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MACHIAVELLI'S TWO UTOPIAS

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Introduction

The field of contemporary utopian studies has long attempted to refute that view of the concept of utopia promulgated by certain of its critics, who see in the utopian image a conceptual prefiguration of the political end of the totalitarian project.¹ The utopian society is identified by these critics as one internally identical with itself, a society in which temporality and difference have been abolished through the integration of all its constituent parts in a harmonious whole whose fixity is reproduced through time. Utopia as a whole, in other words, is reduced to utopia as a systematic blueprint. In rejecting such a reduction, utopian theorists typically distinguish between systematizing utopias and critical utopias, the latter being articulated through the establishment of an oppositional relationship with the established order of things, attempting to delegitimize the status quo through the immanent critique of its contradictions and inadequacies.² Not, in other words, the abstract and ahistorical positing of an ideal blueprint for a new world³, but a displacement of the real that reveals the potential for the emergence of another real, the structure of which has yet to be articulated. In the words of Miguel Abensour, “It is therefore not for utopia to produce positive images, but to open breaches.”⁴ Abensour distinguishes between what he calls eternal and persistent utopia. The former “would invariably produce a closed, static, authoritarian society that negates temporality and does violence to plurality and individual singularity.”⁵ This image, however, is not the product of utopian thought, but of the thought of utopia’s enemies who reject the critical project in itself.⁶ The truth of utopia is thus to be found

in its persistent variants, in the recognition of the perpetual human impulse to affirm alterity in light of reflective consideration on human potentiality. The recognition of the impossibility of instituting a political order that perfectly corresponds with the utopian projection, however, of terminally actualizing potentiality, ensures the perpetuation of the desire for otherness, stimulating the critical project and the impulse for the new. Utopian desire thus never realizes itself, to the extent that what it is oriented toward is not the establishment of a determinate mode of being, but an indeterminate otherwise than being.⁷

To the extent that the utopian project consists in affirming alterity and imaginatively articulating the multiplicity of potential modalities of human existence and co-relation, it has a clear political content. That said, there is embedded within utopian thought a certain political ambiguity that problematizes the extent to which utopian theory and political theory may productively engage with one another. In short: the emphasis of utopian thinking on the inexhaustibility of desire – of the impossibility of desire coming to rest through the establishment of a terminal form of political existence – has obscured the question of the differentiation of forms of political life on the basis of their ability to express this desire. The deep skepticism of blueprint models generates a certain type of political quietism that resists political mobilization directed at concrete ends. In the words of Lyman Tower Sargent, “the danger inheres in the processes of *transforming visions into political movements*, not in utopia itself.”⁸ It is in light of this tension that I turn to the political thought of Niccolò Machiavelli, which I argue not only gives an expression to the ambiguity of the idea of utopia, but also offers a potential means to circumvent it, thus allowing for the establishment of a more clear relation between not only utopia and politics, but utopia and democracy.⁹ Machiavelli, I suggest, is in a certain way the quintessential theorist of utopia.¹⁰

I argue that there exists in Machiavelli's political thought two distinct models of utopia. The first is one that corresponds to the persistent utopian desire. Machiavelli theorizes desire, however, not only in terms of the human craving for alterity, but surpasses most contemporary utopian thought through attempting to think the possibility of the construction of a system of institutions that is capable of perpetually expressing desire, and this to the extent that its being is never fixed, but continually directed toward its own potential self-overcoming. The utopian ambiguity mentioned above is overcome to the degree that Machiavelli theorizes the republican form as permanently open, an object that is continually subject to renovation, and thus a medium for the expression of desire. At the same time, however, such a republican form does not yet exist, and Machiavelli feels compelled to attempt to think those concrete conditions that might allow for the emergence of it. More often than not, however, Machiavelli articulates the dynamics of political change in terms of a model of single-person foundation, in which a rational subject in full possession of the knowledge of historical necessity instrumentally fabricates the new society independently of popular direction. In thinking social transformation in this way, Machiavelli manifests a second utopian moment, one that contradicts his first in fundamental ways. Despite this tension, there remains in Machiavelli's thought a potential counter-model of political change that has the potential to overcome the ambiguity of utopia, thus allowing for the establishment of a more productive proximity between the terms politics, utopia, and democracy.

Machiavelli's First Utopia: The Republican Form and the Expression of Desire

Machiavelli's recognition of a desire to be otherwise is expressed through his affirmation of what he takes to be a certain philosophical-anthropological principle of human being: the craving for novelty.¹¹ This craving is conceptually represented through the category of ambition, which is

considered in terms of a psychic desire to overcome existing forms and creatively impose new values upon the world.¹² Machiavelli concedes that the unmediated expression of ambition is a destabilizing force that tends to violently upset all order, and is in fact the source of human suffering.¹³ His political project, however, is to attempt to find a non-antagonistic means to sublimate ambition, one that pacifies desire via channeling it through institutional forms.¹⁴ It is in the *Discorsi* that Machiavelli most systematically details the potential for a city to construct a system of political modes and orders that is capable of venting the creative and participatory desire of all members of the community. The extent to which, firstly, all members of a city possess this desire for creative self-expression, and secondly, that the actualization of this desire is potentially realized through participatory political modes, is most clearly revealed in Chapter 1.37, on the subject of the conflict over the Agrarian law.¹⁵ Machiavelli begins by asserting as a universal principle of human nature an orientation of desire toward “acquisition,” and a generalized discontent emanating from the incapacity of desire to terminate itself as a consequence of the actualization of its objects.¹⁶ What immediately becomes clear, however, is that this discontent results precisely from the fact that desire has no particular objects: ambition is never realized precisely to the extent that it looks toward transgression and overcoming, toward the institution of the new, and is hence intrinsically insatiable.

