

PROOF

3

Lefort and Machiavelli

Newton Bignotto

In 1972, Lefort published his book *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*,¹ on which he had worked since 1956.² The product of those long years of research is an erudite and complex piece of work. Divided into six parts, it starts by proposing a theory of interpretation and a study of the history of the reception of the Florentine secretary at several moments of European history, and later deals with the analysis of the reference books on Machiavellian bibliography, which he qualifies as “exemplary.” Nevertheless, the core of the book is the two parts dedicated to the study of the main works of Machiavelli: *The Prince* and the *Discourses* (*Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*). In densely packed and often meandering pages, Lefort walks the maze of the Italian author’s thought and proposes an extremely original interpretation of these concepts. Following the rationale he presented in the first part, Lefort deals with the text from a viewpoint that is rather distinct from those of the historians of ideas and even of the specialists who believe that they can find a solution for the enigmas that arise from the reading of the works of the Florentine author.³

In a simplistic way, we can say that our hypothesis in this chapter is that Lefort’s study on Machiavelli is the foundation on which his political philosophy was built, not just the way in which he understood the theoretical revolution carried out by the Renaissance thinker. In this sense, we agree with Bernard Flynn’s statement that the themes present in the interpretative work of Lefort “are generative of many of the key concepts of his own thought.”⁴ We set out to take this statement in its broader sense, and state that *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel* contains the central elements of Lefort’s political philosophy, which continued to evolve in the following years around themes like democracy and totalitarianism, but without losing reference to the conceptual matrixes

presented in his book in 1972. Naturally, the full demonstration of this hypothesis would require much more room than a chapter, but we believe that it is possible to demonstrate its plausibility and consistency based on an accurate selection of the theme. To attain this goal, we will highlight some issues that seem to point to the originality of the work of Lefort and some of its fundamental concepts.

The interpreter and the work of Machiavelli

The notion that our author has the task of an interpreter is central for the understanding of his work. He makes the reading of texts from the past a tool of inquiry into our own time. That is why, according to him, it is necessary to leave behind every approach that seeks to transform the philosophical text into an object from which it is possible to disclose the final meaning of its articulations. Guided by Merleau-Ponty, Lefort states that, upon looking at a philosophy from the past as a “building of knowledge,”⁵ we leave aside the most important issue, namely, that every piece of work contains an “unthought-of” (*impensé*), a fringe of indetermination, which is exactly what makes us think.⁶ If we could concisely separate the subject from its object, the content of a piece of work would remain restricted to itself and its time. Interpretation would be merely deciphering the meaning of arguments, without connection with the problems that trouble us in our own time. In opposition to those who view the examination of texts from the past in this way, he says: “Querying is examining the world that the other names, but in a way that the world towards which the way is opened tells us that the other inhabits it and that we inhabit it, that this world speaks and interrogates us through it, that the past itself interrogates our present.”⁷

Nonetheless, these considerations must not be taken as an exposition of the methodology followed in his interpretative work, as one often finds in the writings of historians of ideas. They reveal the way in which Lefort conceived philosophy, its limits and its specificities. There is no room in his thought for a return to the past in search of the exact meaning of the propositions at the moment they were uttered, such as is the case with Skinner.⁸ To our author, the contemporaries of Machiavelli, even those who, like Guicciardini, knew his intentions and appreciated his intelligence, were less able to benefit from his writings than we are; we, from a distance, gather the fruit of thought that opens itself to new inquiries to the exact extent that it is exposed to the inquirer, and that could not possibly be known to the author.⁹ This is the reason why it is so important to incorporate the reading of other interpreters who have

contributed to the work of thinkers of the past into our own reading, to reach us and continue to inspire new readings.

Following this notion, in the second part of his book, Lefort carefully examines the way in which the work of the Florentine secretary was received. He peruses the literature produced about Machiavelli from as early as the 15th century up to the comments on his works by authors and politicians from the early 20th century.¹⁰ This approach has a two-fold importance. For one thing, our author seeks to keep away from the idea that a neutral or naïve approach to the work of Machiavelli is possible. When it reaches us, we carry an image formed over time, very often conflicting, that determines the object of our quest and the problems we have been concerned with from the very beginning. In the course of our analysis, Lefort declares, this initial image may prove to be false or insufficient. Our questions multiply on contact with the work and follow paths that we ignored at the start of our journey. It is important for us to be aware that any analysis of the work of a thinker is only prolific if it is conducted with vigilant questioning of its arguments and with the awareness that this process leads us to question our own time.¹¹

