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Machiavelli's "new prince" and the Primordial Moment of Acquisition

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Commentators have frequently noted the discrepancy in *il Principe* between the figure of the new prince and the impossibility of exemplifying him. Against interpretations that claim Machiavelli's text either traps a prince in a web of self-destructive advice or destabilizes the very political knowledge it provides, the author argues that it uses the figure of the new prince to locate us in the primordial moment of acquisition of political power, a moment that is never overcome but is constantly replayed in maintaining states and beneath established institutions. Thus given the impossibility for a new prince to ever get beyond "the primordial moment of acquisition," there can be no overall theoretical resolution to this tension, and thus no closure to this text. Therefore the text addresses a reader-actor who has to assemble the maxims and examples in light of the necessities governing primordial acquisition as they play out in his/her historical location.

Keywords: *Machiavelli; political acquisition; Borgia; lo stato; virtù; foresight; fortune; republicanism*

J. G. A. Pocock brilliantly points out that Machiavelli's radical departure from the conventional prudence of his time in *il Principe* was to shift the viewpoint of political advice from that of the traditional established ruler to the "innovator," "il principe nuovo," the actor who invents and imposes a state anew without guidelines.¹ Yet, for all of Machiavelli's illustrations of what past princes have done, there is no one paradigmatic example of such a prince in this work, at least of a particular historical prince who might serve as a model or mirror for all future actors to follow. To be sure, Machiavelli presents numerous candidates for such a role: Louis XII of

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France, Cesare Borgia, Francesco Sforza, Ferdinand of Aragon, and Pope Julius II, but none of these figures represent "the new prince" as such but only fragments of what a new prince might do or have to do. And the great founders of the past turn out to be merely mythical and therefore inaccessible. Hence, the puzzle to be explained: the concept of the new prince as innovator drives the whole account of what a prince must do to acquire, secure, and found a state; yet, this figure is disaggregated into a variety of examples which do not coalesce to produce a composite of the new prince. And if there is no composite prince, there also is no one kind of principality or form of state that the prince produces. Rather, there are as many *stati* as there are princes.

I want to argue that the reason for this glaring discrepancy in *il Principe* between the paradigmatic figure of the new prince in a new state and the impossibility of exemplifying him rests on a problem that this text seeks to raise but not resolve: namely, given the impossibility for a new prince to ever get beyond the moment of original acquisition of a state—what I call "the primordial moment of acquisition"—there can be no overall theoretical resolution to this tension, and thus no closure to this text. Rather, the text draws us into this dilemma and then forces us to use our imaginative capacity to understand the way it is working itself out in our own situation.² I therefore take issue with two conflicting strands of interpretation each of which focuses on relating the underlying textual strategy of *il Principe* to its overall political strategy.³ The first strand understands *il Principe* as opening out to numerous audiences but nevertheless having the effect of trapping its historical addressee, the Medici, in a cunning web of self-destructive advice that will lead to the inevitable loss of their command over Florence and usher in a republican revival.⁴ The second strand informed by a deconstructive reading views *il Principe* as a text that unwinds and ultimately destabilizes the very cumulative political knowledge it claims to provide. Instead of a trap to self-destructive action, this reading views the famous exhortation at the end as a tacked on "oratorical melodrama" of redemption played out by a fictional heroic agent charged with liberating Italy once and for all.⁵ Against both of these readings, I argue Machiavelli's text addresses a reader-actor who has to assemble the maxims and examples by him/herself under the pressure of recurrently nagging necessities governing the primordial origin of all "states."

Before developing this reading of Machiavelli, I want to clarify a few key terms that recur throughout the essay. First, when I speak of the grammar of Machiavelli's theory, I mean it in the sense of forms of ordinary usage. I specifically use the term to point to Machiavelli's continuous employment of

the conditional in the form of “if you do X . . . then Y consequences will follow” or “whoever desires X must do Y” as his way to keep us looking from the viewpoint of action within the struggle over acquisition. Second, I speak of “the matrix of forces” or “the relations of forces” to describe the irrevocable agents and situations that a prince regularly faces in acquiring a state. Third, I often speak of a “paradigmatic” situation, necessity, “matrix of forces,” example, or agent that a prince might face, submit to, find himself in, confront, or imitate. I thus use this term to indicate either a model or pattern to be followed such as the perfect or exemplary prince, or a condition that is typical, recurrent, or irrevocable such as the matrix of forces described above. Needless to say, these terms are often used in relation to one another.

Machiavelli’s Method: Unsettling the Concepts and Grammar of Established Rule

From the very first chapters of *The Prince*, Machiavelli undermines the adequacy of viewing the political actor as office holder or the state as a form of settled rule. He famously begins *The Prince* by distinguishing the hereditary ruler from the actor in whom he is interested, “il principe nuovo.”⁶ Ruling by custom and institutional habit, the hereditary rule has no need for virtù. He need merely rely on established practice and in the face of unpredictable events, he need simply delay until the crises has passed. Above all, such a ruler need not spend time winning over the people. He can count on their good will because it would seem tradition and custom have hidden the memory of the primordial moment when power was seized, when the prince is faced with the existential choice of allies and enemies, of winning supporters only by injuring adversaries (chap. 2, 6–7). The “new prince,” by contrast, must rely thoroughly on his virtù, his energy and courage (animo); his inventiveness (ingengo); his ability to deceive (inganno); his astuteness (astuzia), that is, his ability to recognize situations; his industry (industria); that is, a diligence combined with skill and cleverness—all qualities necessary to impose his will on others in the face of the obstacles created by fortune. Once we view matters of state from the perspective of the new prince, successful rule, all things being equal, depends primarily on the degree of virtù of the prince: “I say then, that in altogether new principalities one encounters more or less difficulty in maintaining them according to whether the one who acquires them is more or less *virtuoso*” (chap. 6, 22).

Similarly, in the very first chapter he defines states purely in terms of their means of command rather than their goal: whether republics or principalities they are "dominations, that have had or have empire over men" (*dominii che hanno avuto et hanno imperio sopra li umoni*; chap. 1, 5). And then, except for a few exceptions in which the state is the agent of action, he renders them the passive (and predatory) object of the prince's actions. In the typical grammar of *The Prince*, as J. H. Hexter has pointed out, the prince acquires, seizes, and then, maintains or holds, or subsequently loses *lo stato*, "imperio sopra li umoni." Occasionally in doing this, a prince also founds or imposes laws on a state.⁷ But in either case, advice is given from a perspective created by Machiavelli's use of the hypothetical (or factual) conditional, that is, of either what a prince, or what you as potential prince, does or must do in order to acquire, seize, hold, or found *lo stato*. Neither one's status nor one's inner qualities are of any importance in defining who is a prince (chap. 18, 70–71).⁸ Or more properly put, one's status in the political world and the qualities we associate with continuity and quality of character become under this grammar merely means of acquiring and maintaining *lo stato*—to be "used" or not "according to necessity" (chap. 15, 61; also chap. 19, 77). Through this grammar, we view the prince (and his capacities) from the angle of all that he must do to seize command over others and maintain that command once seized rather than from that of the institutional lineaments of the ruler in his state or the state as a durable institution outliving the ruler.

