalent. Perhaps Machiavelli assumed, in a cunning fox-like way, that the re-established Grande Consiglio would, through its own power, promote the position of the lower level [*universale*] of the legal citizenry, even though the Medicis would attempt to control its actions. On the other hand, it is possible to interpret the above passage as either a realistic compromise solution or even Machiavelli's opportunistic self-effacement or gullibility in front of the Medici family, as Hale concludes.[185] Put in relation to the two moments of founding a state, the question could also be about Machiavelli sincerely considering Giovanni and/or Giulio as a kind of new prince (cf. the dedication at the beginning of *The Prince* to Lorenzo de'Medici), under whom the 'perfect republic [*una republica perfetta*]', as he calls his proposal, of Florence could be realised.

Whatever Machiavelli's ultimate aims may have been, in any case he proposes a model of government in which the representatives of each level acts as a counter-balance to the others. And, at least to begin with, a Medici ruler would have control of all the levels. From the above passage, it also is evident that the republic cannot be stable unless the lowest level of the legal citizenry is also allowed to have a part in decision-making in matters of the city-state. However, action would have to be taken to prevent enemies of the Medicis from gaining control of the Grande Consiglio. Machiavelli does not give specific names to such potential threats but, obviously, he is referring to those ambitious men of action who have earlier opposed or may later oppose the Medici family. In other words, with the help of the Grande Consiglio, not only is the lowest level of the legal citizenry kept satisfied and on the side of the existing republic but also, at the same time, it is ensured that such men do not stray into a 'popular' institution which would use the Grande Consiglio against the republic led by the Medicis.

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[184] Machiavelli 1989, pp. 110–11.
[185] Hale 1961, p. 201. In 1521 Soderini, who lived in Rome at that time, offered Machiavelli a well-paid position as an advisor to the *condottiere* Prospero Colonna, but Machiavelli turned down the offer, deciding that, in Hale's characterisation, 'it was better to roll stones for the Medici than become a rolling stone himself' (Hale 1961, p. 204).

The great ambitions of the members of the upper level of the citizenry are, in turn, satisfied when the Senato and the highest posts are given to its members. If the members of the highest level of the citizenry are unable to satisfy their great ambitions within the framework of the republic they become a threat to it.

Class position and ambitions

It is possible to lift out from Machiavelli's texts another interesting definition of the levels of the legal citizenry. Which layer a person belongs to is not *necessarily* defined by his social position and family background: his 'personal attributes' can – at least in principle – also have an influence. The expression Machiavelli uses, 'qualità di uomini', may refer to such attributes and not so much to social position.[186]

In emphasising this aspect, however, the tone of the text becomes more radical. A juxtaposition emerges where the aristocratic way of defining citizenship eligibility 'sociologically', that is, according to family and wealth, and Machiavelli's way of defining it, by emphasising man's individual *virtù*, are set in opposition to each other. In this case, the object of his critique is those laws and privileges that exclude the *virtù*-filled ambitious 'men of the people' from the decision-making process in the city state. In other words, he criticises the situation where a man's social position prevents him from rising to a position for which his personal attributes qualify him.

If such an interpretation is perhaps somewhat contrived in the case of Machiavelli's text *Sopra il riformare lo stato di Firenze*, it is better suited at least for that part of *The Discourses* where he looks at the city republic of Venice.[187] Even though all the public offices there are taken by gentlemen [*gentiluomini*] and all the 'populari' are completely excluded from such positions, the criterion for nobility is not, as is the case elsewhere, based on the possession of grand estates, 'for the gentlemen of Venice are so more in name than in fact'.[188] Their wealth is based on trade and moveable property; a wealth which the city bourgeoisie has acquired for themselves through their own work. Because the

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[186] Hale, on the other hand, seems to assume that it was specifically a matter about a low social position or value ('men of small account') and not personal characteristics (Hale 1961).

[187] Machiavelli 1949, I.55, p. 214; Machiavelli 1950, I.55, pp. 256–7.

[188] Ibid.

name of gentleman is in Venice a title that a city bourgeois may also acquire, this means, thinking in a 'Lockean way', that also a skilled person can become eligible for public office in that city republic. Machiavelli indeed states that it follows from such a definition of gentleman that limiting the eligibility for office to the nobility does not cause disorder in Venice.[189]

Likewise, Machiavelli proposes that, in the case of the Roman republic, its greatness was based specifically on the poverty of its citizens and the fact that 'poverty was never allowed to stand in the way of the achievement of any rank or honour, and that virtue and merit were sought for under whatever roof they dwelt'.[190]

Emphasising people's personal attributes is evident also in those numerous passages where Machiavelli refers to private citizens who have risen from obscurity to become rulers. On the other hand, such passages are balanced by those where Machiavelli shows how difficult it is for someone who is not used to ruling to remain in power. One does not, however, have to see a contradiction here, but rather a reference to ideas that both Gramsci and Althusser discussed; that Machiavelli wrote to 'those who do not know' and that in the beginning the new prince has to be on his own. This thought also links the 'social' and 'individual' viewpoints: the members of the substantially wealthy and influential aristocratic families have inherited more skills in governing – an 'aristocratic mindset' typical for those who wield power – than those from the 'lower classes'. In this sense, the former are generally 'more ambitious' and are 'more virtuous' than the men of the people or the *popolo* who are used to being subservient:

> … those who live in servitude are indifferent to a change of masters, in fact in most cases they rather desire it.[191]

This was the situation in which the *populus* of Rome found itself at the end of the era of the kings:

> Many examples in ancient history prove how difficult it is for a people that has been accustomed to live under the government of a prince to preserve its liberty, if by some accident it has recovered it, as was the case with Rome

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[189] Ibid.
[190] Machiavelli 1950, III.25, p. 486.
[191] Machiavelli 1950, III.12, p. 452.

after the expulsion of the Tarquins. And this difficulty is a reasonable one; for
such a people may well be compared to some wild animal, which (although
by nature ferocious and savage) has been as it were subdued by having
been always kept imprisoned and in servitude, and being let out into the
open fields, not knowing how to provide food and shelter for itself, becomes
an easy prey to the first one who attempts to chain it up again. The same
thing happens to a people that has not been accustomed to self-government;
for, ignorant of all public affairs, of all means of defence or offence, neither
knowing the princes nor being known by them, it soon relapses under a yoke,
oftentimes much heavier than the one which it had but just shaken off.[192]