The second reason is that, for Lefort, the selection of themes by the interpreter, the study of the relationships that the work maintains with those of other thinkers, has a meaning that goes beyond those that we attribute to the methodological choices of a historian of ideas. This selection reveals the purpose of the interpreter's inquiry. In this fashion, the reader of Machiavelli finds himself or herself induced to unveil the relationship that he or she maintains with the issue of power while seeking pertinent arguments in the work of the Florentine. Lefort summarizes: "When we inquire of Machiavelli, we inquire of political society: our task is to explore the ties woven between thought in the work and political thought."¹²

Lefort demonstrates these hypotheses of a hermeneutic nature when, in the third part of his book, he investigates the so-called "exemplary interpretations." The list of interpreters selected is not aimed at being a guide to the major readings of his time, even though many of them actually are. Our author seeks to demonstrate how the study of Machiavelli in each of them gives rise to a conception of knowledge and politics; that is, the interpretations are interesting because they reveal the political conceptions of authors as distinct as Gramsci and Leo Strauss. What links them is the fact that, in the dialogue with the thought of a writer from another time, they are led to reveal their own conceptions of politics in order to carry out their own interpretations. The differences in their conclusions are not seen as a sign of more or less accuracy in the

PROOF

Newton Bignotto 37

reading of the texts, but, rather, as how, in the course of the dialogue with the work of Machiavelli, both are led to enquire about fundamental issues of contemporary political thought.

In this sense, the reader dealing with the analysis of *The Prince* and of the *Discourses* offered by Lefort must take into account what he says in the first parts of his study in order not to get lost in a dense and sinuous path. This might be the reason why Genaro Sasso, a major scholar of the thought of Machiavelli, on failing to consider the necessary connection between the various parts of the book, often expressed his lack of understanding of certain passages that interested him.¹³ Lefort himself warns us that he takes the role of an interpreter and that, at the end of his effort to read the main pieces of work of the Italian philosopher, he ends up by revealing his own way of thinking politics.

Nevertheless, the fact that Lefort assumes a point of view different from those of other great readers of Machiavelli in the second half of the 20th century must not lead us to believe that he elaborated his work in ignorance of the bibliography of the time or that he refused to converse with his peers. His book is evidence to the contrary; it reveals a deep interest in current productions and new perspectives that were being opened up by the work of historians such as Eugenio Garin,¹⁴ Hans Baron,¹⁵ Felix Gilbert, and others. A contemporary of the writing of the books of J. G. A. Pocock¹⁶ and Quentin Skinner,¹⁷ he followed paths that diverged from those of the two historians who would mark the history of ideas and the political theory of the final decades of the last century. While Pocock innovatively retold the history of republican ideas in modernity based on the work of Machiavelli and the Italian humanists of the 15th century, Skinner exerted his influence on historiography when he put forward new methods for the history of political ideas and an erudite approach to the formation of Italian and European thought at the beginning of modernity. Lefort shared the historians' interest in Italian humanism, and the fact that, for them, the work of writers such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni already contained the issues that would nurture Machiavelli's reflections on politics, which would change Western political thought. However, he followed a distinct path.

Because Lefort favored the analysis of authors like Baron, he did not share the project of rewriting the history of political ideas of the time with other scholars of Italian Renaissance thought. In a paper published in the mid-1970s he even said that he fostered the wish to work exclusively on the city of Florence and its thinkers, but that this project ended up abandoned.¹⁸ This does not mean that he surrendered his interest

on the subject over time,¹⁹ but only that, from the very beginning, his focus was the elaboration of a body of political thought capable of dealing with the major issues of his time. When he presented his theory of interpretation at the very beginning of his book, he gave a lead on how we should follow him through his inquiry into Machiavelli's work.

The field of politics

Right from the beginning, Lefort's philosophy was marked by the influence of Merleau-Ponty. Lefort had been one of his students in secondary school, and retained a deep admiration for his teacher's work and the way he conducted his inquiry. This can be noticed in Lefort's express interest not only in central themes of phenomenology, but also in literature, painting, and cinema. As his teacher had done, Lefort refused to surrender to the narrow borders of university disciplines, which often, for him, seemed to be an obstacle to thought that sought at the same time to talk to the past and to be attuned to current issues. This view of philosophy and its borders was decisive in the way Lefort criticized the philosophies of his time, mainly those that dealt with politics.²⁰

In the context of the 1960s, when he was studying the Florentine secretary, confrontation with Marx was unavoidable. On the one hand, our author followed the German philosopher in his criticism of the modern utopias, which tended to mask the conflicting character of capitalist societies. On the other hand, he followed his old teacher in his criticism of Marx's philosophy of a radicalism that, according to him, "was much more influenced by the rationalism of western political philosophy that he himself [Marx] acknowledged."²¹ If the German thinker sought the basis for a form of realism in reference to empirical reality that would set him apart from the idealism of his time – which in its turn would bring him closer to the concerns of our author – the return to Machiavelli allowed Lefort to point to the limitations of a philosophy that saw a movement of synthesis towards a society free of contradictions in historical processes. For him, Marx ultimately denied part of the indeterminateness that accompanies every political action, and introduced an element of need in historical events that contradicted his conception of political phenomena. Upon his approach to and criticism of Marx under the influence of Merleau-Ponty, Lefort opened himself up to the investigation that led him to the center of his own political thought.²²