Finally, among the necessities faced by the new prince in gaining *lo stato*, Machiavelli distinguishes those concerned with acquisition, command, or rule over others and those concerned with maintenance of rule once a state is acquired or seized. However, typical of Machiavelli's method, all settled forms of rule are always brought back to their point of origin in the acts of "il principe nouvo." Thus, the art of maintaining *lo stato* fails if the prince loses sight of the demands of original acquisition and suffers from "ozio," indolence, in attending to both arms and popular support (chap. 24, 97; chap. 3, 13). Indeed, although hereditary monarchies (actually, all conventional forms of rule) extinguish the memory of their original acquisition, Machiavelli makes it his business to relentlessly remind us of that moment. He does this by demonstrating that the demands of maintaining one's rule, one's command over others, require we never forget the means of acquisition—the violence, the deception, the imposition of law, the constant choice of allies. Thus in the quote from chapter 6 cited earlier (chap. 6, 22), Machiavelli ties the difficulties in maintaining *lo stato* to the virtù of the seeker of *stato* at the primordial moment of acquisition. If this

is correct, there is no advice that focuses purely on ordinary day-to-day rule in *The Prince*; rather, in each piece of prudential advice on maintaining *lo stato* we are brought back to that primordial moment in which a prince—defined as “whoever understands” Machiavelli’s advice—seizes *lo stato* relying on what limited virtù he has been given.

In sum, the seemingly limited demands of hereditary rule, at first contrasted with “il principe nuovo,” are thereafter absorbed into the constantly expansive demands on the “new prince” relentlessly pursuing *lo stato*.⁹ These moves are distinctive of Machiavelli’s shift of perspective in matters of state from the passive and the settled to the active and the fortuitous, from attributes of status to attributes of skill, from agency to action and consequence. In all these senses, he regularly sets up a dichotomy between a concept related to settled rule and a description of the moment of seizing power only to redefine the former from the viewpoint of the latter. So whether they are the result of custom or the result of seizure, all forms of rule are destabilized and unsettled. It is this dual strategy of first destabilizing traditional institutional rule of states and then, on this newly won terrain, focusing on rule “maintained” purely by one’s own wits or virtù that frames Machiavelli’s discourse on the specific necessities facing “il principe nuovo” who must innovate or succumb. However, given that this “new prince” is located in a swirling vortex of seizure and imposition, is there anything resembling a stable set of necessities relating to “l’arte dello stato” that this figure can teach us?¹⁰

The Unresolvable Dilemma of the New Prince

Following his brief discussion of the hereditary or traditional institutional ruler, Machiavelli answers this question with a variety of statements laying out the central and irrevocable difficulty a new prince faces in conquering a state belonging to someone else:

Men willingly change their masters in the belief that they will fare better: this belief makes them take up arms against him, in which they are deceived because they see later by experience that they have done worse. That follows from another natural and ordinary necessity which requires that one must always offend those over whom he becomes a new prince, both with men-at-arms and with infinite other injuries that the new acquisition brings in its wake. *So you have as enemies all those whom you have offended in seizing that principality, and you cannot keep as friends those who have put you there because you cannot satisfy them in the mode they had presumed and you cannot use strong medicines against them since you are obligated to them.* (chap. 3, 8; see also chap. 4, 18; emphasis added)

Similarly, if a prince seeks to be an "innovator," a founder of a brand new state with new laws, practices and institutions, he has the same problem intensified: "And it should be considered that nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders. For the introducer has all those who benefit from the old orders as enemies, and he has lukewarm defenders in all those who might benefit from the new orders. The lukewarmness arises partly from the fear of adversaries who have the laws on their side and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not believe in new things unless they come to have an experience of them." And so when one's adversaries find the opportunity to counter-attack, one's own supporters respond tentatively and distrustfully (chap. 6, 23–24). And in the penultimate chapter of the *il Principe*, Machiavelli complains bitterly that the princes of his own time have lost their states because either they had engendered the hatred of their people or they had failed to defeat the nobles (chap. 24, 96–97).

The problem here is twofold. The desire of ordinary people to change masters, to escape domination and rule, provides the prince with the occasion to seize power. However, once having successfully won the support of the people to displace the previous rulers and impose his own rule, he has to convince the people that his rule will be different—a claim on which he cannot make good—while facing enemies whom he has injured, particularly among the nobles, who would like nothing better than to exact revenge. The result is that he invariably has fierce enemies and weak, indeed disappointed, supporters. So the very condition that allows the prince to seize *lo stato*—the desire of the people to change masters—provides the conditions for another prince to overthrow the new prince. This problem is increased exponentially for the prince seeking to be the founder of a new order, for he must convince the people of the benefits of new laws and institutions before they have experienced the benefits while the few who benefit from the old laws know precisely what they are losing and oppose the new prince as innovator or inventor of a new state with corresponding intensity. The same problem recurs throughout *The Prince*, always with the same intractable set of necessities. However, the problem is expansive adding new problems and new actors to this paradigmatic necessity.

This fundamental problem of disappointing friends and blunting the designs of injured enemies telescopes down to more fundamental necessity: the prince must steer between the nobles, the well-connected few who desire to rule, and the people who seek to escape being ruled. In the political world, there is only the prince, the nobles, and the people and the struggle

of the three to achieve their conflicting desires because desires effectually produces all political forms and generates political chaos: "For in every city these two diverse humors are found, which arises from this: that the people desire neither to be commanded nor oppressed by the great that the great desire to command and oppress the people. From these two diverse appetites one of three effects occurs in cities: principality, liberty, or licence" (chap. 9, 39). For Machiavelli, this conflict is not one generated by statuses or classes, by differences of birth or wealth; rather it is rooted in a political psychology. There are some inclined to rule and the vast majority who are inclined not to be ruled, and the names we give to actors in all states whether we call them nobles versus the people, the few versus the many, the great versus the low, are in fact nothing more than the political manifestation, the "effects," of these two inclinations. In the *Discourses* Book I chapter 16, Machiavelli provides a clue as to the degree to which the prince can satisfy these conflicting desires at the root of all political orders. The people, Machiavelli argues, have two desires: they want to avenge themselves against their rulers and they want to be free of domination. The prince can satisfy them halfway. He can take vengeance on behalf of the people by destroying the previous aristocratic rulers and contain the popular desire for liberty by absorbing the 50 or so well-connected agents with a desire to rule over others and protecting the persons and property of the rest of the people.¹¹ But he cannot give them complete liberty either in the sense of emancipation from domination by the few or self-government for the many which only a republic could provide. Of course, Machiavelli does not say what is implied: that once one has satisfied the people's desire for security against the few a new occasion has been created for a new prince to exploit this matrix of forces, and the prince, having done what is necessary to maintain his power, is now back again at the primordial situation of all prince's seeking to acquire stato.

Machiavelli's advice to side with and animate the people and tame the nobles as a way to overcome the recurrent dynamic of acquisition is part and parcel of a broader piece of advice that he gives repeatedly, "whoever is the cause of someone's becoming powerful [gaining more stato] is ruined" (chap. 3, 16), and never associate with someone more powerful than oneself because if one wins, one is in his power (chap. 21, 96); or again never stay neutral if two powers close by are at each other but always side with one for "a prince is also esteemed when he is a true friend and a true enemy, that is, when without any hesitation he discloses himself in support of someone against another" (chap. 21, 89). From this precept, it follows that when conquering a state, the prince should become the defender

of the weak in a territory, diminish the power of the established authorities and always take away the occasion for a foreign power to enter (chap. 3, 11). Were the prince a monarch resting on traditional or customary rule, this stricture to always ally with the weak might not apply. However, "il principe nuovo"—indicated by the recurrent "whoever" in these passages—cannot rely on custom or tradition to secure obedience. He must rely on his own virtù to win over a skeptical people, strike fear in the nobles, and deprive any prince like himself of exploiting the ambition of the few or the distrust of the people (11). And for that matter, it is not clear whether the ruler who relies on custom is not simply overlooking a dynamic struggle operating beneath the secure surface of his rule, a struggle requiring the very virtù that custom and tradition extinguish.