What Machiavelli’s account of the Agrarian episode is meant to reveal is that there is no condition of existence that is capable of pacifying desire. What the plebs want is not a particular distribution of wealth or resources, or even a share of a particular distribution of administrative offices or functions. Plebeian desire is not for any specific thing or object, but is rather, as a result of the ambitious orientation toward the institution of the new, for a modality of creative self-expression, here realized through the demand for a perpetually enlarging stake in the

political life of the city. Hence Machiavelli notes how “to the Roman plebs it was *not enough* to secure themselves against the nobles through the creation of the tribunes, to which *desire compelled it by necessity*; for having obtained that, it immediately began to struggle through ambition, and to wish to divide with the nobility honors and possessions, as the thing most esteemed by men.”¹⁷ No particular distribution would be sufficient to satisfy the plebs, precisely to the extent that they, just like the *grandi*, possess an insatiable ambition for innovation, an innovation which in the political sphere is expressed through participation in legislative modes and orders. Shared rule is thus a political means for creative self-expression. Hence Machiavelli notes how more generally in Rome, although “the tribunes of the plebs had this authority in their hands, it was not enough for them to have one plebeian consul, but they wanted to have both. From this they wanted the censorship, the praetor, and all the other offices of rule in the city; nor was this enough for them, for, carried away by the same passion, they with time began to adore those men who they saw as able to beat down the nobility.”¹⁸ The plebs can never have enough for, in Claude Lefort’s words, what they desire is not “to have” at all, but rather, “to be,” being here associated with the externalization of creative energy.¹⁹

What remains only implicit in the *Discorsi* – the essential relationship between the desire for innovation and the being of political, the latter being the means for the expression of the former – is made explicit in the *Discursus florentinarum rerum*. Revealingly, immediately before the discussion of his proposed redistribution of political offices within Florence, Machiavelli again affirms the natural predilection individuals have toward the new.²⁰ Far from being fettered by past experiences that would habituate them to a constant state of being, individuals are open to and desirous of novelty. The construction of a space within the proposed body politic for popular political expression is a normative necessity in light of the recognition of the creative

desire of the people. Hence Machiavelli, after outlining the structure of those institutions belonging to the great and the middle group of citizens, turns to the majority, associating the satisfaction of the latter with the opening of an established place that allows them to self-determine their political will: “It now remains to satisfy the third and final class of men, which is the whole of the citizens: these are never satisfied (and whoever believes otherwise is not wise) if their authority is not restored or promised to be restored.”²¹ The people, possessing the same ambitious spirit as the other social groups in the city, are incapable of being pacified through the establishment of a merely private space of negative liberty from which they could pursue their acquisitive interests.²² They are rather an active force that demands a concrete place in government – which Machiavelli here proposes to realize through the reopening of the Great Hall and the creation of a set of citizen provosts – as a mode for the expulsion of their creative desire for alterity.

In proposing that the desire to institute forms of being otherwise than those that exist in the present can be concretely expressed through the instauration of a particular organization of political institutions, Machiavelli distinguishes himself from most contemporary utopian thought. Recall that the utopian tradition emphasizes not utopia as a place, but as a critical heuristic meant to reveal the limitations or contradictions of the existing form of life, and gesture toward, not specific alternative realities, but the very potential for such realities.²³ The concession of a potential coalescence between desire and a political form of being that actualizes this desire, it is suggested, must necessarily terminate the utopian impulse, to the extent that the latter is grounded in the recognition of the non-identity of these two poles. Contemporary utopian thinking’s justified rejection of blueprint models of political organization is transmuted into a skepticism regarding “political movements” and institutions themselves, the fear being that the

latter may become ossified into new eternal utopias. I suggest, however, that Machiavelli provides a means to overcome this latter skepticism as a result of the precise nature of his theorization of republican institutionalization. The uniqueness of the political thought of Machiavelli, and his potential to contribute important content to utopian thinking, lay in his effort to outline a regime of institutionalization which is in fact never positively fixed, but rather defined precisely in terms of an openness to its own perpetual interrogation, renovation, and overcoming.²⁴ Machiavelli reveals the potential to institutionalize the persistent utopian impulse, his ideal republic affirming not a static organization of political being, but rather an orientation toward the interminable reorganization of the form of the republic, a reorganization grounded in the continuous expulsion of creative desire.