The reading of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* is oriented by the idea, previously mentioned, that when investigating Machiavelli the object of

PROOF

Newton Bignotto 39

investigation is at the same time Machiavelli's work and political society. Our author set off in his analysis with the question of the nature of politics and its determinants. At that moment, Lefort seemed to agree with some interpreters, and later, when he approached the issue of conquest of power present in *The Prince*, he stated: "Politics is a form of war, and undoubtedly it is not by chance that to say as much Machiavelli initially chose to analyze the conquest of power with arms."²³ When he considered the relationship between power and the use of force, Lefort shows that political philosophy cannot simply avoid the issue by denying the pertinence of the association of the two terms. We can clearly be deceived, as were many youngsters of Machiavelli's generation,²⁴ by the idea that force is the key concept to understanding politics. This hypothesis often goes hand in hand with the belief of those who think that it is possible to reduce life in society to a necessary or providential sequence of historical events.²⁵ However, a consequence of this hypothesis is the idea that the line of thought of the Florentine is the surrender of any reference to morality in all its forms.²⁶

For Lefort, praise of the use of force holds no connection whatsoever with the quest for positive knowledge about human actions or with the fight against the presence of values in the public sphere. In truth, this praise grants Machiavelli room to criticize the Christian tradition, which, through the *speculum princeps*, permits making morality the measure of political action.²⁷ It led him to understand the failure of Savonarola, not only in his dismissal of the value of weapons, but mainly for believing that the founder of a new regime could be converted only through the use of prayers.²⁸ Nevertheless, the main function of the reference to the conquest of power through the use of force is to remind readers that the field of politics cannot be understood without reference to the conflicts that constitute it. These conflicts are not limited to military confrontation, but his hypothesis cannot be merely ignored under the guise of the repugnance that we may feel in the face of the use of violence in the public stage.

At various instances in his work, Lefort insisted on the difference that exists between power and domination, between power and potency, without ever dismissing the possibility of viewing the issue of power from its reduction to the accounting of the means that each of the parties involved in the struggle for power has at its disposal to enforce its will on others.²⁹ Power is a concern only to the extent that it is established, that it constructs a relationship that must be supported, often economizing on the use of violence so that it can last. This is what leads Lefort to state that the nature of potency is irrelevant, because

what Machiavelli teaches us is to pay attention to the conflicts between the members of society and analyze the situation from the balance of forces present in the city.³⁰ In *Un homme en trop*, Lefort shows that, in the contemporary world, totalitarian regimes – most of all the Soviet Union – are those in which “violence, rather than dissipating, imposes itself on society . . .”³¹ In these regimes, the antagonism between parties disappears. Society is reduced to sheer violence by the use of force. The complete identification of power with violence, far from offering the key to understanding the purpose of politics, points to the path of its destruction.

To escape the dangers of every idealism, Lefort says that, on following Machiavelli, we must bear in mind that “Ultimately, only the set of facts is meaningful: we may consider the behavior of the subjects only in relation to that of the prince and vice versa, and it is the fact of their relationships that constitutes the object of knowledge.”³² This statement brings Lefort closer to Merleau-Ponty when he says in an essay that “power is of the order of the tacit.”³³ This is a means of criticizing every power that seeks its fundamentals in theology and all those who believe that the object of the political thinker must be sought in some hidden region of being. The political entity is the one that shows itself, and, for this reason, there is no room for the distinction between existence and essence of political events.³⁴ In this way, Lefort moves away both from those who naïvely wanted to reduce politics to the balance of the means of combat through violence and from those who sought the fundamentals of power in some transcendental sphere inaccessible to prying human eyes.

History is “what is apparent, it is the actions of men and the events that connect them,” says Lefort.³⁵ This statement aims at removing the idea that the object of the political thinker is beyond the reach of other men. On the contrary, it is the concrete relationships between men that matter; it is the open fights for power that are the object of the princes and of those who think about politics. These propositions, which aim at keeping political thought away from every political theology and all forms of idealism, run the risk, however, of pushing the thinker into the field of a form of empiricism that is common to various social scientists.³⁶

To escape from this snare, for Lefort, it is the very notion of the real in politics that must be investigated. Traditionally, the readers of Machiavelli resort to the 15th chapter of *The Prince* to discuss his break from classic political philosophy and the basis of his realist thought. In this chapter, the Florentine secretary states that he would rather

PROOF

Newton Bignotto 41

conform to “the effective truth of things” than cling to the imagination, which ends up opposing republics and monarchies that never existed and the ones that we are actually familiar with.³⁷ Lefort employs this statement to criticize those who believe that resorting to the concept of *effective truth* (*verità effettuale*) represents the support of an empiricist conception of political science.