Given the unreliability of the nobles, how is one to secure the people and thereby secure one's command or rule so that no other prince can exploit the desire for new rulers? Much of Machiavelli's advice in *The Prince* is addressed to meeting this necessity though given the intractability of ever satisfying the people more than halfway and taming the nobles once and for all, the advice is always of temporary use. A new prince, Machiavelli suggests, should commit all of his violent acts against his adversaries at the beginning of his seizure of power so he may soon turn to providing benefits for the people before they rebel against him out of rage against increasing injuries (chap. 8, 38). Similarly, Machiavelli cautions a prince to rely on citizens and subjects for his soldiers not on mercenaries or auxiliaries once again because in adversity, the latter will desert him (chap. 13, 57). He should further use his personal energy and his institutions to keep the people animated and active so that they have need of the state and of the ruler rather than merely passively obey. For failing to do this, should a prince be attacked from outside, he will lose his power to the group standing between himself and the citizens, his magistrates (chap. 9, 41–42). One should honor all those with virtù in an art and keep the people occupied with festivals and spectacles and consult with guilds, clans, associations, and above all reward all subjects who personally contribute to the state (chap. 21, 91).

A similar consideration attends Machiavelli's discussion of fortresses. Princes need them to protect against attacks from enemies if they cannot rely on the people, but figuratively and literally they denote a choice not to build one's defenses on popular support but rather to hope to repress the populace while repulsing attack from foreigners. Initially, Machiavelli offers this advice in an impartial tone of voice; but he immediately erases this alternative arguing "the best fortress there is, is not to be hated by the

people, because although you may have fortresses, if the people hold you in hatred fortress do not save you” (chap. 20, 19). Given the desires of the nobles to rule, the people to be free, and outside princes seeking to take away one’s *stato*, the fortress adds an illusory barrier much like custom, law, or tradition, allowing the prince to think that he can escape having to choose among allies by stabilizing a defense against outsiders when in fact it merely hides from him the always recurrent occasion for an outsider to make use of popular discontent with one’s rule.

But finally, the most important fortress for Machiavelli’s new prince is to use all of these means in order to avoid being hated by his subjects (chap. 17, 66–67; chap. 19, 72–73). From the need not to be hated, Machiavelli derives a panoply of contradictory maxims: to name just a few, one must be feared both by one’s supporters and one’s adversaries, yet constantly work to win the “good will” of the subjects; one must be stingy with the public purse, yet reward members of the public with benefits; to secure oneself against popular contempt, one need merely refrain from taking away one’s subjects’ property or dignity, yet one must constantly keep the people involved in the state or they will desert you in time of adversity; one must build one’s armies on the loyalty of one’s subjects, but never fear displaying cruelty in the army to keep discipline. It would seem that once we include this last piece of prudential advice, the contradictory nature of the new prince’s task becomes manifest. At this point, the best advice is of no use if he does not have the requisite *virtù*—inventiveness, energy, astuteness, persistence, strength, and cunning—to understand his own place within the endlessly evolving relations between prince, people, nobles, and adversary princes. It would seem that each shift in the struggle to find and keep the people from deserting you or to conquer a new territory demands a different combination of advice and the *virtù* to translate it into the given situation.

But there is one necessity generated by this dynamic that a prince can never overcome no matter how great his *virtù*, namely he can never seize or maintain a republican form of state. For the republican form of state, a state used to “vivendo libero,” living freely, is able to remember and transmit through its customs and institutions precisely what all individual rulers seek to extinguish: “the memory of [its] ancient liberty.” And the reason, for Machiavelli, why the imprint of its liberty is not to be extinguished merely by winning over the people and thwarting the nobles is not that a republic simply maintains free institutions in its habits and customs, but rather that a republic plays out this conflict at the highest level of intensity as part and parcel of its self-governing way of life (chap. 5, 20–21).¹² The prince may

seize a republic, but, Machiavelli implies, he cannot seize the memory of its originary moment in its own struggle between the few and the many. The effects of the struggle between nobles and people has already taken place, and the prince cannot extinguish the memory of its effects—the institutions and laws that resulted from these conflicts. In light of this limitation, Machiavelli, cautions that a republic can never be subdued, only destroyed (chap. 5, 21). But implicit in this advice is the suggestion that the prince can only gain a pyrrhic victory over a republic, for either he will never rule it, or he will have to destroy it, leaving no one to conquer or to rule—only empty and wasted territory. In effect, the acquisition of a republic represents the limiting case for prudential advice for the new prince on overcoming the dynamic of popular discontent and seizure just as the hereditary ruler serves as a limiting case on the other end of the spectrum.

At the end of the day, then, none of Machiavelli's prudential advice will allow the new prince to rest easily in maintaining his state with confidence. For the "new prince," seeking to escape from, but standing always in the original conflict of acquisition and seizure of *lo stato*, can promise the people liberty as security but never satisfy their desire not to be ruled, commanded, or dominated. Moreover, he can never over the long run prevent either the nobles or other princes from coveting his power. And so he must constantly replay the moment in which power has been seized, promising what he cannot provide and making enemies he can never vanquish once and for all.

If, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the grammar of *The Prince* rotates around both factual and hypothetical conditionals of the kind, "whoever seeks to acquire *stato* (command over human beings in a territory) must do x, or x and y but avoid z," it is this paradigmatic situation of unresolvable and dynamically changing conflict described above that fills this grammar with content. It is also this paradigmatic situation that defines and tests the various qualities that constitute the *virtù* of "il principe nuovo." And finally, it is the impossibility of every mastering this situation then that defines the power of "fortuna," especially, if, at the most fundamental level, fortuna describes all the circumstances that we cannot control through our *virtù*.¹³ Fortune, to be sure, is the possibility of mastering this situation, this endlessly shifting matrix of forces, in seeking *lo stato*; but simultaneously, fortune is the impossibility of an individual actor, no matter how "virtuoso," to master it.

It would seem then that despite his recurrent couplet of the new prince "acquiring" and subsequently "maintaining" *lo stato*, the weight of Machiavelli's prudence lies on the side of acquisition; for if the prince becomes too

focused on maintenance, he will become the victim of the forces at work in the original struggle for acquisition. He will forget that pure maintenance of *lo stato* does not extirpate the occasion for another to exploit the original matrix of forces that allowed “il principe nuovo” to gain command over others in the first place. And so it would seem all rulers both new and old will never master the forces that make acquisition of *lo stato* possible.¹⁴

Imitation as Way Out?

To navigate through these recurrent dilemmas, Machiavelli invokes a typical renaissance topos of prudential learning: the imitation of examples.¹⁵ In particular, he follows the topos of gathering one’s model from a variety of examples but transforming them into something of greater excellence. But there is something ironic about his famous account of exemplary learning. The best examples of the most perfect virtù are almost impossible for a “new prince” to imitate. At first, for “principalities that are altogether new both in prince and in state,” Machiavelli will “bring up the greatest examples.” But then he radically diminishes their efficacy by claiming that “since men almost always walk on paths beaten by others and proceed in their actions by imitation, unable either to stay on the paths of others altogether or to attain the virtù of those whom you imitate, a prudent man should always enter on paths beaten by great men, and imitate those who have been most excellent, so that if his own virtù does not reach that far; it is, at least, in the odor of it” (chap. 6, 22).