Unlike Guicciardini or Vettori, Machiavelli does not make this into a gener-
alisation, one which would be permanently valid, but, rather, he thinks that
one can become skilled in ruling *by ruling*: in other words, the skill of ruling
can be learned in the same way as the skill of warfare and military *virtù*, which
are also developed with practice. This, however, is doubly more difficult in the
case of a man of the people, a new republic or a new prince than it is in the case
of princes who have inherited their power or aristocrats, particularly if power
has come about by accident.[193]

Furthermore, this unifying viewpoint highlights the *struggle* in which those
virtù-filled and ambitious men of action who, for some reason or other, are
ineligible for citizenship or public office, fight against those who – due to
family inheritance and/or their individual attributes – hold positions in public
office. Assessed in this light, *anyone* can, at least in principle, belong to either
of these groups – the *grandi* or the *popolo*. The above quote continues by
describing the struggle between the new [*popolo*] and the old (the privileged
who benefited from tyranny):

> … the state that becomes free makes enemies for itself, and not friends. All
> those become its enemies who were benefited by the tyrannical abuses and
> fattened upon the treasures of the prince, and who, being now deprived
> of these advantages, cannot remain content, and are therefore driven to
> attempt to re-establish the tyranny, so as to recover their former authority
> and advantages.[194]

[192] Machiavelli 1950, I.16, pp. 160–1.
[193] Machiavelli 1949, I.16, p. 137; Machiavelli 1950, I.16, p. 160.
[194] Machiavelli 1950, I.16, p. 161.

Finnish political scientist Jukka Kanerva suggests, citing Federico Chabod, that the 'aristocratic mindset' is not directly comparable to the social classes in the sociological sense of the term:

> Not all *grandi* belong to the elite of political power and not all the *populo* are in a politically subjugated position. The question is, as Chabod notes, of 'tendenze, disposizione d'animo', 'a tendency, a spiritual disposition' (Chabod 1962, 46): in Machiavelli's language, the bodily disposition, characteristic of a citizen.[195]

The viewpoint of Chabod and Kanerva seems justified when one keeps in mind that considered historically – in the context of the city-states – the ambitious 'spiritual disposition' was most often *de facto* linked specifically with the wealthy and those of noble ancestry. In other words, the tendency is not an inborn 'individual quality' but a 'spiritual' tendency that the high social status characteristically produces in man. Kanerva notes that 'the text [*Discourses*, I.4] does not at all limit in advance the quality of the citizen rising to power'.[196] This is certainly true, and refers to the 'popular' and non-aristocratic features in Machiavelli's *thinking*. But it is equally accurate that in Machiavelli's context, the laws, privileges and institutions of the state were mostly a hindrance to the rise to power of a citizen coming from the *popolo*,[197] and the subjugated position could be an obstacle for the development of the ambitious 'spiritual disposition'.[198] Thus the question is not only about the opportunities that the text offers but also about the relationship between the context and the text.

Compared to the attempts of the aristocracy to limit citizenship to groups of wealthy people, Machiavelli's writing *Sopra il riformare lo stato di Firenze* would in principle allow *any man* who is skilful and ambitious to partake in decision making, even if he did come from a well-known noble family. The critique that follows from this, and which Machiavelli directs at the nobleman living off the work of others, is that of the *governo stretto*, where lack of wealth or a modest family background or other inferior 'inherited factors' prevent a 'man of the people' who possesses even a great deal of *virtù* from participating in decision making. (Here, one's thoughts inevitably turn to Machiavelli himself, who,

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[195] Kanerva 1990, p. 93.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Cf., e.g., Machiavelli 1950, I.55.
[198] Cf., e.g., Machiavelli 1950, I.16; and Machiavelli 1950, III.12.

certainly in his own opinion, would have been the most skilful and ambitious citizen, but did not receive the tasks in Florence during the Medici era that his *virtù* and *prudenza* deserved).[199]

But, within the particular historical context of *Sopra il riformare lo stato di Firenze*, one must not forget the controlling role that Machiavelli gives the Medicis. Even though one would think that the aristocracy is not necessarily a 'sociological' category, the members of which would automatically be members of the Senato, but rather that the members of the Senato would indeed consist of those citizens who – irrespective of their social position – are the most ambitious in their 'spiritual tendency', one can still see the Senato also as a kind of safety valve through which the ambitions of the citizens of the first (upper) category – whether they are aristocrats possessing *virtù* and *ambizione or* men of the people – can be defused in a way that is controlled by the Medicis. One might even think that the Medicis should choose as members of the Senato not merely their harmless friends but rather those who pose a threat to them. This strategy of giving the devil your little finger so that he does not take your whole hand is justified by the fact that the Senato has executive power but not the authority to decide in matters of the city. Such power lies with the Grande Consiglio, but if its members are the least ambitious citizens then they will not make any radical decisions that would be problematic for the Medicis and which would be better undertaken by those citizens of the first category.

In short, the *ambivalence* of Machiavelli's proposal lies in the fact that, *on the one hand*, he gives the power of decision to those whom the Medicis can direct and control, while those dangerous citizens who are difficult to direct and control are excluded from the decision making process yet are set to execute matters which have already been decided upon. However, *on the other hand*, Machiavelli does not necessarily present 'sociological' definitions, that is, definitions based on the social position of individuals, or the group to which people belong. This latter idea is subversive and 'popular' compared to the aristocrats' attempt to limit citizenship to the wealthy and those of a noble heritage.

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[199] Machiavelli would not necessarily have been capable of being a military leader. Bandello describes how this renowned authority on warfare once had an opportunity to lead a close order drill, the result of which, however, was complete chaos. After allowing Machiavelli to try for a while, without results, to restore order, *condottiere* Giovanni delle Bande Nere had to restore order among the troops (Hale 1961, pp. 26–7).

5.6.3. 'Utopian' texts

When Machiavelli's views on the relationship between the aristocracy and the lower levels of the citizenship, as presented in *The Prince*, *The Discourses* and *The Art of War*, are studied closely, a writer emerges who is more daring and popular than the one who writes 'occasional writings', someone who, for instance, strongly criticises the aristocracy [*gentiluomini*] living in idleness:

> And to explain more clearly what is meant by the term gentlemen [*gentiluomini*], I say that those are called gentlemen who live idly upon the proceeds of their extensive possessions, without devoting themselves to agriculture or any other useful pursuit to gain a living. Such men are pernicious to any country or republic; but more pernicious even than these are such as have, besides their own possessions, castles which they command, and subjects who obey them. This class of men abounds in the kingdom of Naples, in the Roman territory, in the Romagna, and in Lombardy; whence it is that no republic has ever been able to exist in those countries, nor have they been able to preserve any regular political existence, for that class of men are everywhere enemies of all civil government. And to attempt the establishment of a republic in a country so constituted would be impossible. The only way to establish any kind of order there is to found a monarchical government ...[200]

The idle, aristocratic élite (the few), which lives at the expense of those people who do productive, useful work, is equally the enemy of both the republic and the principality. The above passage also refers to the fact that transferring to the republican 'collective moment' is not possible in a deeply corrupt state with an abundance of idle noblemen. The only way to rid such a state of corruption is to install an autocratic prince who then purposely destroys the aristocratic families. For example, as mentioned earlier, in Romagna Cesare Borgia had no other option than to establish an autocracy if he wished to curb the aristocracy and preserve his own power. On the other hand, this required relying on the productive social classes, that is, the merchants of the cities and the peasants of the countryside.