Similarly, he attacks those who see a complete abandonment of antiquity in Machiavelli and a contradiction in the *Discourses* and *The Prince* when Machiavelli proposes leaving behind all references to the idealized regimes of the past.³⁸ In fact, Lefort proposes that Machiavelli breaks away from the past, but it is necessary to remember that for Lefort the past is plural and cannot be reduced to any single one of its terms. For this reason, he must leave behind the heritage of the Italian humanist, Christian thought, and the Greek thinkers. To make this movement of construction of his thought and of deconstruction of the past, Machiavelli is forced to resort to topics of the past and to question himself about the themes that are central to other thinkers.³⁹ Only as he shows himself capable of dealing with themes such as the virtues of the rulers and their impact on the conquest and maintenance of power does he rise to the task that he has set himself, and at the same time faces tradition in its various forms and the construction of a new political discourse. Once more, we would have to agree with the young peers of Machiavelli if resorting to the concept of *effective truth* meant reducing the field of politics to the confrontation of antagonistic forces. We certainly must pay attention to the capacity of the rulers to dominate through the use of violence, but, as we have seen, this is not sufficient to understand the effective workings of power. To understand the importance of this statement, we need to recall that the debate on the qualities required of the prince so that he can be successful simultaneously leads to Machiavelli’s criticism of Christian thought, particularly in the wish to reduce politics to morality, and serves to show that the ruler cannot overlook his image if he wants to stay in power. For Machiavelli, therefore, considerations of a moral nature are important not because they contain the truth about politics, but because they show that *effective truth* concerns a reality that cannot be reduced to the calculation of arms and the material conditions that support the ruler in power. The prince must take into consideration that the image of the ruler is as important as, or more important than, his capacity to employ force to preserve his power. For this reason, the political thinker cannot dismiss considerations about the morality of rulers in the attempt to understand their political path. It is not a matter of acknowledging the *speculum princeps*

and saying that resorting to Christian values guarantees the success of the prince. What the analysis of the moral behavior of rulers proposes is that politics is the realm of appearance,⁴⁰ that it is formed by a set of elements that matter only to the extent that they are apprehended by men and women as part of reality. This is only possible because, at a given historical moment, we cannot say that the analysis of the power of the ruler based on his capacity to use force counts more than the ruler's image, or that the ruler remains in power only through the image portrayed to his subjects.⁴¹ As Lefort reminds us, "Machiavelli does not seek to return from appearing to being, he queries appearance with the certainty that the prince only exists for the others, that his being is on the outside. He develops his criticism based on appearances."⁴²

Thus, the field of politics must be analyzed taking into consideration that it is formed by a set of variables that cannot be reduced to only one of its elements. Just as it is misleading to think politics from the perspective of domination, it is also an illusion to think that the symbolic is something that can be appropriated and manipulated freely at the whim of political actors. When Lefort praises the *effective truth* proposed by Machiavelli, he defines his standing in the scenario of contemporary political thinking, away from the philosophies of history of the 19th century and the positivism present in the political sciences of his time. From this viewpoint, he may state that "I have known for a long time that the truth of politics does not yield to being reduced to the terms of objective knowledge."⁴³

The fundamentals of the political and of conflicts

The adoption of the concept of *effective truth* enabled Lefort to define the epistemological precepts of his investigations in the field of political philosophy, and the reference to social conflicts enables the ontological fundamentals of his *démarche* to be unveiled.⁴⁴ To understand the meaning that we confer on this idea, we have to keep in mind that Lefort states in the sequence of his analyses of the concept of *fortune* in the thought of Machiavelli that "the horizons of political thought are not political in themselves, that the relationship of the prince with power is a figure of the relationship of man with time and being."⁴⁵ This statement shows that we must not mistake the effort to unveil the fundament of the political with either a philosophy of the immediate, which would end up bringing Lefort closer to Husserl, or the search for an absolute, which would end up giving place to a renewed form of political theology. One must remember that for Lefort, along the lines

PROOF

Newton Bignotto 43

of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, “the concept of origin designates not a beginning in itself, but that which is sought in the junction of a past and a future, of an outside and an inside . . .”⁴⁶