For Machiavelli, there are no new actions—that is, actions that are purely original. We always imitate the actions of others—walk on paths beaten by others’ whether we are aware of it or not. So even the new prince, who produces a new state is repeating what others have done. Moreover, Machiavelli insists, the new prince can never imitate an example perfectly both because of lack of virtù and because situations are always different. And so Machiavelli concludes we must become conscious of the exemplary nature of all action and therefore choose the best examples of virtù to imitate.

But then when he finally selects the highest examples for a new prince to imitate, they turn out to be unattainable. One should imitate actors of pure and perfect virtù—the great founders of states—who relied on fortune only to give them the occasion to act: Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus “and the like,” says Machiavelli mockingly (chap. 6, 22). As Pocock has noted, the pure legislator or prophet imposing form on a totally inert people bereft of customs “never exists in reality” and is therefore not available for human imitation.¹⁶

But this is not necessarily so fatal as it may seem, since all examples, being selections of distinctive qualities of actors and situations, are fictions of a kind. The problem is rather that these great founders of states cannot be imitated precisely, because they are the source of all examples—there is no precedent for Moses's lawgiving, or Romulus's fratricide to begin Rome, or Cyrus leading the Persians out of oppression. All of these actors imitate no one: their actions are in a sense *sui generis*. Thus, to imitate them would mean to be *sui generis* as well. But is this achievable through "imitation?" When we look at what these actors of unprecedented *virtù* did, we are once again thrown back on the original dilemma that recurs throughout this work: the struggle to navigate between the people seeking a way out of oppression and the nobles and princes who seek to dominate and command. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, Romulus are all examples of those who "introduce" "new orders and modes" "so as to found their state and their security" (chap. 6, 23). That is, on the way to merely acquiring power they produce a new order of things for a people seeking to get out from under domination, though not without a judicious use of force before the benefits of the new order become palpable. And if the new prince in his own situation can do this, he will have perhaps not attained the mythical qualities of these examples but will have shared in the qualities that make these examples in effect unattainable: "the odor of the highest *virtù*." They represent a solution to the dilemma of a fierce opposition and a weak support among the people but, as the word "odor" implies, only in the most ephemeral sense.

It would seem, then, that if one merely aims to maintain the state for oneself, one is likely not to achieve even the appearance of doing so. But in striving to be an "originary" source of *virtù* in ordering a people and founding a state, we may secure our domination in a way that might at least give the appearance of durability—and given the purely retrospective success of the great founders, perhaps that is all there is.

The question is whether Machiavelli provides anything resembling a solution or solutions to this problem in the less exalted examples for imitation derived from both ancient sources and contemporaries. If we examine some of Machiavelli's most significant examples, his answer would seem to be resolutely no. Though he does offer an occasional example in which the problem is temporarily overcome, it is usually accompanied by a lesson that contradicts most of his most significant advice.

The book begins with the example of Louis XII of France who fails on all counts. He is the paradigmatic negative example of an actor who does not understand the logic governing any actor who plays the role of the "new prince." He fails to exploit the desire of subjects for new masters by gaining

the good will of the people. He fails to recognize that he has enemies in those he has offended in conquering a new territory. And above all, he fails to heed Machiavelli's general advice regarding both acquisition and rule, never to ally with the stronger party in conquering a new state or preserving a state one already rules. Thus, he quickly takes over the city of Milan but disappointing the people, he allows Ludovico Sforza, a truly "new prince," to immediately take it from him. But he tries again, and this time gains allies among a great number of the most important but most vulnerable cities and nobles in Italy. But then, instead of maintaining his alliance of the weak powers against the strong, he first strengthens one of the strongest powers, the Church, by aiding Alexander VI (the future mentor of Borgia) to take Romagna. He then estranges himself from his allies. And then, he supports another strong power, by inviting the king of Spain to enter Italy and divide up the kingdom of Naples with him. At this point, he has strengthened two powers at his expense. And yet, he still has one last chance to save situation by preserving Venice as a counter power to the Pope and Spain. But instead he takes from Venice its state, so now it can no longer provide a barrier to other two powers, leaving France unprotected in Lombardy (chap. 3, 7–8, 13–15; chap. 7, 28). Louis is subsequently expelled from Italy. But this successful expulsion to the benefit of the Church and Ferdinand of Aragon follows inevitably from the fact that Louis "imitates" his first mistakes—alienating the weak and strengthening the strong power—over and over again. For Machiavelli, Louis is the prime example of political blindness, for he is unable to discern which actors among the matrix of forces merely want protection and which ones covet what he himself desires.

Oddly, it is one of Louis XII two most fatal mistakes—strengthening Pope Alexander VI—that provides Cesare Borgia, the emblematic political entrepreneur, with the occasion to seek *lo stato*. Although Machiavelli describes Borgia as relying on the fortune and arms of others and thus as the prince most far removed from the perfect prince who relies on his *virtù* alone, he, among the many examples in *The Prince*, in fact, represents the prototypical "new prince" in "effective" reality. For although he gains the arms and the occasion for acquiring a state from his father, Pope Alexander, he skillfully turns his borrowed resources into his own while conquering a state in Romagna for himself. That is, he exemplifies the highest *virtù*, at least potentially, in a double sense; first, as if by a kind of alchemy of statecraft, he transforms borrowed resources into his own; and second, having done so he begins to impose durable foundations—laws, arms, and examples—for a state in Italy that will no longer be subject to foreigners.

But not even this captures his unique virtù for Machiavelli, because he builds the foundation for his "stato" as he is going along until he reaches a point at which he can rely solely on his own virtù in conquering the state. He, in effect, starts where most political actors do, depending on others for their resources and the chance to use them to exercise political power, but unlike most actors he comes within a hair's breadth of breaking this umbilical cord and in the process of gaining a stato of his own almost finds one that will live beyond him. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Machiavelli should insist repeatedly that "he [Borgia] should be put forward to be imitated by all those who have risen to empire through fortune and the arms of others," and he insists "I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of his actions" (chap. 7, 33, 27).

And yet, his story, as many commentators have noted, is one of failure, but failure in an odd sense. For wherever we intervene in the story until its ironic ending, there is a lesson on how to meet the demands of Machiavelli's inexorable matrix of forces. With his borrowed troops—ironically lent him through the help of Louis XII—he acquires the territory of Romagna and turns it into his *stato*. But facing a population distrustful of his rule and nobles whose own plunder of the region is threatened, along with the French king externally who does not want him to become too powerful and an army of unreliable borrowed troops, he systematically overcomes these threats in turn. He secures the loyalty of his borrowed army by winning over the adherents of the Orsini family of Rome from whence his army came and then deceiving and killing the heads of the family. Having his own army, he is now in a position to secure his *stato* in Romagna. He then famously invests Remirro de Orco with the power to violently repress the nobles and then in another deception has d'Orco executed thereby discharging the rage and fear of the public (chap. 7, 27–30). At this point, he begins to win over the good will of the ordinary people who start to "have a taste of well-being" (29). He then disentangles himself from his dependency on the King of France (30) and seems on his way to expand his state beyond the territory of Romagna to other parts of the Italian peninsula, but for one fateful error: he fails to secure the election of a new pope who would favor his expansion or fully prepare for a hostile power who would seek to take away the political resources he received from Alexander VI (30). And Borgia dies before he can become self-sufficient enough to defeat the new hostile pope. The narrative ends on a series of what ifs: "If he had succeeded in this [capturing Tuscany] (as he was succeeding the same year Alexander died), he would have acquired such force and reputation that he would have stood by himself and would

no longer have depended on the force and fortune of someone else, but on his own power and virtù” (31).

