Gramsci’s arguments regarding the composition of *Il Principe* are well known. Here is the way they open, in outline: Machiavelli’s text, Gramsci says, renders the figure of the ‘prince’ ‘anthropomorphically’, ‘plastically’, even artistically.¹ This strategy makes Machiavelli’s ‘short book’ part of the ‘modern age’, as different in its argumentative procedure as in its content from medieval or early modern treatises on the education of princes, on the virtues of the good monarch, etc. *The Modern Prince* proceeds, in consequence, on three levels, which Gramsci understands to correspond to three levels on which Machiavelli’s work also operates: Gramsci describes, with respect to *Il Principe*, a historic shift from pre-modernity to modernity; he tracks in Machiavelli’s book a shift from a scholastic logic to a mythography or a rhetoric; and finally, he takes from *Il Principe* the ‘modern’ requirement to pass, and the means for passing, from the figure of the myth-prince conceived as an individual to a conception of sovereignty imagined as an ‘organism’, whose first ‘cell’ is the political party.

It is my intention to focus on the relation between these three levels or modes of argument in *Il Principe*, on the thoroughly irresponsible basis of an overly detailed reading of one symptomatic analogy from the last sections of *Il Principe*. These levels or modes of argument in *Il Principe* are, of course, imbricated with one another, and form a set of mutually-enforcing relays, history to rhetoric, rhetoric to logic, logic to history, and so on, in a series of permutations of surprising coherence. I think it is fairly controversial to suggest that Gramsci draws the ‘organic’ or cellular conception of sovereignty characterising the *modern* Prince from the formal coherence or continuity, the systematic relay-form, among history, rhetoric and logic, that he finds in *Il Principe* – and not from the thematics of Machiavelli’s work.² However consequential it may be

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² The reader of Gramsci’s Machiavelli who comes closest to making this argument is, I think, Louis Althusser, in *Machiavelli et ‘Nous’* (Althusser 2009). I am thinking in particular of his remarks on the first of the ‘conditions’ under which the ‘adventure’ of passing from private
– and it is highly consequential, since on this description of the ‘continuism’ of Gramsci’s model the concept of hegemony will turn out to be a logical function rather than, or before becoming, a political one – however consequential it may be, though, this principle of continuity does not obtain universally, or continuously, in the text of *Il Principe*, where a different, disruptive set of effects is at work as well. One might be tempted to cluster these effects together, and say that they are evidence that a companion principle of dis-continuity rules *Il Principe*, and the prince himself as well – but the symmetry of this structure would be deceptive in the extreme. The principle of discontinuity in Machiavelli is not a principle; it does not gather its effects into a set organised axiomatically around a term or a function governing the class of effects and designating their concept. Discontinuities in *Il Principe* work instead like contingent indices, or acts of ostension, or of reference, or of designation – they are disorganising strokes of fortune, *eventa*. They are more like floods or earthquakes than like reasoned decisions.

So if the thought that is at work in *Il Principe* does not represent the dynamic conflict between symmetrical principles, what *does* it represent?

Let me first be clear on my terminology. I intend the notion of continuity in a fairly technical sense. It would seem nonsensical to claim for Machiavelli a proto-Leibnizian position: *natura non facit saltus* meshes badly with the catastrophism we find in *Il Principe*, where nature jumps about, society does as well, and the Prince must somehow react to the predictable occurring of unforeseen effects in both domains. But neither natural nor social phenomena – which include unexpected earthquakes, plagues, floods, the whimsy of a bad prince, the spontaneous revolt of a people, and so on – are principally where Machiavelli’s continuism can be marked – or so, at any rate, Gramsci will suggest. It is rather the coherence with which Machiavelli’s argument is conducted that interests Gramsci – the highest example of which, *The Modern Prince* suggests, is to be found at the conclusion of *Il Principe*, where ‘Machiavelli makes himself the people, merges himself with the people (si confonde col popolo) ... whom [he] has convinced with the preceding tract, whose conscious expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels himself

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person to Prince, from a geographical location to a national state, can occur: the condition that the fortunate, or happy, *heureuse*, encounter between *Fortuna* (objective conditions of a conjuncture, in a given region) and *virtù* (subjective disposition of an individual in that conjuncture) have a *form*, whether the form of a correspondence, non-correspondence, or deferred correspondence (see Althusser 2009, pp. 133–35).

3 I am offering a very schematic version of Leibniz’s principle, which is not, or not entirely, or not consistently, treated as a principle by Leibniz himself, and which depends in any event on quite a different notion of what ‘nature’ is than we find in Machiavelli.