Machiavelli's rejection of the prospect of realizing an eternal utopia, of instituting an order of political things that enduringly reproduces itself through time, is revealed in his unambiguous statement that "it is impossible to order a perpetual republic."²⁵ This claim speaks not only to the practical impossibility of such an ordering, as a consequence of the inevitable emergence of contingencies and accidents that cannot be negotiated within the context of the existing political form, but also to the normative defense of popular rule grounded in the affirmation of creative desire, such as was detailed in the *Discursus*. If desire is to be continually expressed in the political realm, the political realm must be an object of renovation: its form must never be considered fixed if it is to function as a field for the expression of desire. Hence the great lengths that Machiavelli goes to in order to highlight the self-overcoming form of republican modes and orders. The opposition of the ideas of utopia as form and utopia as freedom is overcome in Machiavelli's contention that freedom is realized precisely in the alteration of form.²⁶ Contrary to the ahistorical republics of Sparta and Venice, for example, in

Discorsi 1.6 Rome is identified as a society open to innovation, not looking to arrest historical time through the reification of the being of the polity.²⁷ Rome for Machiavelli is better suited to articulating the historical being of society to the extent that it is a city that does not attempt to cover up historical mutation through the affirmation of immutable constitutional laws, but one that is open to its own self-transformation.

In *Discorsi* 1:18 Machiavelli provides his most clear statement on such self-transformation. He writes that “the orders and the laws made in a republic at its origin, when men were good, are not afterwards to the purpose, when they have become bad.”²⁸ Temporal variability is here grounded in the indeterminacy of desire, the variability of the human psyche allowing for the possibility of the emergence of a disjuncture between the structure of the polity and the circumstances of human being. The distinction in this chapter between laws and orders is important, Machiavelli writing that “if the laws vary according to the accidents in a city, its orders never vary, or rarely: this makes new laws insufficient, because the orders, which are durable, corrupt them.”²⁹ The potential for renovating orders, however, is certainly not rejected. Indeed, such potential is significant enough that Machiavelli identifies as one of the seemingly few deficiencies of Roman republicanism its one-sided willingness to alter law, but not the more fundamental institutional substratum represented by the concept of order. He notes that “The order of the state was the authority of the people, of the Senate, of the tribunes, of the consuls, the mode of selecting and creating the magistrates, and the mode of making the laws.”³⁰ Although as the nature of individuals changed specific laws were varied in an effort to accommodate such movement, this alteration could only have so much effect: “by holding firm the orders of the state, which in corruption were no longer good, those laws that were renewed were not enough to keep men good; but they would have assisted much if with the innovation of

the laws, the orders had been retransformed.”³¹ Innovation must thus take as its object those elements that constitute the very core of the social order.

The continuing reproduction of the freedom of Rome would have necessitated the latter’s perpetual self-alteration of its orders.³² There is no possibility of creating a fixed system of orders – a terminal political form – that is capable of stabilizing the social being of the city and indefinitely regulating human affairs. In the case of Rome, “always in managing that city new necessities were being discovered, and it was necessary to create new orders: such happened when they created the censors, which were one of those provisions that helped keep Rome free, that time that it lived in freedom.”³³ What is suggested here by the juxtaposition of the notions of freedom and self-alteration is the extent to which the latter is not simply the means for the preservation of the former, but the very mode through which the former is actualized. If human freedom lay in the expression of desire, which as we have seen refers us to a creative activity of generating novelty, the republic’s openness to its own alteration via popular reinstitution represents a generalization of this expression at the collective level. Machiavelli thus articulates a relation between not only utopia and politics, but also utopia and democracy. If the temporal persistence of the republican city requires alteration of the latter’s form as a result of the shifting of *fortuna*, the ethical ground for a specifically democratic alteration is Machiavelli’s recognition of what he takes to be the universal ambition for creative institution. In the final instance the republic is that form of regime in which the utopian impulse for otherness is capable of being politically affirmed, through the openness of this form to agonistic popular reinstitution.³⁴

Machiavelli’s Second Utopia: The Prince and the Making of History

The uniqueness of Machiavelli's republic is located in its existence as a positive form of political regime, but a positive form whose being is not fixed, that is, a form that is continuously open to its own self-overcoming as a result of the insatiable expression of utopian desire. It is important to recall that in the *Discorsi*, where the lines of this republic are outlined most comprehensively, Machiavelli is performing an imaginative exercise. Far from attempting to reconstruct a linear narrative detailing the actual history of the Roman republic, Machiavelli is creatively juxtaposing various episodes drawn from history in order to invent an entirely novel political regime, one that affirms the utopian desire to be otherwise.³⁵ As I noted above³⁶, the typical opposition between the realism of Machiavelli and the imaginative character of the utopian tradition is a false one. Not only does Machiavelli's realistic analysis of political potential have a thoroughly imaginative dimension, but the utopian tradition itself is articulated through the critical opposition to existing political realities. Interpreters have tried to stress this fact through, in particular, undertaking comparative analyses of the work of Machiavelli and Thomas More. As Hilary Gatti notes, "Commentators have discussed at length to what extent Machiavelli's *Discourses*, insofar as they outline the contours of the just republic, should be considered as pertaining to the genre of utopia."³⁷ It is true that in Chapter 15 of *Il Principe* Machiavelli criticizes those writers who would construct fantastical republics that are not anchored in consideration of existing reality, declaring that he finds it "most suitable to go after the effectual truth of the thing rather than the fantasy of it."³⁸ More's utopia, however, is not an example of the purely abstract republics criticized by Machiavelli, *Utopia* itself being firmly grounded in the real: "Indeed, the whole of the first book of his text is composed of a description of the many elements of corruption and bad government that More sees in the England of his day. To call this book a 'mere' utopia, in the sense of a naïve dream of a perfect political never-never-land, is thus

