Machiavelli was Not a Republicanist – or Monarchist: On Louis Althusser’s ‘Aleatory’ Interpretation of The Prince

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1 The State and the Law

Even though neither Althusser nor Gramsci dispute that Machiavelli’s thinking contains obvious republican tendencies or dimensions, they both nevertheless emphasise the historically utopian nature of the republican moment. The historical situation on the Apennine peninsula during Machiavelli’s time was such that a move towards the collective moment of the republic, and the collective will it required, was not possible. There was not the occasione for a republic. Before it could occur, it was necessary to go through the ‘moment of solitude’ of the new.

In other words, the organisation or thorough reformation of a republic based on the law necessarily requires as a form of transition a prince or legislator who, by means of power, persuasion and cunning, leads 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.1

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1 Machiavelli 1949, p. 119, and 1950, p. 138 (D 1.9), see 1949, p. 220, and 1950, p. 265 (D 1.58). 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
In this quote there are 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 far away from the differentiation between the forms of State proposed by Aristotle in the *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 alone also in the sense that only he can interpret the real interests of the people, whereas with the ‘collective moment’ the people gradually learn to understand what their own interests are. They become a people (devenir-people) as a political actor in a new kind of State.2

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’ 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.3

According to Althusser, one should not think, on the basis of the second moment, that Machiavelli was a republican like the majority of 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 mo-

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3 Althusser 1995, pp. 115–16, and 1999, p. 65 (original emphasis).