The issue of the nature of ontology postulated in the political philosophy of Lefort would remain unanswered if we believed that he looked for an absolute viewpoint in Machiavelli which would allow him to think about the foundations of the political phenomenon outside historical events.⁴⁷ History, regarded as that which shows itself to men, remains the field of our investigations, even when our inquiry converges to the limits of life in common. Having said that, we must remember that his point of departure is the statement made by Machiavelli that “every city has two opposing humors and this results from the fact that the people do not want to be commanded or oppressed by the *grandees* (*grandi*) and that the *grandees* wish to command and oppress the people (*populo*).”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, along the same lines as the Italian thinker, Lefort insists on the fact that the antagonism between the two humors is not reducible to their historical manifestations. This does not mean that the conflicts between the *grandees* and the *people* can only be perceived by the eyes of the experts who explore the recesses of our political life. Our author does not hesitate in using a terminology close to that of Marx to show that the antagonism between the humors is class conflict involving clearly defined historical actors.⁴⁹ In fact, all the forms of politics that we find in history result from the division of the humors. The empirical manifestations of this division express the fact that “things are unstable, that time evicts everything in front of it, that desire knows no rest.”⁵⁰ No knowledge alone, however, expresses the originary condition of political life. Each one has a peculiarity that is irreducible, that leads the political actor to face the contingency of each moment as part of the possibilities that he discovers in the present. In this sense, Lefort claims that there is no form of determinism in Machiavelli’s thought which might allow the thinker to tell the political actor how to behave to be successful in his action. Quite the contrary, it is the political actor and not the thinker who is capable of seeing “the universal in the particular, deciphering the signals of what will become a figure of conflict in the present.”⁵¹ This impossibility of deciphering the future through rational calculation from a distance of the inherent risks of the action must not induce us to believe that we must give in to the enticement of the moral theories that seek to find the fundamentals of life in common in some instance outside the effective relationships among men. “Truth – says Lefort – is far removed from it, it implies the unveiling of the social being, such as it appears in the division of classes.”⁵²

The theory of the division of the social body into antagonistic wishes associated with political principles is one of the axes of Lefort's thought. He finds this in the course of his interpretation of the philosophy of Machiavelli; however, he transforms it when he mobilizes it for the confrontation of his own conceptions with those of other philosophies of modernity. It is especially important when he analyzes the reality of mass societies, present in phenomena such as the Nazi and fascist regimes, which the Florentine thinker could not possibly have been familiar with. Lefort tackles the problem of identity of totalitarian regimes by showing that they make the unity of power and society the touchstone of refusal of all heterogeneity. Unity transformed into a supreme value masks, according to Lefort, the "division of classes" and ends up destroying freedom.⁵³ Based on the discussions of Machiavelli about the opposing wishes that are at the root of all political experience, he finds an original path to understand a historical experience that has challenged 20th-century thinkers. Upon revisiting Arendt's analyses of totalitarianism, with which he often agreed, Lefort does not fail to notice that they give great importance to the process of atomization of individuals, which marks the consolidation of totalitarian power, leaving aside the constitution of the image of a united people, one that denies any social division. For our author, this operation of resignification of the social is both a denial of the origin of all regimes in the originary division of the social body and a change of the image that society has of itself and of its relation with power. It is for that reason that Lefort concluded: "The notion of a homogeneous society is linked to that of its closure, of the enigma of its institution and of the indetermination of its history."⁵⁴

To understand the meaning of what we have just said, we must examine the analyses that our author makes of some initial chapters of the *Discourses*. In the fourth chapter of this work, Machiavelli proposes that the greatness of Rome was the fruit of the turmoil that was produced by the constant disputes between the plebeians and the senate. Lefort observed that this thesis has in itself a scandalous character, because it contradicts the long tradition of the praising of peace and the criticism of internal disputes, which, since antiquity, have been a common ground between otherwise very diverse political doctrines. Praise of Roman turmoil becomes even more important in the thought of the Florentine when we understand that, far from being a provocation, it only points to the origin of liberty itself.

Lefort observes that "there is no order that can be established based on the elimination of disorder, except at the expense of the degradation

PROOF

Newton Bignotto 45

of law and freedom.”⁵⁵ We can understand this statement, first, by relating it to the fact that the division of the body of society is at the basis of life in common and cannot be denied without affecting the organization of political forms. However, Machiavelli makes it possible to reach even farther when he associates the “fundament of law and freedom” with the desire of the people.⁵⁶ It may sound strange that he associates freedom and one of the constituting humors of the city directly, when we know that the political forms are the historical result of the conflict of classes. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, if the opposing wishes are always present in the city, they are not symmetrical, they do not aim at the same object and, for this reason, they cannot be identified as two fields fighting for the same object. The wish of the people is always the wish for non-oppression, which is why Lefort states that “it does not have an object, it is pure negativity.”⁵⁷ The wish of the people can thus ground freedom because no regime of laws can fully coincide with it. Without an object, it always gets in the way of every political form which intends to embody the place of the people.