to misunderstand the origin of the genre as it emerged in Machiavelli's time."³⁹ In short, what both More and Machiavelli are concerned with is producing historically situated critique, critique that takes the form of the imaginative construction of an alternative to the existing form of the real. Present political modes and orders are exposed as ethically deficient, the potential for realizing a different way of political life – for affirming social-historical alterity – being articulated through the utopian image.

An additional similarity between More and Machiavelli's utopian presentations has been noted by Zhang Pei, and it is this similarity which I argue ultimately points to the emergence in Machiavelli of a second utopian moment, although one that contradicts the spirit of the first. In *Utopia* the ideal society is one that is brought into its theoretical existence through the application of a science possessed by the legislator, King Utopus singularly planning and instituting the city. Zhang notes that Machiavelli also considers the creation of the body politic to be the work of an individual founder, who must be free to apply whatever technique is required for the fabrication of the design: "For Machiavelli, a good ruler should hold absolute power to do anything, either good or bad, for the good of his country, for the end justifies the means. Machiavelli's teachings apply to Utopus perfectly. Indeed, Utopus is an unacknowledged forerunner of Machiavelli's ideal prince."⁴⁰ More, however, never intended Utopus's city to function as an exemplar or constitutional guide. In Abensour's words, "*Utopia* ceaselessly works to persuade the reader that this thing, this 'truly golden handbook,' is neither a kind of plan nor any kind of model."⁴¹ Not meant to instaurate in thought the best positive form of regime, *Utopia* seeks to stimulate its readers's critical and creative reflection on political possibility and the limits of the real.

Now, Machiavelli is also looking to cultivate this sensibility, although he has come to the realization that a specific form of political organization is capable of affirming the desire for alterity through its very institutional structure. He thus becomes tasked with attempting to think the actual conditions for its emergence. The potential for such an emergence, however, can only be actualized under precise social-historical conditions. In a corrupted body politic in which the majority of people have not been civically educated toward life in common, responsibility for the creation of the initial institutional conditions for republican socialization falls to an elite citizen apparently unique in being undetermined by the social-historical situation. Hence in *Discorsi* 1.9 Machiavelli's famous declaration regarding the necessity of single-person foundation. Here Machiavelli writes that "One ought to take this as a general rule: that it never or rarely occurs that any republic or kingdom is from the beginning ordered well, or altogether reformed independent of its old orders, if not ordered by one. Indeed, it is necessary that one alone must give the mode, and that from his mind depend any such ordering."⁴² The end of such ordering is identified with the civic education of the people, the exercise of princely power being for the sake of republican political socialization.

Here Machiavelli presents himself as a utopian in the sense of the term used by Hannah Arendt: Machiavelli views the new society as an object of instrumental fabrication. The republic must be produced through the rational action of a subject in possession of those techniques required for the "making of political bodies."⁴³ Machiavelli cannot say exactly what is necessary to build the new society, but building such a society is a necessity.⁴⁴ It is the prince himself who must determine the nature of this necessity on the basis of his consideration of the specificity of the historical situation. The prince must develop, in other words, his own utopian blueprint and act so as to bring it into concrete existence. Machiavelli's second utopia is not to be found in the

promulgation of the image of a perfectly reconciled society marked by historical closure, but rather in the contention that society can be reduced to an object of making, an object that can be produced through the application of a virtuous technique that is seen as capable of being exercised by a princely individual. Contrary to the affirmation of freedom and equality that characterizes Machiavelli's first utopia – expressed in the universal capacity of individuals to self-articulate their creative desire via political participation – his second utopia affirms a principle of political inequality that potentially contradicts and cancels the possibility for the realization of the former.

Machiavelli's thinking here – his oscillation between these two utopian images – expresses what Abensour labels the dialectic of emancipation, “that is to say, a paradoxical movement by which emancipation is subject to reversing into its opposite and giving birth to new forms of domination and servitude, despite the initially liberating impulse.”⁴⁵ This dialectical transmutation is generated through the reproduction, in the transformative movement, of a distinction between the knowledgeable and the unknowledgable, those aware of the necessities of the revolutionary situation and those lacking such historical understanding. The dynamic engendered by the dialectic of emancipation threatens to again freeze the social field through the establishment of a new form of domination that schematizes inequality via the construction of a fixed distribution of functions. In order to counter this threat utopia must continually assert its orientation toward the new – toward the upsetting or interrogation of such distributions – in order to “thereby escape the grip of repetition in history.”⁴⁶ Hence the necessity of the utopian tradition adopting a critical orientation toward itself, of being wary of the potential for the reification of the utopian image, and the subsequent identification of a privileged subject capable of bringing into existence the now hypostatized social object.⁴⁷