In the opposite case, when a 'grand equality [*grande equalità*]' prevails, the precondition for founding a principality is that the prince bestows upon

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[200] Machiavelli 1950, I.55, p. 255.

the aristocracy great privileges in terms of property, possessions, money and subjects to rule over. The prince must then align himself with the aristocracy, so that, surrounded by them, he is able to maintain his power, and through his support they satisfy their own ambitions while others may be 'constrained to submit to that yoke to which force alone has been able to subject them' and thus ruler and ruled are maintained in their 'respective ranks' [*negli ordini suoi*].[201] The question is, in other words, about founding a tyranny that prevents social mobility.

In discussing Machiavelli's views, Gilbert draws the following blunt conclusion:

> Machiavelli's whole conception of Roman history is based on the view, which he adopted from Sallustius, that money and wealth are evil.[202]

Gilbert's conclusion, however, simplifies the issue. Even though Machiavelli presumes – as Rousseau did after him – that the basic reason for a state becoming corrupt is those people who are most wealthy, therefore gaining a great personal advantage and pursuing their own personal interests, he did not condemn *all* economic activity as 'evil', as Gilbert concludes.[203]

In his own interpretation, Gramsci puts forward a hypothesis that, at first, might seem surprising; namely, that Machiavelli's 'political' views on the importance of the ties between cities and the countryside, the importance of agriculture, as well as the critique he directs towards the feudal corporative privileges of the cities would, when 'translated into an economic language', refer to the 'physiocratic characteristics' that transcend the mercantile stage in his thinking:

> If one can show that Machiavelli aimed at creating links between city and countryside and at extending the role of the urban classes up to the point of asking them to forgo certain feudal corporative privileges with respect to the countryside, so as to incorporate the rural classes into the state, one

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[201] Machiavelli 1949, I.55, p. 213; Machiavelli 1950, I.55, p. 256.
[202] Gilbert 1965, p. 175.
[203] Wood (1968, pp. 81 and 85) states that Machiavelli does not justify the class struggle in terms of economics. In light of Gramsci's and Althusser's interpretations of Machiavelli, however, Wood's thesis seems problematic. Gramsci, in particular, discusses passages in Machiavelli's writings that deal with the struggle between 'those who work' and 'those who do not'.

will also have shown that, implicitly, Machiavelli had in theory overcome
the mercantilist stage and already had some traits of a 'physiocratic' nature –
that he was thinking, in other words, of a politico-social environment which
is the same as that presupposed by classical economy.[204]

Unfortunately, Gramsci did not have the opportunity to further develop his
interesting hypothesis that Machiavelli was a precursor of classical political
economy, and his observations were limited to a few notes.[205] Yet, even these
notes already depict Machiavelli as a writer who understood that the time of
accumulating wealth, endless wars, and city-states characterised by mercenary
armies that swallowed resources was over:

> Machiavelli is a man wholly of his period; his political science represents
> the philosophy of the time, which tended to the organisation of absolute
> national monarchies – the political form which permitted and facilitated a
> further development of bourgeois productive forces. In Machiavelli one may
> discover in embryonic form both the separation of powers and parliamentari-
> anism (the representative regime). His 'ferocity' is turned against the residues
> of the feudal world, not against the progressive classes. The Prince is to put
> an end to feudal anarchy; and that is what Valentino does in Romagna, bas-

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[204] Gramsci 1975, p. 1039.
[205] The starting point for Gramsci's hypothesis is Gino Arias's study 'Il pensiero
economico di Niccolò Machiavelli' (*Annali di Economia*, Vol. IV, Milano 1928). Aria does
not concentrate on the question of Machiavelli's possible physiocracy but rather uses
him to verify the fascistic thesis, according to which parliamentary institutions are
not in their origin Italian or part of the Italian state tradition, and therefore can be
replaced by a corporative government that seeks its model from the medieval city-states
(Boothman 1995, pp. xxxv–xxxviii and p. 511). In a letter to Tatjana (Tania) Schucht
(14.3.1932) Gramsci asks her to ask her friend, the economist Piero Sraffa, if he knew
of any research where Machiavelli's views on the economy and economic policies are
discussed. Gramsci also asks Sraffa to comment on Arias's study: 'Can one say that
Machiavelli was a "mercantilist", if not in the sense that he consciously thought as
a mercantilist, then at least in the sense that his political thought corresponded to
mercantilism; that is, he said in political terms that which the mercantilists said in the
terms of political economy? Or could it not even be maintained that in the political
language of Machiavelli (especially in *The Art of War*) there arose the first seed of a
physiocratic conception of the state and that therefore (and not in the exterior sense of
Ferrari and even of Foscolo) he could be considered a precursor of the French Jacobins?'
(Gramsci 1965, p. 589). Sraffa replied (21.4.1932) to Gramsci via Schucht as follows: 'I
don't know anything about the economic thought of Machiavelli: the little that I learned
by reading the article of Arias suggested by Nino [= Gramsci] seems to me to confirm
what Nino says. It seems to me that there is a great analogy with an English economist
of the Seventeenth century, William Petty, who Marx called "the founder of classical
economics"' (Sraffa 1991; cf. also Potier 1991, pp. 45–6).

ing himself on the support of the productive classes, merchants and peasants. Given the military dictatorial character of the head of state, such as is needed in a period of struggle for the installation and consolidation of a new form of power, the class references contained in *The Art of War* must be taken as referring as well to the general structure of the state: if the urban classes wish to put an end to internal disorder and external anarchy, they must base themselves on the mass of the peasants, and constitute a reliable and loyal armed force of a kind totally different from the companies of fortune.[206]

The above quote focuses on two 'popular' features in Machiavelli's thinking. Firstly, that Machiavelli's views on the relationships between groups of people in a state should not be assessed merely within the traditional context of city-states. Furthermore, one should pay attention to those 'utopian' references where Machiavelli talks about the extensive and centralised state, in which an army made up of men from its own population has a central role. Secondly, following on from the previous viewpoint, the criteria for 'citizenship' must not only be assessed on the basis of one's participation in political institutions, but also one must pay attention to those institutions, such as the army, through which the multitude is integrated or 'made into a people' within the state, even though this does not necessarily mean the expansion of the eligibility for legal citizenship, political election and public office.