It would seem that this example points to the fact—so central to Machiavelli’s advice—that a new prince seeking to acquire *lo stato*—and meeting every necessity as it comes along—still cannot conquer one thing: fortuna. And Machiavelli’s own judgment would give credence to such a reading: “It was not his fault, because this arose from an extraordinary and extreme malignity of fortune” (27). And yet, the “misfortune” of not living long enough to thwart Pope Julius’s designs occurred not simply because time ran out before Borgia could become sufficiently independent militarily and amass enough empire or *stato*, to resist the pope. Rather, as Machiavelli derisively remarks, for all his furious acquisition of empire, Borgia overlooked a crucial necessity that refers us once again back to the paradigmatic scene of action faced by all princes: he made a strong adversary more powerful—in this case, he allowed the papacy to be chosen from cardinals he had injured. For one moment, he falls into the trap of thinking he might tame an injured party by benefiting him: “So the duke erred in this choice and *it* was the cause of his ultimate ruin” (32, emphasis added). Although the exemplary counterpoint to Louis XII, Borgia commits the same ultimate mistake as Louis of allowing a powerful party to become more powerful (chap. 3, 16; see chap. 21, 90), and he does this even though he has as close to a comprehensive understanding of the political field as one political agent could conceivably attain. It would appear therefore that while Machiavelli suggests all of Borgia’s actions but one are worthy of imitation, he also leave us with a warning on the limits of exemplary imitation.¹⁷

We can easily dispense with Agathocles and Hiero of Syracuse. They maintain themselves by a timely and economic use of force, and in the case of Hiero by turning all relations of authority upside down. These actors successfully seize power and hold it but found nothing lasting outside of their rule. And as we have seen both in the fictional examples of founders and the all too concrete example of Borgia, success is to be measured not simply by the virtù of using force and deception to gain command but providing “foundations” beyond one’s own rule. So while Agathocles and Hiero’s tactics are exemplary for a “new prince,” their accomplishment, Machiavelli, suggests, is not (chap. 8, 35).

Then, there is the peculiar example of Annibale Bentivoglio and his long lost son, Giovanni (chap. 19, 74). In this example, Machiavelli demonstrates the benefits of not being hated and encouraging the good will of the people in a most ironic way indeed. As Machiavelli tells it, Annibale Bentivoglio was killed by the conspiracy of the Canneschi—a seeming

lesson that even if one is not hated, one cannot avoid conspiracies if one is a prince. But then, Machiavelli provides a cheering end to the story, for "immediately after the homicide the people rose up and killed all the Canneschi. This came from the popular good will the house of Bentivoglio had in those times" (74). They then found someone born a Bentivoglio who was taken for the son of a blacksmith and put him in charge of government of Bologna until Giovanni was old enough to govern himself.

The lesson Machiavelli draws from this story—that starts starkly realistic and ends in myth—seems to be the recurrent lesson of this work: "a prince should take little account of conspiracies if the people show good will to him" (74). Of course, against the example, the lesson drips with irony. For a prince is told that he can ignore conspiracies as long as he cultivates the good will of the people—part of the standard advice already presented in chapter 3. But the example of Bentivoglio now shifts the standard of success in warding off the nobles and winning over the people from maintenance of the prince's *stato* to maintenance of the prince's name. His success in warding off the nobles and propitiating the people is gained literally in name only—an odd example for imitation indeed.

As for the two examples of success, Ferdinand of Aragon and Pope Julius II, neither is emblematically "a new prince." Ferdinand is a monarch who inherits his throne from a cautious and inept successor. He is the ruler by inheritance of the kind Machiavelli in chapter 1 dismisses as lacking in interest. Nonetheless, he uses his traditional authority as a place to launch undertakings worthy of a new prince. Pope Julius is portrayed as a master of impetuosity and impatience, but he in effect impersonates a prince (chap. 25, 100–101). For he possesses no real army of his own, does not rely on popular support, and plays off alliances of princes and nobility—the King of France and the Orisini and Collonia—to overcome his adversaries. Although showing admirable energy and quickness, he violates every maxim Machiavelli puts forward as the basis for acquiring a state. And despite all of his restless activity, he creates no *stato* in Italy. All told then, in no contemporary example does a truly "new prince" ever succeed. On the contrary, the dynamic relation of discontented people and ambitious nobles seems either to defeat some of Machiavelli's most significant exemplars of princely virtù or provide an occasion for actors to succeed who have only a vague resemblance to the "new prince" portrayed in Machiavelli's maxims.

But what of the combination of his examples with his maxims of conduct? Do they together give us a way out of the failure to provide us with some paradigmatic figure to imitate in solving the recurrent situation produced by the psychology of princes, nobles, and people? To be sure, in

addition to his many examples, he also provides a series of claims about the efficacy of his maxims and examples. Yet, he resolutely undermines some of the grandest of these claims. First off, as if to provide a solution for all previous tensions within maxims and examples, he makes the famous claim that if his advice is followed it will make a prince seem older and more durable than a hereditary ruler: Once the virtù of the “new prince” is recognized by ordinary people, once it is embodied in good laws, arms, allies, a civic examples, Machiavelli claims, it is adhered to more than to ancient customs, because the present is more palpable than the past, and the new prince can count on the members of his state to defend him in adversity in a way that a hereditary ruler cannot (chap. 24, 96). Yet at the same time, everything that follows this claim gives us grounds to think that any stable state that ensues will require of the prince that he constantly attend to necessities over which at best he can gain temporary control. But then in chapter 24, Machiavelli reverses himself again and claims that the failures of new princes in the present are not due to bad fortune but to *ozio*, sloth, a lack of reliance on their own virtù (chap. 24, 97). And what does this failure to rely on their own virtù consist in? Again, the new princes failed to attend to arms, and they failed to animate the people and thereby secure themselves against “i grandi,” the great or few who desire to oppress. In chapter 25, however, he demonstrates that even if present rulers had attended to these matters, success might very well have eluded them. For our virtù of character and modes of proceeding are always contingently related to the occasion fortune serves up. He then argues that sometimes fortune will dictate the need for caution, sometimes impetuosity, but then he seems to side with impetuosity as the ultimate feature of virtù (chap. 25, 100–101). However, like our models of the great but mythical founders, impetuosity needs no guidance.¹⁸ It needs merely energy and drive and the occasion to act.

But if Machiavelli provides no ultimate solution to this dilemma, what is the cumulative point of his prudential maxims? What are Machiavelli’s examples of prudent and virtuous actors supposed to demonstrate? What would it mean to imitate these examples as Machiavelli suggests we do? Some of the most acute commentators have suggested that we might glimpse a solution to this dilemma in Machiavelli’s rhetorical strategy.