This tension plays itself out within Machiavelli's thought. On the one hand, and in line with Machiavelli's first utopian moment, the indeterminate expression of the creative energy of the people is seen as being able to be spontaneously channeled toward the creation of political forms whose structures are not determined in advance of collective determination, that is to say, forms which are not preceded by utopian blueprints. Hence, for example, the increasingly enlarging scope of demands made by the plebs during the Agrarian episode, or the spontaneous institution of the twenty tribunes on the part of the plebs after the death of Virginia.⁴⁸ On the other hand, and in line with Machiavelli's second utopian moment, political action is often reduced to a form of instrumental fabrication, the political form being rendered determinate, and hence an object capable of being brought into existence by the voluntary application of a specific technique by a rational subject. Thus, for example, the characterization of the princely founder as who assumes responsibility for creating the conditions for the socialization of a people fit for republican life. In certain notable cases this tension even manifests itself within the presentation of a single historical episode. In the *Istorie fiorentine*, for instance, Machiavelli recounts how the Milanese people, after having taken up arms and killing those magistrates who could not escape them, determined that they needed to create a prince should their presently abject situation be overcome: "having become practically princes of the city, they considered among themselves what had to be done, if they wanted to escape from so many afflictions and have some repose. And everyone judged that it was necessary to take refuge, since freedom could not be preserved, under a prince who would defend them."⁴⁹ Various arguments were presented regarding whom should be invited into the city as ruler, with the people deciding, after having listening with "wonderful attention," that the count Francesco Sforza should become the duke of Milan.⁵⁰ The ambivalence, in short, is this: if the people – who have managed to install themselves as

“practically princes of the city” – have the capacity to reflectively deliberate on their social situation and make an informed political determination in light of such deliberation, then why do they need a prince? What causes this identification whereby the people subordinate themselves to a ruler whom they interpret as embodying their particular interest?

What this episode reveals is the extent to which the question of the political function of the prince cannot be dissociated from the question of the desire of the people, and in particular of the mutability of the latter. If Machiavelli often seems to privilege historical renovation by a single individual, it would appear to be as a consequence of his recognition of the variability and negativity of popular desire. We have already seen how desire has no particular objects to which it is intrinsically oriented toward. Although desire always seeks its exteriorization, it may will domination just as much as freedom, the particular trajectory of desire being dependent upon a complex of historical factors that structure its mode of expression. Indeed, the people characterized in *Il Principe* certainly desire otherwise than they do in the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli stressing the extent to which the former lack forms of socialization which would positively invest them in the civic life of the city, and how this produces a one-sided concern with the acquisition of private goods and benefits.⁵¹ There is no possibility, however, of producing a social situation that is capable of educating individuals so as to guarantee the orientation of their always unstable ambition. The ambivalence of desire thus renders freedom, even once achieved, a perpetually fragile condition. It is for this reason that Abensour often conceptually links the dialectic of emancipation with Étienne de La Boétie’s concept of voluntary servitude.⁵²

According to traditional explanation of the mechanics of domination, the people are divided from their masters on the basis of their differing activity, or more precisely their non-activity: in the relation of servitude the masters are active subjects whereas the people are

passive objects. La Boétie reverses this equation, interpreting the dominated as active agents of their own domination. Under conditions of servitude the people “are fascinated and, so to speak, enchanted by the name of the one,” bonding themselves through their voluntary acceptance of the political being of this one that captivates them.⁵³ Ultimately the means to upset this political order lay simply in the people’s withdrawal of their support for the ruler, in their refusal to no longer actively choose liberty over servitude. In La Boétie’s words, “in order to have freedom, it is only necessary to desire it.”⁵⁴ Now, although all individuals desire, like Machiavelli La Boétie rejects that there might exist a natural foundation for the direction of this desire toward specific objects.⁵⁵ Desire is ultimately ambivalent: the instability of the desire for freedom lay in the fact that it perpetually threatens to transform itself into a desire for its opposite, the people willing their domination as a consequence of being charmed by the image of the one, who they may or may not identify as embodying their own interest or ambition.

The mutability of desire and the difficulty of voluntary servitude that it raises is discovered not only by La Boétie, but Machiavelli as well.⁵⁶ The difficulty articulates itself perhaps most clearly in Machiavelli’s account of the political rise and fall of Michele di Lando during the revolt of the Ciompi.⁵⁷ Michele’s assent to the position of Gonfalonier of Justice was wholly the result of a plebeian exercise of will, the people voluntarily, through a political act of delegation, consenting to have him function as an institutional representative for them. Speaking of his selection Machiavelli writes: “turning to the multitude, [Michele] said: ‘You see: this palace is yours, and this city is in your hands. What do you think that you should do now?’” To which all responded that they wanted him as Gonfalonier and lord, and to govern them and the city as it appeared best to him.”⁵⁸ We see in this movement, then, how quickly the people’s desire for freedom, originally affirmed through popular self-activity in the political sphere, may

be transmuted into a desire that looks toward the institution of a social situation that immediately contradicts the original impulse. We see, in other words, the proximity of the desire for liberty and the desire for servitude, and the capacity of freedom to efface itself through willing an object that threatens its original spirit. Both La Boétie and Machiavelli are clear that there are a plurality of contingent circumstances that might generate amongst the people an initial desire to alienate their freedom. Such an initial alienation, however, regardless of the conditions that originally motivated it, is perpetually reproduced and entrenched through time, individuals becoming accustomed to their servitude and eventually losing any memory of the nature of free life.⁵⁹