The criterion for a 'popular' state and form of government is not necessarily the number of people eligible to vote and hold public office in proportion to the whole population. It can also be a matter of the *quality* of the relationship between citizens and non-citizens; in other words, the *attitude* of non-citizens and the nature of their *position in relation* to those in power who fulfill the criteria of citizenship. If the prince relies upon the aristocracy, this means oppressing other groups of people and keeping them in place, while the aristocracy enjoys its privileges.[207] Thus, such a tyranny is characterised by keeping large groups of the population immobile and 'under the yoke'.

When also at least the 'middle classes' fulfill the criterion for citizenship, the relationship of those in power to the rest of the population becomes more close-knit and 'more legitimate' (through friendship and respect) than if the aristocracy had sole rights to power and public office. Accordingly, the Grande

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[206] Gramsci 1975, pp. 1572–3.
[207] Cf., Machiavelli 1950, I.55, p. 256.

Consiglio and *governo largo* can be considered as one form of response to the question of how the 'middle-class' citizens – irrespective of their number in relation to the whole population – represent, depending on one's viewpoint, both a counterforce to the aristocracy and a closer and more 'popular' tie to the population that remains outside the criteria of citizenship.

According to Gilbert, Machiavelli's assessments of the Grande Consiglio were positive, even after the return of the Medicis, though he then gave more emphasis to 'the spirit which stands behind them' than the institution itself.[208] In Gilbert's opinion, it is specifically the term *virtù* that refers to this 'spirit':

> *Virtù* was the prerequisite for leadership. Every leader, whether he was cap-
> tain of an army or the head of a state, needed *virtù*. But, according Machi-
> avelli, *virtù* could be possessed by a collective body as well as by individuals.
> For example, an army must have *virtù*. … Military *virtù*, therefore, reflects
> a spirit which permeates all the institutions of a political society and is an
> aspect of a more general *virtù* which is to be found in well-organized soci-
> eties.[209]

In this case, however, in linking *virtù* to 'spirit', Gilbert's interpretation is unnecessarily idealistic and one-sided. He does not adequately emphasise the other side of the issue, namely, how the very preconditions for the develop-ment of the 'spirit' are the good institutions and the political practices that materialise within them, which reproduce *virtù* and prevent it from becom-ing corrupted as lethargy [*ozio*] and vice [*vizio*]. If, according to Machiavelli, a state's army consisting of men from its own population (rather than mercenary troops) and good laws (rather than privileges) applicable to the *whole* popula-tion are the absolute conditions for the durable and vital state, *virtù* in this case expresses the respect and approval the citizens and non-citizens have towards these institutions, while, at the same time – seen from a different angle – these institutions produce and reproduce this approval.

A central example of an institution that produces 'civic *virtù*' also amongst non-citizens is the army. As has been evident from the earlier chapters of this study, in Machiavelli's texts the army is also a place for 'politics', an institution that controls and 'makes a people [*devenir-peuple*]' of the state's own

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[208] Gilbert 1965, p. 179.
[209] Gilbert 1965, pp. 179–80.

population. The *making of a people* does here not necessarily refer to the rights of citizens, that is, eligibility for election or public office, but to the production of the 'second nature' of the multitude. In *The Art of War*, Machiavelli states that:

> ... a state ought to depend upon only those troops composed of its own subjects [*i suoi popoli*]; that those subjects cannot be better raised than by a citizens' militia; and that there can be no better method devised to form an army or to introduce good order and discipline among soldiers.[210]

Following this, referring to the Roman writer Publius Flavius Vegetius,[211] he discusses the question of which men form the best troops, and ends by emphasising the profession more than the moral *virtù* of the individual man, which only the military service itself ultimately reveals.[212] Even though, in this context, the issue is primarily about the courage of the individual, Machiavelli's list of civilian professions among the soldiers shows that the infantry could include bird-catchers, fishermen, cooks, pimps and brothel-keepers, as well as peasants, blacksmiths, farriers, carpenters, butchers, hunters and other practical professions.[213] According to Machiavelli, not even the first members of this group, such as the bird-catchers, should be excluded from the army, because *virtù* may also be present among them. In other words, *virtù* does not depend on one's profession: for example, a pimp can just as well be filled with *virtù* due to his personal character and can just as easily be active as indolent [*ozioso*] and even full of vice [*vizioso*]. In any case, the list includes professions of people who, in the Florentine context, had no citizenship rights but whom Machiavelli nevertheless includes in his army.

Referring to Althusser's interpretation, one must note that the army is, just like the laws and the prince, an ideological apparatus, the task of which is (apart from warfare and training for warfare) to call forth (or using an Althusserian expression, *to interpellate*) the population comprised of non-citizens into the 'spirit' or *virtù* of the state. If the soldiers to be commanded

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[210] Machiavelli 1949, I, p. 469; Machiavelli 2004, p. 33.
[211] Flavius Vegetius Renatus, who was active during the reign of Theodosius (379–95), wrote *Epitoma rei militaris* [Epitome of Military Science], in which he presents his views on the training and organisation of the Roman legions (*The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, p. 563).
[212] 'For it is not the natural courage of men that makes an army bold, but order and good discipline' (Machiavelli 2004, p. 64).
[213] Ibid.

are other than one's own subjects, they will have no 'ties of loyalty' to their leader, as Fabrizio states in the last book of *The Art of War*:

> In Italy, therefore, it is not enough to know to command an army already raised and disciplined. A general must first raise and discipline it himself before he puts himself at its head. Nobody can do that unless he is a prince possessing large territories and a great number of subjects, which I am not. Nor did I ever yet, nor can I, command any but foreign armies composed of soldiers who owed me no natural obedience …[214]

If one's own subjects are sufficiently willing to respond or learn (or are taught) to respond to the call, then the prince *or*, in the republic, for example, the members of the Grande Consiglio, can successfully govern and control both the subjects and the whims of the nobility [*grandi*]:

> Now men become excellent and show their virtù *according to how they are employed and encouraged by their sovereigns, whether these happens to be kings, princes, or heads of republics* …[215]

Seen in this light, Machiavelli's views strongly emphasising the importance of the infantry [*fanteria, i fanti*] are not only strategic and tactical theses, but also refer to an army based on the large, cheap to maintain masses of infantrymen as an expression of the 'popular' state, rather than the expensive cavalry as an expression of the power of the aristocracy. The infantry, consisting of the lower levels of the population, does indeed protect against the possibility that someone among the nobility would use the army to accomplish his own ambitions.[216]

Summarising the above, one can say that, in the case of Florence, the notion of 'popularity' refers to the *governo largo* and the Grande Consiglio, but, beyond this immediate historical context, it expands to encompass the 'popular' relationship of the prince or those holding political power in a republic to the rest of the population.