Here we can easily recognize the origin of Lefort’s formulations of democracy as the regime that leaves the place of power empty. It is in the same line of thought of Machiavelli that Lefort understands that democracy, which is conceived in the same way as the republic for the Florentine thinker, is a regime unlike any other. It is constantly threatened by the positive wish of the grandees and by the difficulties that freedom has to be translated into an instituted legal form. For him, democracy is always in search of fundamentals, because, as a regime of freedom, it is the fruit of the work of the negative. In its historical existence, this leads to continually transforming and assimilating, as part of its existence, that which is sheer refusal of oppression. That is why, says Lefort, “it is in the claims of those who are excluded from the benefits of democracy that it finds its most effective mechanism.”⁵⁸

However, Lefort does not conceive democracy as a regime that repels institutionalization, or distinct from a regime of laws. Quite the opposite, within Machiavelli, Lefort proposes a definition of the republic that resembles Rousseau’s in the *Social Contract*. For him, “the regime of freedom is thus that of the law; or, strictly speaking, that in which the laws are directly related to its foundation.”⁵⁹ Thus, he does not deny that democracy exists historically through its laws and its institutions. On various occasions, he pointed out the importance of the fight for rights and the fact that right itself is a battling ground of disputes between the social groups that make up the city. What is important in his definition of “regime of freedom” is that he does not confuse it

with the legal form of freedom; although it is expressed through this, it always has to return to its fundamentals. As we have seen, the bases of democracy are neither the wish for concordance, nor the expression of an unstoppable process of history heading towards its conclusion, nor the fruit of a debate about the best way to put order into common life conducted by reason. Quoting Lefort, the foundations of free regimes are found “in the division of the classes.”

Therefore, when Lefort said in an interview for *Esprit* in 1979 that “nobody holds the formula of democracy and that it always retains a wild character,”⁶⁰ he referred to the fact that its nature is open to various claims that run through the political body, and also to the conflicts between various segments of society. What he is interested in is understanding the nature of democracy’s foundations, which, as we have seen, are not themselves political. It is by interpreting the theory of conflicts present in Machiavelli that other authors such as Skinner indicate the extension of his originality in relation to the political thought of the Renaissance⁶¹ and, for Sasso, a source of true paradoxes.⁶² Lefort indicates a novel path for understanding the nature of political freedom, which moves away from much of the contemporary criticism of Machiavelli, which was concerned with the identification of its ties with Roman and humanist republicanism, leaving aside the possibility of extracting from it a conceptual matrix in tune with our own time.

The association made by Lefort between the concept of Machiavelli’s republic and his own conception of democracy simultaneously resembles the modern republican tradition, particularly that of the Italian matrix, and forges his theoretical identity within contemporary political thought. On the one hand, he frees himself from contemporary social sciences and the belief that it is possible to understand political life through the analysis of the workings of its institutions. On the other hand, when he approaches republicanism, a term which Lefort used cautiously, he moved away from both the path followed by authors such as Carl Schmitt and his belief that the modern state must fight for its internal unity, and from liberal thinkers who believed that they could solve conflicts by resorting to an instrumental form of rationality capable of shaping and regulating conflicts. In this movement of dialogue with the past and of criticism of the present, he forged the identity of his own work.

Conclusion

Lefort’s thought became better known during recent decades because of his harsh criticism of the totalitarian regimes, particularly of the Soviet

PROOF

Newton Bignotto 47

regime, and because of his theories about contemporary democracy. His interest in contemporary events and his capacity to analyze them in a novel and pertinent way have led many of his readers to think that the center of his work is the study of contemporary politics and the erudite reference to authors from the past. Actually, he was a great analyst of the present time. The clarity that he demonstrated in studying the reality of European countries submitted to extreme regimes stands out, as does his capacity to understand the directions that many countries like Brazil took in their process of redemocratization in the last decades of the 20th century. He himself never separated the work of conceptual elaboration from the study of the present. In an interview published in 1988, he summarized this conception by saying that “political philosophy is, on the one hand, a reflection that takes into account all previous research, and, on the other hand, and inseparably, scrutiny of the time in which we live.”⁶³

The level of sophistication of Lefort’s political analyses and the fact that he was always consistent in the way he examined the thought of other thinkers may at times be an obstacle to the naïve reader. We believe, however, that the examination of his body of work demonstrates that it was constructed around a robust and well-delimited conceptual nucleus. As we have attempted to demonstrate, resorting to Machiavelli was a means of elaborating concepts that structure the central elements of his theory of democracy and of his analysis of totalitarian regimes. *Le travail de l’oeuvre Machiavel* is a pillar of the political philosophy of our author, who has transformed the scenario of contemporary political reflection.