Such historical habituation, however, did not occur in the Ciompi case. What is unique about the episode is that the people's desire, after its redirection so as to invest Michele di Lando with singular authority, once again immediately mutates. After the alienation of their political authority to Michele the people concluded that he went on to violate his mandate to express their will and desire in his new office, the latter having been the motivation originally stimulating this alienation. Specifically, Michele in restructuring the orders of the city would give too many titles and offices to the people's patrician enemies, enemies who still harbored a humor to oppress and desired the expulsion of the people from public life. Thus "it appeared to the plebs that Michele, in reforming the state, had been too partisan toward the greater people; it neither appeared that they had as much a part in government as was necessary to maintain and defend themselves; so, pushed by their usual boldness, they again took up arms and tumultuously, under their ensigns, came into the piazza."⁶⁰ What will occur next is a clear display of popular self-institution, again independent of elite direction. Disgusted by Michele's subsequent censure of them in the face of their grievance, "the multitude, incensed with the palace, settled at Santa Maria Novella, where

they ordered among themselves eight heads, with ministers and other orders that gave them reputation and reverence; thus the city had two seats and was governed by two different princes.”⁶¹ The delegates of the people began to make further policy determinations, undertaking a bold attempt at redistributing the offices of the city in order to reestablish a genuinely popular system of orders: “They took away from Messer Salvestro de’ Medici and from Michele di Lando all that in their other decisions had been granted them; they assigned to many of themselves offices and subsidies, to be able to maintain their position with dignity.”⁶² For a second time, then, the people demonstrate a capacity to articulate a political desire for freedom, and outline a system of orders that they deem capable of giving this desire a positive expression in the political sphere.

Despite his sympathy for the Ciompi cause, it seems clear that in this dispute between the people and Michele di Lando Machiavelli clearly comes down on the side of the latter. Nevertheless, in providing his account Machiavelli seemingly demonstrates the existence of a popular capacity that might render the idea of singular institutionalization unnecessary as a mode of political foundation. What is significant about Machiavelli’s retelling of the revolt of the Ciompi is that it highlights how the development of a will to participatory freedom can be nurtured and expressed in a clearly poorly-ordered social context, even if it does not provide a theoretical account of the mechanics of such a development. The people themselves demonstrate during the revolt their ability to autonomously institute political modes and orders that would be capable of actualizing their desire for freedom. What the revolt seems to prove, in other words, is that political elites are not required in order to lead the people out of their corrupted state, but that the intrinsic popular desire for participatory self-expression is capable of being self-actualized. Not only does the creation of democratic life not depend upon investing a singular

actor with sole political authority – upon an actualization of a desire for the one – but this investment, a perpetual possibility given the ambiguity of desire, is the means by which the freedom of the people is lost, and the potential for democratic life annulled.

Conclusion

Machiavelli himself sometimes expresses reservations about the feasibility of single person political foundation.⁶³ That said, he never systematically develops an alternative to such a solution, one that avoids recourse to a political model of instrumental fabrication, that is to say, a utopian model in the second sense. How then is utopia in the first sense, the institutionalization of a form of political life that is capable of concretely expressing the utopian impulse, to come into existence? Answering this question is outside the scope of the present paper, but I have suggested that clues to the problematic are to be located within Machiavelli's account of the revolt of the Ciompi, and in particular his (not wholly enthusiastic) discussion of the nature of popular self-organization as a reaction to the identitarian political tactics of Michele di Lando. This episode suggests a more democratic understanding of the dynamics of political change, and thus one more consistent with the ideal of persistent utopia. As La Boétie reminds us, even in instances where the people will servitude, this choice can always be reversed. The desire for freedom may very well be covered up or abrogated, but not terminally abolished. The key question is how desire is to be, to utilize a phrase of Abensour's, educated. In Abensour's words, "Desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all, to desire otherwise."⁶⁴ The education of desire refers not to the utopian identification of true or genuine desire, but to the establishment of a path for the expression of the indeterminate desire for otherness. Desire must be educated precisely to the extent that it is ambivalent, to the extent that

it may take the form of the desire for freedom just as much as the desire for servitude. The question is what form of education is capable of nurturing or stimulating the former condition, cultivating the utopian impulse to alterity in a specifically democratic form. Although Machiavelli prefers to think about political socialization in terms of instrumental fabrication and princely foundation. I have suggested that there is a counter-tendency in his thought, represented particularly well in the account of the revolt of the Ciompi, which might serve as a ground allowing us to address this question. Although Machiavelli's political theory manifests an antinomy of utopia, as expressed in the tension between the two utopian moments in his thought, he nevertheless provides us with the conceptual resources to rethink the nature of the political actualization of the desire for otherness. If it is true that the people are capable of autonomously instituting popular modes and orders that look to educate desire, this education providing a foundation for the deepening of democratic institutionalization, the practical political motivation that gives rise to Machiavelli's second utopian moment is thus dissolved. So, then, is the danger that contemporary utopian theorists worry about when they proclaim the necessity of preserving a distance between the idea of utopia and politics, maintaining that the former must be articulated in its separation from the latter. Privileging Machiavelli's first utopia over his second is capable of not only enriching our understanding of democratic politics, but also of the political potential of utopian thinking, articulating the relation between democracy and utopia, and the productivity of this relation for contemporary political theory.