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[214] Machiavelli 2004, p. 208.
[215] Machiavelli 2004, p. 77; my emphasis.
[216] Machiavelli 1949, I, p. 467; Machiavelli 2004, pp. 30–1.

'Nazione' and Machiavelli

When writing about Machiavelli's views on the state, Gramsci usually places the words *popolo* and *nazione* in inverted commas. Particularly in the latter case, the use of inverted commas is necessary because the modern *nazione* terminology cannot be found in Machiavelli's texts – nor in those of his contemporaries – just as the corresponding views of the nation-state [*stato-nazione*], nation [*nazione*] or nationality [*nazionalità*] are similarly not to be found. As was stated earlier, Machiavelli uses the terminology of his time, with such expressions as 'popolo', 'populi', 'moltitudine', 'plebe', 'gente', 'uomini', 'molti', 'comuni', 'università', 'universale' and 'popolare' when referring to the lower social groups or to those generally who are not in power. He characterises the aristocracy or those in power as, with such terms as 'gentiluomini', 'grandi', 'patrizi', 'pochi', 'ottimati', 'potenti', 'capi' and 'nobilità'.

As Eric Hobsbawm argues,[217] the type of thinking tying together the nation, the state and the people did not arise and develop to become a hegemonic position until the nineteenth century, and only then at first amongst the upper classes, along with the nationalism that was being created from above. This is shown by the fact that, until the very end of the nineteenth century, the word 'nation' referred to, among other things, one's origin or birth (cf. *natus*) but not the state or government. The word *patria* also had a narrow meaning, referring to a person's home or birthplace.[218]

Even Althusser, who uses Machiavelli's views and aims more freely than Gramsci when explaining the expressions 'nation' and 'l'État national',[219] remarks that the term 'nation' was, for Machiavelli, not an existing form but *one possible* (aleatory) result in the struggle between social classes:

> But the need for the existence and constitution of a nation is one thing; the
> factual and relatively aleatory conditions of its realization are quite another.
> While the need to constitute the nation ultimately corresponds to the creation
> of a sufficiently large market for the nascent bourgeoisie, the nation cannot
> be constituted by decree. It is the stake of a class struggle. But the outcome
> of this struggle – whose objective is not the conquest of an already existing

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[217] Cf., e.g., Hobsbawm 1991, p. 19.
[218] Hobsbawm 1991, especially p. 15; cf. also Hale 1994, p. 68.
[219] Cf., e.g. Althusser 1995a, pp. 51–2; Althusser 1999, p. 11.

form, but the reality of a form that does not as yet exist – depends upon the arrangement of the existing elements. To put it another way, the possibilities and limits of the nation's realization depend upon a whole series of factors – not only economic, but also pre-existing geographical, historical, linguistic and cultural factors – which in some sense prestructure the aleatory space in which the nation will be able to take shape.[220]

The 'nation-state' would not even have been the *telos* that Machiavelli or the urban bourgeoisie would have *consciously* strived for or even could have strived for. The nation-state was only to be the result of an aleatory process that crystallised in the coming generations, but which, in retrospect, in nationalistic discourses, was teleologised as the inevitable end result of the history of states or the arrogant aim of patriots and heroic battles for independence. Alternatively, it was interpreted as 'the history of the nation', where the language, land area, borders, race, religion, culture, and other 'atoms' were interpreted as parts of the 'nation' that contained the *telos* of the birth of the nation.[221]

When using expressions such as 'nation [*nazione*]' and 'people [*popolo*]' in the context of Machiavelli, they are referring only to his attempt to perceive durable solutions in a highly aleatory conjuncture; this was specifically characterised by the internal struggle in the city-states between the aristocrats and the other population groups, the wars between the different city states and the continuous invasions of the 'barbarians' into the Apennine peninsula.[222]

This does not mean, however, that one could not, if one wanted to, read 'utopian' elements – the building of a 'nation-state' or nation – in Machiavelli's views on the unification of Italy or even in his writings in general. Such a reading, however, must not be teleological. With reference to Althusser's interpretation, the elements have not 'taken hold of' or 'become encoded' as elements of the nation-state. For example, the question of the relationship between the Italian dialects or language or the extent of the durable state were, for Machiavelli, primarily pragmatic questions and answers to the problems of the conjuncture; for instance, that the linguistic dispersion was an expression

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[220] Althusser 1995a, pp. 51–2; Althusser 1999, p. 11.
[221] Cf. also Althusser 1995a, pp. 51–2; Althusser 1999, pp. 11–12.
[222] Cf. Althusser 1992a, p. 213; Althusser 1993c, p. 220 in which Althusser argues that Machiavelli's era could not offer even words with which he would have been able to describe his objective, namely, Italian national unity.

of the inability of the city-states to become allies against the barbarians, or that the dispersion of the Apennine peninsula prevented an efficient defence against France and Spain.

In *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*[223] Machiavelli writes about *patria* but does not refer to 'Italy' or 'Italians' but, rather, to the Tuscans, who speak Italian in a more expressive way than others, making them stand out in a positive way. Machiavelli makes a clear difference between his own *patria* and its language, as well as, on the other hand, between the other *patria* and their language. This, however, does not prevent him from believing, particularly in the case of written language, that the Italian language of Tuscany should be made – or recognised that it *already is* – the standard and foundation of the written language in the other *patria* of the peninsula.[224]

Unlike with nineteenth-century nationalistic thinking, for Machiavelli language is not a cultural factor central to the identity of the *patria* or nation, but rather simply a communication tool that enables co-operation between many different *patrie*. Language must be sufficiently general and expressive so that there are no bad misunderstandings, for example, in giving orders between different units of soldiers.

Linguistic dispersion is also seen as a symptom of weakness in relation to the 'barbarians', as Hale interprets Machiavelli's text.[225] Machiavelli was indeed aware that the time had come for a large and centralised monarchy, as in Spain and France.[226]

One must note, however, that the France with which Machiavelli had become familiar was not yet a nation where, for instance, the French language and ethnic and cultural 'Frenchness' were central and ideological factors

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[223] Carlo Dionisotti states, referring to a study by Cecil Grayson (Grayson 1971), that *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* was written at the earliest 1524–5 and not 1514–5 as has usually been assumed (Dionisotti 1980, p. 268 and p. 310). The text was published for the first time in Florence as late as 1730, and even then anonymously because Machiavelli's writings were still in the Catholic Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Dianisotti 1980, p. 270).

