In his paper at the Spinoza conference of 2002, in Urbino, Etienne Balibar proposed three possible interpretations of the famous passage in chapter 15 of The Prince on the ‘effectual truth of the thing (verità effettuale della cosa)’ and on the significance of its opposition to the ‘imagination of it (immaginazione di essa)’.

Balibar’s first reading is based on the philosophy of Spinoza: the opposition between ‘effectual truth’ and ‘imagination’ is interpreted in the light of Spinoza’s opposition between reason and the illusion of finality. This reading is possible to the extent that politics, understood in Machiavelli’s sense, constitutes another standard of truth in addition to that of mathematics ‘that precludes the imagination’.1 However, this interpretation does not lead to a simple opposition between reason and imagination, because the material of reason, in reality, is the imagination itself, and therefore reason tends to ‘reduce the complexity of opinions and [...] to regulate the emotional conflicts that embody the imagination’; ultimately we can speak of ‘engendering reason, as an objective-subjective faculty, or as the faculty of adequating subjectivity to objectivity (d’instituer l’adéquation de la subjectivité à l’objetivité)’.2 An interpretation of this kind brings to light the ambivalence of the subjective/objective genitive in Machiavelli’s expression ‘the effectual truth of the thing’:

[…] the discourse of truth cannot be thought about only in relation to the mode of reflection, representation, and the subject-object division. It refers instead to a production, to a retroactive effectiveness, or in less abstract terms if you prefer, to the notion that its own effects are involved in practice in the constitutions of its agents, or its bearers (porteurs).3

The second reading is the one Althusser put forward in Machiavelli and Us in which Balibar sees ‘both an original interpretation of Machiavelli, and a proto-

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* Translated by Zakiya Hanafi
col that also transforms the conception of truth in Althusser, causing it to shift from a “Spinozist” model of the opposition between causal rationality and the finalist or ideological imagination to [...] a Machiavellian model.4 This Machiavellian model of truth would reside in a conception of knowledge based on the division or on the disjunctive synthesis of opposing statements, since knowledge is implicated in its object and, what is more, the nature of this object is conflictual:

However – adds Balibar – it would be completely wrong to interpret it as a failure of rationality and of its project of universality: it must be seen rather as a conflictual construction, immanent to the object, without the possibility of any neutral and neutralizing ‘metalanguage’, of universality itself.5

Finally, the third reading is based on the thought of John Austin; that is, according to Balibar’s clarification, ‘a possibility of confrontation [...] between the Machiavellian theory on the effective character of truth and certain properties of the notion of performativity’.6 From this Austinian perspective, it should be emphasised that Machiavelli viewed his own discourse as one that is stated in a situation, which ‘by its very utterance is capable of transforming the situation in which and out of which it arises’.7 This makes it, at least metaphorically, comparable to a gigantic, complex, performative utterance (a comparison made possible because ‘it is uttered in the first person, an essential characteristic of Austin’s notion of the performative’). However, this reading would have the effect of correcting the subjectivism of the performative:

[...] it would probably be possible – writes Balibar – to show that Machiavelli continues to question the idea that the effectiveness of discourse, especially the effectiveness of the discourse on truth, proceeds from its author, or from its ‘manifest’ (i.e., personal) author, necessarily situated in a univocal fashion in the political topography of the conflicts between opinions (‘between humors’) and between differences in social position, even though at different times it may fictitiously occupy more than one place; for example, the position of the ‘Prince’ or the ‘Grandi’ or the ‘people’. The effectiveness of discourse, or the springboard of performativity,