Notes

1. C. Lefort (1972) *Le travail de l’oeuvre Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard).
2. In a text from 2000, Lefort says that he delivered his thesis project to his advisor, Raymond Aron, only in 1958. Hugues Poltier says that the work was started as early as 1956. C. Lefort (2007) *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005* (Paris: Belin), p. 993. H. Poltier (1997) *Claude Lefort. La découverte du politique* (Paris: Michalon), p. 33.
3. The idea that there is an enigma that may never be solved in the work of Machiavelli had already been proposed by Benedetto Croce, but Lefort does not agree with the reasons that led the Italian thinker to reach this conclusion. Benedetto Croce (1949) *Quaderni di critica*. V. 14 (Bari: Laterza). Apud I. Berlin (1972) “The originality of Machiavelli” in M. Gilmore (Ed). *Studies on Machiavelli* (Firenze: Sansoni), p. 206.
4. B. Flynn (2005) *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort. Interpreting the political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), p. 5.
5. C. Lefort (1978) *Sur une colonne absente* (Paris: Gallimard), p. 13.

6. Ibid., p. 16. "L'impensé du philosophe est ce qu'il donne à penser aux autres."
7. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 56 (*Interroger est certes scruter le monde que l'autre désigne mais de telle manière que ce monde vers lequel il fraye un chemin, nous sachions qu'il l'habite et que nous l'habitons, que ce monde parle et nous interroge à travers lui, que le passe lui-même interroge notre présent*).
8. For a view of Skinner's contribution to the methodological debate, see Q. Skinner (2002) *Visions of Politics. Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Vol. I.
9. C. Lefort. *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 59.
10. One of the important sources used by Lefort in this part of the book is Giuliano Procacci's work (1995) *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età moderna* (Roma-Bari: Laterza.)
11. C. Lefort. *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 151.
12. Ibid., p. 306 (*Puisque nous interrogeons Machiavel, nous interrogeons la société politique: notre tâche est bien d'explorer les liens qui se tissent entre la pensée de l'oeuvre et la pensée de la politique*).
13. N. Sasso (1980) *Niccolò Machiavelli* (Bologna: Il Mulino) pp. 441, 475, 505, 528, 556, 573.
14. E. Garin (1965) *Scienza e vita civile nel Rinascimento italiano* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza); (1961) *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano* (Firenze: Sansoni).
15. H. Baron (1965) *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
16. J. G. A. Pocock (1975) *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
17. Q. Skinner (1978) *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2 vols.
18. C. Lefort (1978) *Les formes de l'histoire. Essais d'anthropologie politique* (Paris: Gallimard).
19. In this regard, see: "Foyers du républicanisme" in C. Lefort (1992) *Écrire. A l'épreuve du politique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy), pp. 181–208.
20. In this regard, see B. Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort. Interpreting the Political*, pp. 5, 64–9, 94.
21. C. Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente*, p. 104 (*qu'il fut plus tributaire qu'il ne pensait du rationalisme de la philosophie politique occidentale*).
22. In this regard, see C. Lefort, "Réflexions sociologiques sur Machiavel et Marx: la politique et le réel" in *Les formes de l'histoire. Essais d'anthropologie politique*.
23. Ibid., p. 353 (*La politique est une forme de guerre, et sans doute n'est-ce pas un hasard si pour nous le faire entendre, Machiavel choisit d'abord de raisonner sur le cas de la prise du pouvoir par les armes*).
24. In this regard, see F. Gilbert (1970) *Machiavelli e Guicciardini. Pensiero politico e storiografia a Firenze nel Cinquecento* (Torino: Einaudi) pp. 95–132.
25. C. Lefort. *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 365.
26. That is what Strauss and Berlin do in different senses in texts contemporary to Lefort's. L. Strauss (1982) *Pensées sur Machiavel* (Paris: Payot); I. Berlin (1972) "The originality of Machiavelli" in Myron Gilmore (Ed). *Studies on Machiavelli* (Firenze: Sansoni).