A Political Answer: Rhetorical Poison for the Prince

One powerful solution to this dilemma has been proposed by Mary Dietz. Dietz recognizes that Machiavelli’s prudential advice may open out

to a variety of audiences and a variety of readings. However, if we view both the sequence and content of advice in *The Prince* within the particular historical-political conjuncture in which the Medici overthrew the Florentine republic, she argues, we will discover that work to be "itself an act of political deception."¹⁹ Testing Machiavelli's specific advice against the historical exigencies of Lorenzo di Medici's seizure of power, she concludes that were the latter to have followed Machiavelli's advice, he would have undermined the very strategies by which he maintained his power: "Machiavelli indeed intends this book for the Medici. . . . He intends for a gullible and vain-glorious prince to heed the duplicitous advice of *The Prince*, and thereby take action that will jeopardize his power and bring about his demise."²⁰ As evidence for her case, she cites among Machiavelli's many maxims his advice to Lorenzo to rely on the people not the (untrustworthy) nobles in building his state, to desist from building fortresses and instead live among the people, arm the people rather than employ mercenaries, and avoid being liberal with the public purse—all of which represent the precise opposite of what the historical Medici actually did to maintain their domination over the former Florentine republic. *The Prince*, on this reading, represents a series of republican snares to destroy the Medici and recover a republican Florence.²¹ Thus, it would be odd for us to expect that Machiavelli's advice and examples would be efficacious or cumulatively complete—at least for the prince to whom the work is explicitly dedicated.

The strength of Dietz's interpretation is that she understands the disruptive literary strategy of Machiavelli's text in general and his examples in particular to be in the service of a political strategy—one that combines Machiavelli's preoccupation with cunning and deception with his avowed republican sympathies. However, she conceives the (historical) political strategy of the work a bit too narrowly. For she views Machiavelli's strategic advice and the recipient of that advice in rather literal terms. Machiavelli's constant elaboration of and reference back to the primordial moments of acquisition along with his exemplification of actors located within it now become merely stage props to deceive the historical Lorenzo into thinking that the advice he is to receive is effectual in maintaining his rule when it is precisely the opposite. This assumes that Lorenzo—or at least Lorenzo as conceived by Machiavelli—to be a most literal and naive reader of this work, one who was so lacking in political acumen, so taken by the work's evocation of future glory, that he would religiously follow Machiavelli's self-defeating advice to the bitter end. By the same token, it assumes Machiavelli to have been a most naive literary strategist, writing in the belief

that he could literally trap a particular historical prince by slipping in republican advice under the guise of aiding a prince to defeat republicans.²²

More generally, Dietz's interpretation reduces the implied reader of this text indicated by Machiavelli's famous claim in chapter 15 that his book is aimed at "whoever [chi] understands it" (chap. 15, 61) to the explicit historical addressee of the book, Lorenzo di Medici. After all, "il principe nuovo" who is urged always to arm his subjects (chap. 20, 83)—a maxim that is one of Dietz's central pieces of evidence for Machiavelli's entrapment—would know how to defeat a Medici prince.²³ He would simply exploit the weaknesses endemic to any established prince who forms enduring alliances with the nobles (i grandi): specifically, the new prince will appeal to il popolo, knowing they want to get out from under the existing rule of the nobles while the nobles will desert the prince at the first opportunity hoping to seize power themselves (chap. 9, 39). Of course, with success the prince who overthrew the Medici would face the same problem of maintaining his domination. In this sense, Dietz's interpretation misses the recurrent dilemmas of "acquisition" faced by any reader of this work who might be a potential actor.

In short, if there is rhetorical entrapment for political purposes in *The Prince*, it is of the reader who would like to escape the struggle over *lo stato* in which s/he is located either by retreating into a position of moral or theoretical superiority toward the unsavory world of statecraft in general or submitting to any ruler who promises to support established institutions. Machiavelli, as he moves recurrently from "one must" to "you must," from "the new prince who desires" to "whoever desires," is addressing a fictional prince, who in a few sentences in the Dedication and the last chapter is named Lorenzo but usually has no name as such. That unnamed fictional prince slides from being the personage to whom the advice is addressed into being the reader of the work. But who that reader is specifically depends on the way s/he cobbles together that political advice and examples for his/her own constellation of governments, territory, and conflicting groups. In short, Machiavelli leaves open who that reader might be and where s/he is located in the matrix of political forces.

A Literary Answer: A Self-Undermining Text

An alternative answer to the apparent limited efficacy of Machiavelli's prudential maxims and the recurrent failures of his exemplary actors in *Il Principe* focuses on the tension between the work's claim to political

realism and its literary structure. For this strand of interpretation, informed by a deconstructive reading, *Il Principe* operates on the surface level by using the figure of the prince to provide a cumulative political knowledge culminating in the fusion of the new political science with an apocalyptic moment in which virtù, action, and situation merge, while beneath the surface the political science is shown to be increasingly useless as fortune replaces virtù as the privileged term, leaving the prince only with wild impetuosity.²⁴ Central to this interpretation is the claim that the text undermines itself in the very act of claiming to provide political prudence and examples of virtù for imitation. As Michael McCaules argues, the reader of *The Prince* not only encounters qualifications of political generalizations but continuous qualifications of qualifications along with distinctions that then turn into one another and practical arguments that undermine themselves.²⁵ Similarly, Thomas Greene claims that after chapter 17, the work steadily unwinds as the efficacy of Machiavelli's maxims is continually undermined both by political forces that cannot be conquered and by fortune itself.²⁶ The inability of Machiavelli's prince to translate either maxim or example into victory over fortune is replicated in the discursive sequences of the text itself: "The failure of the prince betokens the failure of the analyst whose admission of circumstance has caused this conceptual space to implode. Stage by stage, he has withdrawn dogmatism to qualification to contradiction to a surrender before pure contingency. The text, unable to validate imitation, acts out its own version of the prince's failure."²⁷ This rather brilliant interpretation treats the Exhortation at the end as a literary add-on, that manipulates a satisfying conclusion for the application of prudence and virtù to fortune where no hope of such an application in fact exists.

So is the evocation of the prince's success at the end purely a literary add-on? Is the reason why there is no example of the "new prince" available in *il Principe* that he is a literary fiction requiring a literary vindication in the face of steadily self-consuming political advice? As persuasive as this approach may seem in capturing the disjunctions and disruptions of the text at the level of literary strategy, I would answer that it ignores the possibility the literary strategy itself may itself be serving a political-strategic purpose but simply assumes the latter is invariably entrapped by the former. Specifically, this approach does not take into full account the way in which Machiavelli's "new prince" and the context and necessities in which he must operate opens out to the actor/reader for completion. Instead we are asked to choose between a text in which either a political strategy or a deconstructive literary strategy is dominant, as if the latter strategy could not be read as a literary replication of the open and constantly shifting relations of forces with which the actor/reader of this work must contend.

Literary Deconstruction in the Service of a Political Answer: The Fictional Prince and the Reader as Actor

What I would propose then is to combine the sensitivity of the deconstructive reading to the contradictions, discrepancies, and textual disruptions of Machiavelli's political advice and examples of *virtù*—including the tension between the goal of providing effectual advice and its undermining in the sequence of the text—with a historical political reading that assumes the work opens out to political context beyond its textual functionings. But this approach to reading *The Prince* would reject the literary closure of the former and the determinate historical closure of the latter. Instead it would emphasize a reading in which the text in all of its limited prudential advice and its evasive examples opens out to a reader as potential political actor located in a political space beyond the text. In a very different idiom, Louis Althusser has captured the thrust of this kind of reading:

On the one hand, we have conditions specified with the utmost precision, from the general state of the Italian conjuncture to the forms of the encounter between *fortuna* and *virtù* and the exigencies of the process of political practice. On the other, we have a total lack of specification as to the site and subject of political practice. . . . This thinking of the disjuncture stems from the fact that Machiavelli not only formulates, but thinks, his problem *politically*—that is to say, as a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed by thought, but only by reality.²⁸

Following Althusser on this point, I would argue that indeed Machiavelli's attempt to constantly align maxim and example, *virtù* and fortune throughout *il Principe* opens out to an indeterminate political agent and a political context beyond the text, indeed a potential political agent (and state) imaginatively brought into being by Machiavelli's advice. But I would want to add that "the exigencies of political practice" mentioned by Althusser are defined by the constant though unresolvable struggle endemic to primordial acquisition and therefore appear in Machiavelli's text at once as precise and determinate and as disruptive and contradictory—so nicely captured by the deconstructive reading. I would also add that within Machiavelli's text it is the "new prince" as an imaginary prince who stands in for the reader/actor of this work.