[224] In *Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*, Machiavelli has an imaginary dialogue with Dante. In the opinion of Machiavelli, Dante's language is not a curial Italian, as he himself claims, but specifically a Tuscan Italian. According to Dionisotti, Machiavelli's view reflects the concern about the collapse of the position of Florence. This was furthered not only by the alien 'barbarians', with their invasion, but also by 'padre Dante' with his curial speech (Dionisotti 1980, pp. 362–3).

[225] Hale 1994, p. 67.

[226] Machiavelli 1949, II, pp. 508–9; Machiavelli 2004, pp. 79–80.

articulating the nation.[227] When Machiavelli comments on France, the objects of his comments are the French monarchy, their subjects and troops. He is obviously interested in the fact that something *new* and important is going on in France. This 'newness' does not, however, gain meaning for Machiavelli as the 'French nation' in the post-revolutionary nineteenth-century understanding of the word, but, rather, refers to the efficient, centralised and extensive organisation of this extensive state, the ruler of which, well protected from the whims of the aristocracy, leads an army which is superior compared to those in Italy:[228]

> Among kingdoms which are well organized and governed, in our time, is that of France: it possesses countless valuable institutions, on which the king's freedom of action and security depend. The first of these is the parliament and its authority. For the lawgiver of the French kingdom, knowing the ambition and insolence of the powerful, judged it necessary that they should be restrained by having a bit in their mouths. On the other hand, he wanted to protect the masses, knowing how they feared, and therefore hated, the nobles.[229]

According to Gramsci, Machiavelli's interest in France shows that he transcended the perspective of the city-states and that the 'prince must stop the feudal anarchy'.[230] But Machiavelli was also a man of his time, for whom the unification of the Apennine peninsula was a question of the politics of power:[231]

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[227] Hale refers to Johann Honter's geography textbook *Cosmographic Rudiments* (1542), where '[t]he maps showed rivers, mountains and major cities but no borders, and the place – names – all in Latin – reflect the provinces of the Roman and medieval worlds rather than a contemporary political survey. On the map of France "Burgundia Gallia" (Burgundy) and "Brittania Celtica" (Brittany) are printed in larger capitals than 'Francia' itself, inscribed above "the real France" ' (Hale 1994, pp. 66–7).

[228] The French kings disarmed their subjects in order to control them more easily. In their place (starting from Louis XI [1423–83]) came Swiss troops, a solution for which Machiavelli criticises the French kings (cf., e.g. Machiavelli 1949, I, p. 469; Machiavelli 2004, pp. 32–3). He also criticises the Italian princes of his own time for showing cowardice towards the soldiers coming from over the Alps, of which the events of 1494 (the end of Medici rule and the beginning of the republic period) are proof (Machiavelli 1949, pp. 618–19; Machiavelli 2004, pp. 210–11).

[229] Machiavelli 2004, Chapter 19, p. 80.

[230] Gramsci 1975, p. 1572.

[231] On the history of the later revolutionary use of Machiavelli's ideas, see Lefort 1988, pp. 135–48.

> It should be noted that in the Italy studied by Machiavelli there existed no
> representative institutions already developed and significant in national life
> like the Estates General in France.[232]

In other words, the unification of Italy was not even in its 'first moment'. Apart
from the estates and the balance between them that constituted the 'second
moment', what was also missing was the new prince, who was essential
in the 'moment of solitude', and who would have united the city-states.
Machiavelli's analyses in his occasional writings, for example on the renewal
of the Florentine city-state, indeed refer to the second, collective moment, but
only within the internal context of the city-state. And yet, when looking from
the viewpoint of transcending the city-states, it was self-evident to Machiavelli
that Italy could not, at least initially, be a city-state on a large scale, that is, an
extensive republic. The only possibility was to form a principality, which the
example of Cesare Borgia had made evident.

According to Gramsci, already as early as the sixteenth century, Machi-
avelli's thinking served regression in France because at that time the cen-
tral questions in the country concerned achieving an equilibrium between
the already existing estates 'in that already strong and consolidated state'.[233]
Unlike in the Italy of Machiavelli's time, in France during the time of political-
philosopher Jean Bodin (1529/30–96), the third estate *was already* aware of its
power and position to the extent that it could set conditions for other groups.
The French king was not a 'solitary' new prince but one factor in the system of
equilibrium between the estates, the absolute power of which the third estate
already attempted to limit through their own actions.[234] In this context, follow-
ing the doctrines of *The Prince* would have meant denying the importance of
the estates and would therefore have been a regressive act.[235]

Gramsci, however, compares Machiavelli to the Jacobins, yet also empha-
sises the differences between their historical contexts. The comparison is jus-
tified because, according to Gramsci, both Machiavelli and the Jacobins con-
sidered the participation of the masses to be important and both emphasised
the connection between the cities and the countryside. Both were concerned

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[232] Gramsci 1975, p. 1574.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Titus Livius is also a central source of Bodin's *Six livres de la République* (published
1583).

with the promotion of a 'national-popular [*nazionale-popolare*]' state, though, in Jacobin France, this question turned out to be more multifaceted than with Machiavelli, for whom it was largely limited to issues of reorganising the army.[236]

5.7. Epilogue: Machiavelli and the taming of chance

Machiavelli's views about the unification of the Apennine peninsula have, in the present study, been interpreted from the viewpoint where the goal of the project of the new prince is to take hold of a highly aleatory conjuncture by producing an extensive state in terms of the area under its control. Due to its historical context, the taking hold does not yet in the case of Machiavelli refer to the 'nation-state' in which, among other things, nationalist ideology and representational institutions would produce a national unity. The expressions of 'national' politics and ideology are the ideological apparatus of the prince, who should aim to gain the friendship of the people and the army formed from his own subjects. Apart from averting external enemies and achieving

