

The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language.

Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino, eds.

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This volume publishes the proceedings of the 2013 international conference at Brunel University on “Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*: Five Centuries of History, Conflict, and Politics.” Twenty-three scholars in philosophy, politics, political theory, history, political economy, and literature present their findings in five sections: “Language,” “Machiavelli and Philosophy,” “Politics, Religion, and Prophecy,” “Radical Democracy beyond Republicanism,” and “Machiavelli and Marxism.” Focusing these disciplines and perspectives are three factors: sustained attention to *The Prince*, although the *Discourses*, *Art of War*, and *Florentine Histories* are regularly cited; the guiding philosophy of Louis Althusser, the subject of three papers; and the paradigm of conflict ordering discourse in language, philosophy, economics, war, and politics. In all of these areas Machiavelli is found to be radical.

The section on Marxism makes Machiavelli’s radicalism clearest. This is because of the work of Louis Althusser, who read Machiavelli virtually side by side with Marx yet saw Machiavelli as “the greatest materialist philosopher in history” (420). In the articles under review, Althusser parsed what Machiavelli meant by “la verità effettuale della cosa” (“the effectual truth of the thing”), developing an insightful “aleatory” reading of *The Prince* such that the conjuncture in any matter of human agency and prevailing circumstances—but especially any pertaining to the founding and renewing of a state—is understood to entail the risk of a roll of dice: “Aleatory logic, indeed, refers to the fact that there is a struggle at the center of politics” (403).

If struggle is at the center of politics in the Marxian perspective, motion and conflict are the center of underlying nature in the Lucretian perspective. Machiavelli transcribed and annotated Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* well before writing his major works, and, as seven of the papers make clear, the experience was profoundly influential in shaping the whole of his outlook. The parallels between Lucretius and Machiavelli are striking—e.g., the recognition that nature is in constant flux without divine origin, help, purpose, or morality; the recognition that fearful animals model for their fearful human kin the struggle to survive by ferocity (lion) and guile (fox) exhibiting a common fear of death (necessity); and the view that both animals and humans enjoy qualified freedom to act within the deterministic laws of cause and effect. One might say that their views were Darwinian *avant la parole*. Small wonder, then, that Machiavelli would come to write (in *Discourses* 3.41) that the plan to preserve a state’s life and liberty must override all consideration of morality.

A state's survival entails, of course, preparedness for war—arguably the topic to which Machiavelli devoted most of his attention, most extensively in the *Art of War*. The five papers exploring this work see the French invasion of 1494 as key in exposing the obsolescence of long-standing military mindsets and terminology. That event created the preconditions for a conceptual revolution, one in which Machiavelli developed new modalities, and new value-free words. They see Machiavelli radically departing from classical and humanist models of military writing by virtue of his focus on the tactics and maneuvers not of large armies but of small-scale combat units. And in the process they see him changing the very language of war. For him, “to speak of war . . . is to speak always of death, the death of men and the death of States” (23; my translation). The survival of the whole risked the survival of its parts.

Survival, of course, has to be funded, and in a highly illuminating paper on Machiavelli's rejection of the Ciceronian adage “pecunia nervus belli” (“money [is] the sinew of war”), one learns how “Machiavelli may have laid certain *foundations for the critique of political economy*” (295). Similarly, the papers on the Ciompi uprising, the Savonarola revolution, on Moses as a state builder, and on Greek as opposed to Roman tyrants all shed important new light on Machiavelli's so-called populist-republican sympathies, his advocacy of a citizen militia, his displacement of God from politics, and his understanding of what has aptly been called his economy of violence.

These papers cohere very well, often speaking to each other and sometimes disagreeing. They underscore the truism that *The Prince* remains a battlefield and that no consensus on it is likely ever to be reached. But these papers, with their carefully constructed arguments, extensive documentation, and nuanced evaluations, as well as their forty-seven pages of bibliography, do much to clear away old smoke. They testify to “the *postponed effects* of Machiavelli's *oeuvre*, which both reveal it and transform it through a ceaseless ‘mobilization’ of its words and propositions” (349).

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