It is, thus, the reader as potential political actor who must put the text together relative to his/her (political) situation which fortune always serves up in unpredictable and unique ways. It is the ups and downs of fortune in relation to action that the contradictions in both maxims and examples

portray. Or as Victoria Kahn puts it, Machiavelli "duplicates on the rhetorical level the practical problem of judgment that the prince will have to face—that of applying the rule of *virtù* to the particular situation at hand."²⁹ In short, fortune constantly reshapes the recurrent problems of overcoming enemies and winning popular support. The reader must choose the relevant advice and use his/her own judgment on the degree of similarity of Machiavelli's examples to his/her own situation with particular attention to where in the continuum she/he may be between founding and conserving a state (chap. 19, 82).

This said, for Machiavelli it is only through action itself that we ultimately discover whether fortune in the most literal sense will provide us with the occasion for introducing new orders and modes in the act of acquiring *stato*. Although we do not know whether time, geography, and causal outcomes will coincide with our foresight and our virtuoso qualities, we must act as if such an occasion were possible. This is why Machiavelli says in his renowned chapter 25, "I judge that *it might be true* that fortune is arbiter of one half of our actions, but also that she leave the other half, or close to it, for us to govern" (chap. 25, 98, emphasis added). In order to see whether chance, lady luck, is in our favor we must act *as if* the possibility of acquiring *lo stato* were at hand so as to find out whether in fact it is—a chance that chance might be 50–50.

But there is an even more significant implication of the tension between the disjunctive advice rotating around the primordial moment of acquisition and the apparently fictional recipient of that advice. The fiction of "il principe nuovo" becomes a device to project one's own position as actor into political situations.³⁰ It forces us out of a spectator position, and into imagining what our stance would be as actors in a dynamic situation of conflict tensed between a present state and a new one. It requires us constantly to choose between the few who want to dominate and rule and the people who want to escape domination; between distrustful support in the people and fierce antagonists in the nobles; between the opportunities for action available and our ability, our energy, persistence, and inventiveness to recognize and take advantage of that opportunity for ruling; between the forms of *stati*, that is, the different kinds of individual rule we can conquer and those we cannot—namely, the variety of republics that mobilize the popular desire for liberty and self-government.

Thus, for Machiavelli, we need to look at political situations from the perspective of a new prince, "il principe nuovo," seeking *lo stato* and trying to maintain it against adversaries while maintaining support of people and of one's armies, in order to discover what the different situations in the

struggle for rule demand and what qualities we may have or need to have to meet that situation. Ultimately, we as readers also need to learn how to make such probes through the projection of this “new actor” into what seems always already like a most unpromising moment for active intervention: namely, when institutions protect the rule of established actors. In effect, the discordant ending of Machiavelli’s *Prince* mirrors the beginning three chapters in so far as the impetuous and active relation of the new prince to the always available occasion to bring a people out of oppression—perhaps, to exploit this fact—applies as well to the settled, customary rule at the beginning of the work. This mirroring effectively collapses the distinction between princes relying on customary rule and the new prince’s rule acquired through virtù, drawing the former into the orbit of the latter. Is it a coincidence that in this text the most effective contemporary princes are emblematic figures of traditional rule: Ferdinand of Aragon who brilliantly conquers Naples and the King of France through “pious cruelty” and swiftness of action that keeps his opponents off balance (chap. 21, 88) and Pope Julius II, whose impetuosity and guile rival that of any new prince (chap. 25, 100)—church and state?

Hence, one final implication of this way of reading *The Prince*. The new prince as the emblematic political actor at the origin of all rule over others and all states (chap. 1, 5) never has a synoptic view of terrain of action. As actors whether nobles, people, or prince, we never escape the problem of perspective in so far as we are always located somewhere within the primordial struggle over acquisition. This perspectival locatedness, I would argue, is for Machiavelli the concrete meaning of fortune as distinct from its figurative representation as a river threatening to overflow its banks and as a high-born lady waiting to be seized. Specifically, the practitioner of “l’arte dello stato” is always located at some point within the struggle for *lo stato*, at once spatially, temporally, and causally—this last aspect expresses itself in the prince’s inescapable need of allies and his relentless striving not to be hated by the common people.³¹ The agent in matters of state is located geographically in the sense that he cannot see how he is viewed from other points in the terrain (Dedicatory Letter, 4; chap. 14, 59). Moreover, the extent of terrain one must command to be secure is indeterminate, because whatever territory one secures it will always be contested. He is located temporally in the sense that even the most fervent, frenetic, and energetic activity to conquer rule over others and shape it into new orders and modes of political practice rarely can outrun the erosion of time (chap. 4, 13). Lastly, and most fundamentally, the prince is caught in an existential causal nexus at the foundation of all forms of state, consisting of

a never-ending struggle to win over the people as allies, gain advice without being usurped by an advisor, fight off conspiracies through popular support, maintain an independent military force, and impose good laws and good arms—all this without being made superfluous by his success. At any one moment in this struggle, he never quite knows what element of virtù will be effective, because his own actions will have altered the very relations of these tendencies whose direction he is trying to foresee in light of his own intervention.

Conclusion

It would seem that the lesson taught by the figure of the new prince is that all actors seeking to hold *lo stato* must constantly improvise and act energetically or they will fail, even if they move successfully from acquisition to maintenance and from maintenance to new acquisitions. To do this the individual actor seeking domination over others is constantly in need of new examples. But the virtù of all actors is limited given the matrix of forces, and so they are unable to make use of all the examples Machiavelli provides in *The Prince*. We have seen that of the two bodies of interpretation that are aware of the self-negating quality of this text the first gives us an all too reductive account of its addressee and the second fails to explain the very textual indeterminacy and fictional resolution it has so brilliantly discovered. On the reading offered here, the literary fiction of the new prince and the disjuncture between maxims and examples and between virtù and fortune simply traces the contours of the field of political acquisition itself. That is, both the literary fiction of the new prince in a new state and the disjunctive textual sequence in *The Prince* are necessary to locate us in the field of action in which the struggle for *lo stato* is endemic. One might even want to say that the figure of the new prince seeking to found a new state forces us constantly into the matrix of political forces governing the acquisition of *lo stato* when our inclination is either to step outside of it and see it from a safe moral or theoretical distance, or to assume that it comes to an end once customary institutions or constitutional arrangements have been established. Seen in this light, the "new prince" provides us with the location from which we discover the particular alignment of forces—rulers, people, prince, and outside forces seeking to manipulate the situation; the relative means available to all parties; and above all, the inescapable fact that the people whether harboring the memory of republican liberty or oppressed by an outside power or corrupt elites are always part of the occasion that fortune sets before an actor seeking *lo stato*.