¹ For classic expressions of this identification between utopia and totalitarianism see, for example, Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944); Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2011); Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

² See, for example, Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 10; Lyman Tower Sargent, "Authority & Utopia: Utopianism and Political Thought," *Polity* 14, no. 4 (1982): 579.

³ George Kateb goes so far as to claim that "any serious utopian thinker will be made uncomfortable by the very idea of a blueprint, of detailed recommendations concerning all facts of life." George Kateb, "Utopia and the Good Life," *Daedalus* 94, no. 2 (1965): 454.

⁴ Miguel Abensour, "L'homme est un animal utopique," in *L'homme est un animal utopique : Utopiques II* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2013), 278.

⁵ Miguel Abensour, "Persistent Utopia," trans. James Ingram, *Constellations* 15, no. 3 (2008): 407.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Following Abensour, contemporary theorists have emphasized precisely this dimension of utopia. Hence Ruth Levitas, for example, writes that the element shared by all utopian theory "is that of desire – a desire for a better way of being and living." Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (New York: Philip Allan, 1990), 7. More precisely, "The core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise." Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xi.

⁸ Sargent, "Authority & Utopia: Utopianism and Political Thought," 566. Emphasis added. On the distance between utopia and political institutionalization see especially Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review*, no. 25 (2004): 35–54.

⁹ For the most well-known contribution to the recent democratic turn in Machiavelli studies see John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Such a suggestion may seem strange at first glance. Two facts must be kept in mind. Firstly, the extent to which Machiavelli's realism is an active and politically engaged one, one that looks to interrogate social-historical potential for the sake of concrete social transformation. It affirms alterity and is as such, to use Maurizio Viroli's words, an imaginative realism: "His realism was in fact integrated with a deep persuasion that imagined institutions and orders may become realities, and by the awareness that to understand political reality requires a work of refined interpretation." Maurizio Viroli, "Machiavelli's Realism," *Constellations* 14, no. 4 (2007): 466. Writing of Machiavelli Arlene Saxonhouse has also recently noted how "The art of politics entails imagining what we are not." Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Machiavelli's Women," in *Machiavelli's Legacy: The Prince After Five Hundred Years*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 85. Secondly, the extent to which utopian thought is firmly anchored in rational consideration of the potentialities embedded in the real. Although utopian desire is expressed through the exercise of imagination, it is not exhausted only by the limits of this imagination, but the range of human possibility. Speaking of the compatibility of utopia and realism, for example, Raymond Geuss will go so far as to write that a certain kind of utopianism "should be a part of a sensible realist project." Raymond Geuss, "Realism and the Relativity of Judgment," in *Reality and Its Dreams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 48. On the illegitimacy of criticizing utopia on the basis of its supposed ahistoricism see also Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Free Association Books, 1988), 143; Herbert Marcuse, "The End of Utopia," in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 62–63.

¹¹ On Machiavelli's philosophical anthropology see Christopher Holman, "Machiavelli's Philosophical Anthropology," *The European Legacy* 21, no. 8 (2016): 769–90.

¹² See, for example, Niccolò Machiavelli, "Dell'Ambizione," in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1971), 984–87.

¹³ See, for example, Ibid., 984.

¹⁴ On the different ways in which Machiavelli sees ambition as being politically sublimated see Christopher Holman, "Machiavelli and the Concept of Political Sublimation," *Italian Culture* 35, no. 1 (2017): 1–20.

¹⁵ On the centrality of this chapter to Machiavelli's theory of desire see Luca Sartorello, "L'urna senza fondo machiavelliana e l'origine della politica," in *Machiavelli: immaginazione e contingenza*, ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Luca Sartorello, and Stefano Visentin (Pisa: Edizioni Ets, 2006), 208; Giorgio Cadoni, *Crisi della mediazione politica e conflitti sociali: Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini e Donato Giannotti di fronte al tramonto della Fiorentina libertas* (Roma: Jouvence, 1994), 35.

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio," in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1971), bk. 1.37; 2.proemio.

¹⁷ Ibid., chap. 1.37. Emphases added.

¹⁸ Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio," bk. 1.5. Emphases added.

¹⁹ Claude Lefort, "Machiavelli and the *Verità Effettuale*," in *Writing: The Political Test*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 112.

²⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, "Discursus florentinarum rerum post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medices," in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1971), 26.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² The recognition of the identity of desire between the plebs and the *grandi* forms the basis of Mark Jurdjevic's recent reinterpretation of the political significance of Machiavelli's Florentine writings. Mark Jurdjevic, *A Great & Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Jurdjevic, however, sees this identity as adhering only in the *Istorie fiorentine* and the *Discursus florentinarum rerum*, whereas I suggest it is also evident in the *Discorsi*, most prominently, as mentioned, in 1.37.