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[236] According to Gramsci, Machiavelli's writings include at least an implicit critique of the 'cosmopolitanism' of the Renaissance era. Cosmopolitanism expressed a rift which prevailed between the 'universal' favour showed towards the arts and sciences and the underdevelopment of political factionalism and political institutions. According to Gramsci, it was because of the cosmopolitanism of the Renaissance era that the pursuit of sciences and arts was not articulated as part of the project of the unification of Italy. On the contrary, the scientific and artistic actions of the Renaissance became a central hindrance to such a 'national-popular' project. Even though the Renaissance and humanism furthered the development of the Italian and European intellectual strata, from the national viewpoint this was a case of an aggressive and oligarchic movement that deepened the cultural rift between the intellectuals and the wider population (cf., e.g., Gramsci 1975, p. 1859). In the case of Machiavelli, one should also note that he does not actually refer to the Renaissance arts and sciences. His silence might have been due to the fact that, in his eyes, the Renaissance did not manifest itself as a force that furthered the unification of the Apennine peninsula but as an expression of the era of the city-states and their regressive logic of action. Favouring the artists and scientists of the Renaissance and the 'rebirth' of Latin (and Greek) was an expression of the competition between the city-states in which the Medicis had great success, yet the goal of this élitist contest was not the unification of the peninsula, but, on the contrary, to stand out from all the other city-states of the peninsula. The Renaissance interpretation of antiquity was, however, for them an idealised antiquity of 'high culture' and not an antiquity involving the subversive political actions of the men of action that opened up from the past to the present and future.

other foreign political goals, he must produce as many *virtù*-filled citizens as possible, and who would experience *patria* as something integral to their own nature.

This factor has to do with the first moment of the state, but not yet the second moment. The second or 'republican' moment can be seen in Machiavelli's texts, but in concrete terms only when his viewpoint is that of the city-state. In city-states such as in Florence, the second moment has to do with the establishment of a republic [*governo libero*]. The Florentine model, however, could not be projected onto a larger scale, on to the level of 'Italy'. The unification of Italy required actions typical for the first moment, such as the emergence of a new prince and a military-service type of army containing extensive and varied professional groups.

In light of Althusser's interpretation of *The Prince*, the *praxis* of the prince can be assessed as a practice in which the new prince attempts to control both the nobility ('the few') and the lower layers of society in a way that lowers the degree of aleatoriness of the conjuncture. The new prince tames chance, and his specific role of producing a 'stable people', including holding the nobility at bay, is of central importance.

Machiavelli's new prince and the unified Italy are not the same thing, however, as the modern nation-state of later centuries, where the taming of chance increasingly meant more profound attempts to control and homogenise the population. Apart from nationalistic, ideological apparatuses, stabilising the people will entail population censuses, statistics and registers emphasising civic duties above civil rights, the centralisation and development of control and disciplinary institutions establishing and regulating communication channels, and disciplining the use of time, actions targeted at the 'well-being' of the population, the rise of bureaucratic and technological rationality and so forth.

Following Ian Hacking, one can indeed characterise the birth process of modern societies and states as the *taming of chance*, where population censuses and statistics, timetables and calendars, the standardisation of measurements and monetary units, as well as nationalistic ideologies and measures promoting the 'health' and 'well-being' of the population are expressions of the attempts to fix or take hold of increasingly extensive population groups within the nation-state, and, by utilising this 'information', to make uniform and regularise, in all meanings of the words, the life and behaviour of the population groups.

Even though the nineteenth century indeed crushed classical determinism and actualised the question of chance, this nevertheless did not mean the breakthrough of the 'Epicurean' idea of 'freedom of the will' but, on the contrary, the development of different measuring and research methods in order to compile statistics, and to predict, to control and to make uniform the most varied forms of behaviour of the population:

> Although determinism had been eroded, it was not by creating some new place for freedom, indeed we might say that the central fact is the *taming of chance*; where in 1800 chance had been nothing real, at the end of the century it was something 'real' precisely because one had found the form of laws that were to govern chance.[237]

This could be said to be a 'mould' in which the sciences of 'control' and 'behaviour' and the politics of hegemonic power controlling the population through these same sciences are equally born. In other words, the 'control sciences' entail lowering the degree of subjective aleatoriness of the national state through different knowledge-acquiring methods and lowering the degree of humanly objective aleatoriness by controlling the population with different methods. In their 'Machiavellian' actions (such as the wars they have undertaken), the modern states are 'superior' (more 'Machiavellian') to Machiavelli and his time. This does not mean, however, that already Machiavelli's texts could be interpreted as outlines for such an extensive state in which the behaviour of the population would be more predictable, uniform and disciplined than the situation was in the beginning of *cinquecento* Italy.

In any case, Machiavelli should not be seen as a writer who would have had in mind the well-known forms of supremacy and subordination familiar from states ruled by the bourgeoisie. One must indeed remember that the starting point for his thinking was the historical situation where the actions of the domestic and foreign 'few' and their mercenaries caused continuous unrest and disturbed and threatened the course of the everyday life of 'the many'. Seen in this light, one must not anachronistically label Machiavelli's 'administrative' goals as conserving and 'Machiavellian' attempts to preserve what exists. It is also a matter of an epoch-making and revolutionary, that is, subversive, project and not only about texts for subversive uses. The goal

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[237] Hacking 1991, p. 185; my emphasis; cf. also p. 194.

of the project is to create the kind of 'collective will' that would have the power to question and to transcend the oligarchic forms of action, organisation and thinking which are in a dominant position in the existing historical conjuncture.

Both Althusser and Gramsci emphasise in their respective interpretations of Machiavelli that questioning the existing effective truth requires an extensive mass movement and an organisational base. In the case of Machiavelli himself, this entailed a new prince and his subjects, while in Gramsci's historical context it entailed a modern prince, that is, a collective, intellectual and counter-hegemonic national-popular bloc. The condition for the organisation and operation of such movements is the aleatory reality. As Althusser states, the world or social order regarded as most fixed, 'lawful' or natural is, by its very nature, aleatory. Aleatoriness is not only a threat that should be averted but also the condition and possibility for political interventions and mass movements, and such movements must be able to take an advantage of it.

Chapter Six
Conclusion

In the present study, I have attempted to show that Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli is an important contribution both to Machiavelli scholarship and political theory generally. Furthermore, Althusser's posthumously published writings shed new light on those of his works published during his lifetime. The notion of the materialism of the encounter and the posthumously published writings dealing with Machiavelli show that the claim that theoretical anti-humanism bypass the problematics of human action is erroneous. Instead, Althusser's critique is aimed at: i) the method of theoretical humanism, which is based on the separation between the individual and society, which operates within the abstract concept of 'man', and which places 'man' at the centre of his own world,[1] and ii) the idea of the expressive totality contained within the Hegelian philosophy of history which, when interpreted logically, leads to the viewpoint that human practices, such as politics, are *seemingly* autonomous expressions of the 'big subject', in other words, Universal History.

Even though Althusser's writings published during his lifetime do not explicitly deal with

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[1] Althusser 1976a, p. 176.