27. M. Senellart (1995) *Les arts de gouverner. du regimen medieval au concept de gouvernement* (Paris: Seuil), pp. 228–30.
28. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 367.
29. C. Lefort (2007) "Le pouvoir" in *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005* (Paris: Belin) pp. 981–92.
30. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 355.
31. C. Lefort (1986) *Un homme en trop* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil) p. 99. (*La violence, au lieu de se dissiper, s'imprime dans la société.*)
32. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 355. (*En définitive, seule la constellation des faits est significative: nous ne pouvons considérer le comportement des sujets qu'en regard de celui du prince et vice versa, et c'est le fait de leurs relations qui constitue l'objet de la connaissance.*)
33. M. Merleau-Ponty (1960) "Note sur Machiavel" in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard), p. 269. (*Le pouvoir est de l'ordre du tacite.*)
34. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, pp. 357–8.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 358–9 (*que ce qui apparaît, c'est-à-dire les actions des hommes et les événements autor desquels eles se nouent*).
36. P. Manent has already remarked on the importance of this statement for Lefort's interpretation of the thought of Machiavelli. P. Manent (1993) "Vers L'Oeuvre et le monde: le Machiavel de Claude Lefort" in C. Habib and C. Mouchard (eds) *La démocratie à l'Oeuvre: Autour de Claude Lefort* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil), pp. 169–91.
37. N. Machiavelli (1997) *Il Principe* in *Opere* (Torino: Einaudi-Gallimard) Vol. I, p. 159.
38. C. Lefort (1992) "Machiavel et la verità effettuale" in *Écrire. A l'épreuve du politique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy) p. 143.
39. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 403.
40. See H. Adverse (2009) *Maquiavel. Política e retórica* (Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG) pp. 62–81.
41. This is why Poltier recalls that power has a symbolic nature before it acquires an instrumental one. H. Poltier (1997) *Claude Lefort. La découverte du politique* (Paris: Éditions Michalon) p. 61.
42. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 408 (*Machiavel ne prétend pas revenir du paraître à l'être; il interroge le paraître dans la certitude que le prince n'existe que pour les autres, que son être est au-dehors*).
43. *Ibid.*, p. 444 (*Mais il nous est apparu depuis longtemps que la vérité de la politique ne se laisse pas réduire aux termes d'un savoir objectif*).
44. We employ the term ontology as it was used by Pierre Manent in an interview with Lefort. C. Lefort, "Pensée politique et Histoire" in *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005*, p. 855.
45. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 444 (*que les horizons de la pensée politique ne sont point eux-mêmes politiques, que le rapport du prince avec le pouvoir est une figure du rapport de l'homme avec le temps et avec l'Être*).
46. C. Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente*, p. 28. (*le concept d'origine designe-t-il non ce qui est en soi commencement, mais ce qui est recherché à la jonction d'un passé et d'un avenir, d'un dehors et d'un dedans...*)
47. B. Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort. Interpreting the Political*, pp. 37–8.
48. N. Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, p. 143 (*car en toute cité on trouve ces deux humeurs opposés; et cela vient de ce que le peuple désire de n'être pas commandé ni*

50 *Intellectual Influences and Dialogues*

opprimé par les grands, et que les grands désirent commander et opprimer le peuple).

49. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 382.
50. Ibid., p. 387 (*les choses sont instables, que le temps chasse tout devant soi, que le désir ne laisse pas de repos*).
51. Ibid., p. 357 (*l'universel dans le particulier, de déchiffrer dans le présent les signes de ce que sera la figure des conflits à venir*).
52. Ibid., p. 386. (*La vérité passe au-delà, par le dévoilement de l'être du social, tel qu'il apparaît dans la division de classes.*)
53. Ibid., p. 475.
54. C. Lefort, "Le concept de totalitarisme" in *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005* p. 891 (*À la notion d'une société homogène se relie celle de sa clôture: celle de l'abolition de l'énigme de son institution et de l'indétermination de son histoire.*)
55. Ibid., p. 477 (*il n'est pas d'ordre qui puisse s'établir sur l'élimination du désordre, sinon au prix d'une dégradation de la loi et de la liberté*).
56. Ibid., p. 476.
57. Ibid., p. 477 (*il n'a pas d'objet, est négativité pure*).
58. Ibid., p. 390 (*dans la revendication de ceux qui sont exclus des bénéfices de la démocratie que celle-ci trouve son ressort le plus efficace*).
59. C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, p. 475. (*Le régime de liberté apparaît donc comme celui-là même de la loi; ou, à rigoureusement parler, comme celui dans lequel les lois sont rapportées à leur fondement.*)
60. C. Lefort "La communication démocratique" in *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005*, p. 389. (*Il est vrai, la démocratie, personne n'en détient la formule et elle garde toujours un caractère sauvage.*)
61. Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol I, p. 181.
62. G. Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, pp. 476–8.
63. C. Lefort, "La pensée du politique" in *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005*, p. 601. (*La philosophie politique est, certes, pour une part, une réflexion qui prend en charge toute une recherche antérieure, mais elle est aussi, pour une autre part et indissociablement, une interrogation du temps dans lequel on vit.*)