²³ For a representative expression of the nature of utopia as critique see, for example, Bill Ashcroft, "Critical Utopias," *Textual Practice* 21, no. 3 (2007): 411–31.

²⁴ Several readers have pointed out this feature of Machiavelli's republicanism. See, for example, Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 344; S.M. Shumer, "Machiavelli: Republican Politics and Its Corruption," *Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (1979): 16; Martin Fleisher, "The Ways of Machiavelli and the Ways of Politics," *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 3 (1995): 341; John Kennedy, "Machiavelli and Mandevile: Prophets of Radical Contingency," *Political Theology* 5, no. 1 (2004): 108; Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 385.

²⁵ Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio," bk. 3.17.

²⁶ On the idea of utopia as freedom see, for example, Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 26.

²⁷ Whereas Venice attempted such a reification through not deploying the plebs in war, Sparta did so through closing the city to foreigners. Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio," bk. 1.6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, bk. 1.18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, bk. 1.49.

³⁴ For an influential radical democratic reading of Machiavelli grounded in what is seen to be the latter's rejection of any identity between the republic and political form itself, see Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

³⁵ On the nature of this historical method see Christopher Holman, "Machiavelli's Constellative Use of History," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 2 (2016).

³⁶ See note 10.

³⁷ Hilary Gatti, *Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe: From Machiavelli to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.

³⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, "Il Principe," in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1971), chap. 15.

³⁹ Gatti, *Ideas of Liberty in Early Modern Europe: From Machiavelli to Milton*, 20. See also Stelio Cro, "The Contrasting Political Philosophies of More Machiavelli," *Moreana* 47, no. 3–4 (2010): 207.

⁴⁰ Zhang Pei, "The Birth of Utopia," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 41, no. 3 (2014): 304–12. On Utopus's singular foundation see Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42, 46.

⁴¹ Miguel Abensour, *Utopia from Thomas More to Walter Benjamin*, trans. Raymond N. MacKenzie (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017), 20.

⁴² Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio," bk. 1.9.

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 227.

⁴⁴ On this point see Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. François Matheron, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999), 51–52.

⁴⁵ Miguel Abensour, "Utopie et émancipation," in *Le procès des maîtres rêveurs: Utopiques I* (Arles: Éditions de la Nuit, 2011), 49.

⁴⁶ Miguel Abensour, "Le nouvel esprit utopique," in *L'homme est un animal utopique: Utopiques II* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2013), 213.

⁴⁷ Such a critical orientation characterizes what Abensour identifies as the new utopian spirit, a definite tradition of utopian thinking that emerged in the mid-19th century as a form of auto-critique, after the movements of utopian socialism and neo-utopianism. On Abensour's typology of modern utopias see Miguel Abensour, "L'histoire de l'utopie et le destin de sa critique, I," *Textures*, no. 6 (1973): 3–26; Miguel Abensour, "L'histoire de l'utopie et le destin de sa critique, II," *Textures*, no. 7 (1974): 55–81.

⁴⁸ Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio," bk. 1.57.

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, “Istorie fiorentine,” bk. 6.24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Compare, for example, Niccolò Machiavelli, “Il Principe,” in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1971), chap. 17 with Machiavelli, “Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio,” bk. 1.55.

⁵² On Abensour’s reading of La Boétie see, for example, Miguel Abensour and Marcel Gauchet, “Les leçons de la servitude et leur destin,” in *Le discours de la servitude volontaire*, by Étienne de La Boétie (Paris: Payot, 1976), 7–44; Miguel Abensour, “Is There a Proper Way to Use the Voluntary Servitude Hypothesis?,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16, no. 3 (2011): 329–48; Miguel Abensour, *La communauté politique des “tous uns”: désir de liberté, désir d’utopie* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014), 101–118.

⁵³ Étienne de La Boétie, *Le discours de la servitude volontaire* (Paris: Payot, 1976), 194.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 200.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ On Abensour’s denial of Machiavelli’s recognition of these dynamics see Abensour, “Is There a Proper Way to Use the Voluntary Servitude Hypothesis?,” 336–37.

⁵⁷ For a reading of the action of Michele di Lando within the context of the dialectic of emancipation see Martin Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*, trans. Lazer Lederhendler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 15–18. For another differently framed expression of this tension in Machiavelli, which also highlights the latter’s radical democratic commitments, see Yves Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 736–66.

⁵⁸ Machiavelli, “Istorie fiorentine,” bk. 3.16.

⁵⁹ La Boétie, *Le Discours de La Servitude Voluntaire*, 200.

⁶⁰ Ibid., bk. 3.17.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See especially Machiavelli, “Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio,” bk. 1.18. Hence the skepticism on the part of many readers that Machiavelli could have intended single-person foundation to be a plausible solution to the problem of political rejuvenation. See, for example, Mary G. Dietz, “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 3 (1986): 780; Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 295; John M. Najemy, “Society, Class, and State in Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 101–2; John M. Najemy, “The 2013 Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture: Machiavelli and History,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2014): 1147.

⁶⁴ Miguel Abensour, “William Morris: The Politics of Romance,” in *Revolutionary Romanticism*, ed. and trans. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1999), 145–46.