Machiavelli or the materialism of the encounter, 'Machiavellian' questions are nevertheless implicitly present. They are present either as questions posed, which Althusser's posthumously published late texts discuss further, or as theoretical formulations explicitly aimed as interventions into the Marxist debate. Examples of the latter formulations are: i) the critique of the idea of the expressive totality contained within Hegelian Marxism; ii) the inability to present the conditions for political activity based on the idea of the expressive totality in a theoretically valid way; iii) the theory of over- and underdetermination of contradictions contained in Althusser's interpretation of Marx; iv) the analyses of Lenin, the man of action; v) the problematics of complexity contained in Althusser's critique of Engels; and vi) Althusser's self-critique, which he directs at his earlier 'theoreticism', and in connection with which he presents a theoretical outline on the relationship between theory and practice with regard to intellectual-political activity.

In his posthumously published late writings, Althusser seeks material for a critique of essentialism and the teleological philosophy of history from the 'underground' tradition of materialism that begins with Epicurus. Particularly in terms of political activity, the most central representative of this tradition is Machiavelli. In this regard, *The Prince* is not simply a book that brings out the aleatory conditions for political activity, but rather is a tool with which Machiavelli performs a political intervention in the Italian conjuncture of the *cinquecento*. In the present study, these two dimensions have been crystallised in the expressions 'the praxis of the prince' and 'the praxis of *The Prince*'.

In light of Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli, *The Prince* can be seen as a *revolutionary manifesto* because its politics are laid out from the viewpoint of the people, as made evident by the dedication at the front of the book to Lorenzo de'Medici. The new prince should respond to the 'passionate cry' of the people, as becomes evident in the final chapter of the book, 'Exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarians'. Althusser shows that the 'Machiavellian' and 'democratic' paradigmatic interpretations of *The Prince* end up being contradictory. The former forgets the viewpoint of the people in the dedication while the latter neglects the appeal for a new prince in the final chapter.

The new prince is also the political actor in whom the 'praxis of the prince' and the 'praxis of *The Prince*' are linked. The new prince must be as equally in control of the necessary political skills as well as the existing princes but,

unlike them, the new prince must use his skills for the objective set from the point of view of the people, namely, the unification of the Apennine peninsula. Machiavelli, however, does not present this demand for the alliance between the people and the prince as a moralistic claim (e.g. appealing to the kindness of the prince, as Seneca does). Rather, he instead appeals to the prince's 'own interests'. A prudent prince understands that his power will lie on a much more solid base if he relies on the people and not the nobility. In other words, it is possible to lower the high degree of aleatoriness of the conjuncture when the prince *produces a people* [*devenir-peuple*] from the people. In the historical context of Machiavelli, this means an extensive state with its own army made up from inhabitants from the area rather than mercenary soldiers. The army is not only a war machine but also a 'melting pot of the people', an important political-ideological apparatus and practice. This is not yet, however, a matter of creating a nation-state [*stato-nazione*].

Althusser does not deny that Machiavelli's preferred goal would *not* have been a 'popular state' based on laws and an army formed from its own inhabitants. Nevertheless, Althusser is not satisfied with the 'static' analysis of such a state, but instead manages to emphasise the aleatory dynamics of the process of *taking hold* of a durable state. This occurs by means of his Epicurean 'aleatory logic'. By means of 'if-then …' deductions, it is possible to take control of the logical actions of the political actors and groups when they attempt to take advantage of the aleatory situations, as well as create durable forms in such unstable conjunctures.

In this study, I have used the expression 'man of action' (Althusser's *l'homme d'action*) to describe the *political actor*. I have argued, however, that contrary to what has often been proposed in Machiavelli scholarship, he should not be seen as the founder of 'modern' political science. Even though he proposes 'general rules [*regoli generali*]', their *status* is different from the status of laws in modern scientific theories. According to Althusser, the central aspects in general rules are the constants [*constantes*] repeated from one case to another, knowledge of which *may* be useful for the political actor planning a strategy of action. These constants can be a disadvantage, however. A blind faith that the present or future will be like the past can lead the actor to ruin because the status of these 'constants' varies from one case to another. In other words, in each case, the 'general' and 'specific' are conjuncted with each other in a particular way. Thus, in summation:

The man of action must be sensitive to the unique characteristics of his or her own case if he or she is to succeed.

In other words, success requires sufficiently precise information about the case at hand. Machiavelli indeed pays more attention to the particular features of each case than has been suggested in 'modern' interpretations of his writings, which see them as inductive generalisations – as if Machiavelli were researching different cases, from his own time and the past, in order to propose theoretical generalisations (general rules) about them. In Althusser's interpretation, by contrast, Machiavelli's interest in his own case and its unique features are emphasised. Furthermore, the political-historical cases are not seen as examples of a general rule or theory. Instead of such a substantive case conception, each historical-political case must be analysed as a unique case, in which the 'general' and the 'specific' are linked together in a way that differs from all other cases. In his interpretation, Althusser shows that the importance of Machiavelli, which transcends his own time, lies in the fact that he teaches his reader to analyse the 'unique' features of each political conjuncture.

The uniqueness of any case makes it both surprising and contingent. In Machiavelli's texts, the problematic of surprises is crystallised in the mythical form of *fortuna* and the corresponding *virtù*. *Virtù*-filled political action requires the ability to take advantage of the 'objective' *fortuna* of the surprising situation, so that it produces favourable, 'subjective' *fortuna* for the actor. This calls for organising such modalities as the 'possible' and the 'necessary'. Unlike the interpretations of the modalities employed in the natural sciences or philosophy, in Machiavelli's political thinking *possibility* and *necessity* – like chance – are immanent and aspectual subfactors of the effective truth. For example, the 'chance' or 'surprising' opening of an opportunity for an actor in a conjuncture can indeed be a matter arranged by another actor. Such playing with chance is present particularly in Machiavelli's descriptions of war and battle.

The examples of utilising and organising the aleatory situation refer to Machiavelli's viewpoint about the 'effective truth'. As Althusser emphasises, Machiavelli presents 'empirical-factual' descriptions of matters and events concerning conjunctures. With regard both to possibilities and to necessities, as well as morality and religion, Machiavelli's viewpoint is 'political' or 'politicising'. The effective truth comes by means of human deeds.

This does not mean, however that political action would necessarily be a cynical power game or that it would not be possible to aim for a world that is better than the existing one. On the contrary, the new or modern prince who does not have adequate skills and powers to influence the prevailing 'effective truths' will not achieve what he sets out to do; furthermore, the failure to influence such 'effective truths' would condemn him to solitude, or even ruin.

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