CHAPTER 14

The Modern Prince

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Machiavelli’s place in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* reflection. The Florentine *Segretario* ['secretary'] appeared on many different ‘pathways’ of Gramsci’s reflection: a moment in the history of Italy and Europe, an important figure in the history of intellectuals, an emblem of the renewed evaluation of politics in Marxism, an example of a ‘precocious’ Jacobinism, a philosopher of immanence and of praxis. It seems that Gramsci projected himself onto Machiavelli, or used him as a mirror; indeed, there were many points of convergence between them (though there was no lack of differences, which we will proceed to discuss). Both wrote after their respective defeats; both contemplated the situation in which they were immersed in light of the international context and with reference to foreign ‘models’ (in Gramsci’s case, Soviet Russia, for Machiavelli, the great nation states of Europe); both sought to *translate* these historical experiences *into Italian*, obviously with all the adaptations and alterations that a good *translation* must entail.

Against Stenterello

Gramsci’s engagement with Machiavelli had a long past. In a letter from Turi prison to his sister-in-law Tatiana on 23 February 1931, Gramsci himself recalled that his interest in Machiavelli went back to his university education in Turin. It was probably a lecturer in Italian literature, Umberto Cosmo, that gave the young Sardinian his interest in the author of *The Prince*, or at least reinforced it. Cosmo had a significant influence on the Sardinian student, among other things encouraging him to study Dante and De Sanctis and introducing him to ‘lifetime friend’ Piero Sraffa. Gramsci wrote:

When I saw Cosmo for the last time in May 1922 (he was at that time a secretary or adviser at the Italian Embassy in Berlin) he still insisted that I should write a study of Machiavelli and Machiavellianism; it was fixed

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1 ‘It is not hard to see the extent to which Gramsci’s Machiavelli borrowed from Gramsci himself’: Garin 1997, p. 59.
in his mind, from 1917 onward, that I ought to write a study of Machiavelli, and he reminded me of this on each meeting.²

Despite this account – which suggests that he had a specific, deep interest in studying Machiavelli (and Machiavellianism) going back to at least 1917 – we do not find Gramsci making many references to the Florentine secretary in the years preceding his arrest and imprisonment. As a militant journalist in the 1910s – also drawing on Croce – he did not, of course, repudiate politics as force,³ and nor did he have any love for reformism and the parliamentary system, especially in the form that it had assumed in Italy, going under the name of ‘Giolittism’. However, the young revolutionary took a clear distance from those inspired by a ‘raison d’état’ that allegedly harked back to Machiavelli. Gramsci was hostile to the ‘varied scheming formulas of our flabby Machiavellianism’,⁴ and he compared this latter to Jacobinism, which up until 1921 he interpreted as a negative phenomenon wholly internal to bourgeois politics. In the 18 May 1919 Avanti! Gramsci wrote that ‘Messrs. Statesmen in France and Italy … are realists, naturally descended from Machiavelli, and they have explicitly put raison d’état back on the altar as the sovereign criterion of our international co-existence … These Machiavellis of capitalist realism are, essentially, Jacobins: they make a fetish of laws and treaties’.⁵

That said, Machiavelli is one thing, ‘Machiavellianism’ quite another. Already on 21 December 1915, Gramsci had written – in the guise of a ‘history lover’ polemicising against the rhetoric of the radical Antonio Fradeletto: ‘Up until the French Revolution there was no effective, widespread national sentiment in Italy: the expressions of Italianness among literati and historians were just literature and rhetoric of more or less good coin, according to the writer: Machiavelli does not stand for his whole century’.⁶ Subsequent years also saw repeated positive references to the Florentine secretary. ‘Italy’, Gramsci wrote on 2 November 1918, ‘is the cradle of the experimental method that Machiavelli applied to the social sciences and Galileo applied to the physical sciences’.⁷ And on 7 November of the following year: ‘Just as Machiavelli

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2 Gramsci 1996a, p. 399.
3 Paggi 1984, p. 393. Paggi emphasises how this reading, which concerned also his reading of Machiavelli, entered into crisis with Fascism’s coming to power.
5 Gramsci 1987, p. 28.
7 Gramsci 1984, p. 389.