But within this field of original conflict, as Machiavelli presents it, there is one last lesson about the conditions of success for an individual political actor in matters of state. Success comes to the prince ultimately only when the prince cedes power to that which he can never conquer, a republic. For only a republic can in fact solve the problem of ambitious princes, oppressive nobles, and disappointed people. The reason for this, as Machiavelli argues in Book 1 of *The Discourses* is that if properly ordered, a republic generates its own solution from within to the primordial struggle of acquisition: conflict between the nobles and the people generates a variety of orderly practices and institutions that sustain a tension between liberty as self-governance and liberty as avoiding domination (*The Prince*, chap. 9. 39).³² Externally, republics can do the prince one better: namely, they can sustain their “imperio”—their *stato* understood as both state and empire—beyond the life of any one individual by mobilizing citizens according to the virtù demanded by the situation;³³ and they can harness the struggle between the people and the few to acquire and expand their imperio outward.³⁴ But of course, this can only be taught using a different literary fiction for realist purposes—the literary fiction of the relentlessly energetic Roman republic.

Notes

1. J. G. A. Pocock, “Custom and Grace, Form and Matter: An Approach to Machiavelli’s Concept of Innovation,” in *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought*, ed. Martin Fleisher (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 168.

2. My interpretation therefore implicitly takes issue with the large and diverse body of interpretation that attributes to Machiavelli’s *Prince* a unitary meaning, purpose, or intention. It should be pointed out that most of these interpretations are fully aware of the contradictions of Machiavelli’s advice and the ambiguity of his examples, especially as this feature of the texts is linked to political necessity. However, they subsume these discrepancies under a larger unifying concept or aim rather than relate them to a political agent operating in a political context and facing political potentialities beyond the text.

3. I have chosen to focus primarily on these two sets of readings, because unlike the vast body of Machiavelli interpretation, they do not seek to unify his work as a whole or the discrepancies in *il Principe* under a unitary *theoretical* “intention.”

4. Mary Dietz, “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 777–91.

5. Thomas Greene, “The End of Discourse in Machiavelli’s ‘Prince,’” *Yale French Studies* 67 (1984), 69. But for an alternative rhetorical reading, see Kenneth Burke, “‘Administrative’ Rhetoric in Machiavelli,” in *Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 158–66.

6. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 6. All further reference to *The Prince* will be given in parentheses along with chapter numbers. All Italian references come from Niccolò Machiavelli, “Il Principe,” in *Il Principe e Discorsi Sopra la Prima Deca di Tito Livio*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milan, Italy: Feltrinelli, 1973). I have occasionally altered the translation.

7. J. H. Hexter, "The Predatory Vision: Machiavelli. II Principe and lo Stato," in *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 156. Also, Harvey Mansfield, "The Impersonality of the Modern State: A Comment on Machiavelli's Use of *Stato*," *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 4 (1981): 854–55.

8. See Charles Singleton, "The Perspective of Art," *Kenyon Review* 15, no. 2 (1953): 175–76.

9. A number of interpreters have noted that for Machiavelli the methods necessary for the maintenance of the prince's state are the same as those for acquiring one and therefore hereditary rule is collapsed into rule through acquisition. For these interpreters, Machiavelli's "naturalizes" political acquisition. See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 57, 70; Harvey Mansfield, "Machiavelli's Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 2 (1981): 94; and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 163, 176. My interpretation differs somewhat from these commentators as it focuses on the way this move is linked to a dynamic of acquisition that allows neither a political resolution to the problem of rule nor a unifying theoretical teaching.

10. In his famous letter to Vettori of 1513, Machiavelli refers to *il Principe* as the result of his fifteen years of studying "l'arte dello stato," the art of the state. James B. Atkinson and Edward Sices, eds., *Machiavelli and His Friends: The Personal Correspondence* (de Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 265; and Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere* (Milan, Italy: Feltrinelli, 1961), 305.

11. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 46.

12. See John McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy: Controlling Elites with a Ferocious Populism," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (2001).

13. See Neal Wood, "Machiavelli's Humanism of Action," in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli's Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 46–47; J. G. A. Pocock, "Custom and Grace, Form and Matter," 173.

14. See Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 2000), who argues that Machiavelli uncovers a primordial moment of popular liberty when the people actively resist the attempt to reduce politics to state forms or constitutions.

15. See G. W. Pigman III, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1980): 7–9. Machiavelli explicitly embraces a typical renaissance notion of *imitatio* for the art of the state in claiming "a new prince in a new principality cannot imitate the actions of Marcus, nor again is it necessary to follow those of Severus; but he should take from Severus *those parts which are necessary to found his state and from Marcus those which are fitting and glorious to conserve a state that is already established and firm*" (chap. 19, 82, emphasis added).

16. J. G. A. Pocock, "Custom and Grace, Form and Matter," 171–72.

17. For a quite different and suggestive reading of this example, see John T. Scott and Vickie B. Sullivan, "Patricide and the Plot of the Prince: Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli's Italy," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (1994): 887–900.

18. Charles D. Tarlton, "Azioni in modo l'una dall'altra": Action for Action's Sake in Machiavelli's *The Prince*," *History of European Ideas* 29 (2003): 124.

19. Dietz, "Trapping the Prince," 781.

20. *Ibid.*

21. A similar argument to Dietz's is made in Stephen M. Fallon, "Hunting the Fox: Equivocation and Authorial Duplicity in *The Prince*," *PMLA* 107, no. 5 (October 1992), though he argues that the textual contradictions and equivocations in *The Prince* hide an attempt to inspire a kind of reckless confidence in the Medici that will encourage them to undertakings so formidable that their downfall will be assured. The criticism that follows applies equally to this argument.

22. Fallon recognizes this interpretation assumes an appeal to a gullible and vain reader, but claims the fault lies with Machiavelli (1193).

23. Dietz, "Trapping the Prince," 786–87.

24. See Greene, "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's 'Prince,'" 68; and Tarlton, "Azioni in modo l'una dall'altra," 124, 134–35.

25. Michael McCandles, *The Discourse of Il Principe* (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1985), xii–xiii.

26. Greene, "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's 'Prince,'" 64.

27. *Ibid.*, 68.

28. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 1999), 80. I am not sure, however, that Althusser is right to claim the political dilemma to be solved beyond the text is the formation of an Italian national state similar to that of France or Spain (48). See Felix Gilbert, "The Concept of Nationalism in Machiavelli's Prince," *Studies in the Renaissance* 1 (1954), for an argument that such a notion would have had no meaning to Machiavelli.

29. Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 32. Also see Greene, "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli 'Prince,'" 70. At the outset, Kahn sees the rhetoric of the prince as serving a political function. However, like Greene, she turns the argument that the text opens out to actors and action located in a constantly changing matrix of forces into a mere matter of textuality—both deception and force are viewed not as means of action but as part of Machiavelli's "rhetorical arsenal" (36).

30. This is at least one of the meanings that I think Gramsci had in mind when he speaks of Machiavelli's prince as "a concrete phantasy." Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 126.

31. This triadic notion of fortuna is most easily seen in Machiavelli's letter to Giovanni Battisti Soderni of September 1506. Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 135.

32. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.4, 19.

33. This point is made by Fallon, "Hunting the Fox," 1192.

34. Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6, 50–60, finds this to be the dangerous underside of Machiavelli's republicanism.

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