

François Regnault

The Thought of the Prince

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[23] Part One: Manifest Discourse, or What is Said

There is a politics [*une politique*] in Descartes.¹ Of course, there are few texts to be found by Descartes on politics, but it is not impossible to deduce a politics from the very principles of Cartesianism. Since he was a French gentleman who (for good reason) felt no guilt about his titles of nobility, and since he found the regimes under which he had lived here and there 'almost always easier to put up with than changing them [would have been]², and since he was not one of those 'meddlesome and restless characters'³ who wanted to reform everything, he never envisaged giving *his* own account of the possible forms of regime, or of the problem of the best kind of government. However, the facts show he was quite capable of pronouncing on such matters when the occasion arose. As evidence, consider the line that Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia threw to him over the course of a conversation that took place in the summer of 1646, during which she suggested that he should share with her his reflections on Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which she had read some six years previously.⁴ 'By inviting him to read Machiavelli's *Prince*, [24] by submitting to him

¹ The main idea for this article – that Machiavelli's thought is the non-place and bad conscience of the classical theory of right [*droit*] – came from Louis Althusser and the course he gave on Machiavelli in 1961 or 1962. In the third part, I apply to Machiavelli the first section of Jacques Lacan's article, 'Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' (*La Psychanalyse*, t. 1, pp. 93-110; now in *Écrits* [Paris: Seuil, 1966], 247-265). I owe a great debt to Michel Serres' article entitled 'Un modèle mathématique du cogito', which appeared in the second issue of the *Revue philosophique* (April-June 1965), as well as to the first appendix to the second volume of Martial Gueroult's *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1953; *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, trans. Roger Ariew [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985]). Lastly, the texts by Machiavelli can be found in *The Prince and the Discourses on Levy*, and the letters of Descartes and Elisabeth on Machiavelli in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964-1983), vol. 4, 447, 449-452, 485, 493ff., 519, 528.

TN: The letters are translated into English in *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, ed. and trans. Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 138-150. For the works of Descartes and for his letters to Princess Elisabeth, the page reference to the standard Adam and Tannery edition (AT) is given here, volume number followed by page number, since this pagination is reproduced in the cited English translations.

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² TN: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), AT 6: 14.

³ TN: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, AT 6: 14.

⁴ TN: In her edition of the *Correspondence*, Shapiro notes: 'Elisabeth seems to have made this specific request to comment on Machiavelli's *The Prince* in person, though it follows on her earlier effort to receive Descartes' thoughts on maxims for guiding civil life' (139). She refers to the letter of 25 April 1646 (not included in the 'Quatre lettres sur Machiavel' by Descartes and Elisabeth that follow Regnault's article in this issue of the *Cahiers*, as CpA 6.3), written by Elisabeth in response to an early draft of Descartes' treatise on *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). After making various specific objections, Elisabeth writes: 'I find it much less difficult to understand all that you say on the passions than to practice the remedies you prescribe for their excesses. For how is one to foresee all the accidents that can come upon one in life, as it is impossible to enumerate them? And how are we to prevent ourselves from desiring with ardour those things that necessarily tend to the conservation of man (such as health and the means to live), but that nevertheless do not depend on our free will? As for

difficulties on the deployment of force, or the conditions of peace, she obliged him to clarify his sentiments on the subject of civil life, that necessary extension of moral life, even if experience plays a greater role here than reason amongst the generality of men.⁵ Thanks to this we have the following: a letter from Elisabeth dated July 1646 inviting him to come visit; Descartes' reply dated September 1646 after his reading of *The Prince*; Elisabeth's response of 10 October 1646; and Descartes' response of November 1646, which in some sense closes the chapter of Cartesian politics. What we learn is that this politics must be founded on reason and that, if there are cases where the use of violence is permitted, tolerating them in no way precludes the politician from being a good man, or from 'thinking that [since] a good man is he who does everything true reason tells him to, so the best thing is always to try to be one'.⁶

Cartesian politics versus Machiavellian politics. Two problematics, a sole drama. A rift. Morality and politics. The scholar or scientist [*savant*] and the politician. Two temperaments.

We have to set off again, from a better footing.

I The Day of the Sabbath

1. *Letter of September, 1646*: 'Instead, in order to instruct a good prince, however newly he has come to power, it seems to me one should propose to him altogether contrary maxims, and it should be supposed that the means he used to establish himself in power were just, as in effect I believe they almost always are, when the princes who practice them think them to be. For, justice between sovereigns has different limits than that between individuals, and it seems that in these cases God gives the right to those to whom he gives force. But the most just actions become unjust when those who perform them think them so.'⁷

2. *Article 146 of Descartes' Treatise of the Passions*. 'Thus, for example, suppose we have business in some place to which we might travel by two different routes, one usually much safer than the other; [25] even if Providence were to decree that we will not escape robbery by following the route that is usually safer, and that we could have taken the other route without any danger, we should not for all that become indifferent about choosing one or the other, or rely upon the immutable fatality of this decree; reason insists that we choose the route which is usually the safer.'⁸

3. Lastly, the text that ends the whole sixth Meditation, and refutes objections to the goodness of the veracious God that could be extrapolated from the fact that our nature sometimes makes us find poisoned meat pleasant, or that those suffering from dropsy have an increased thirst the satisfaction of which would nevertheless be fatal,

knowledge of the truth, the desire for it is so just that it exists naturally in all men. But it would be necessary to have infinite knowledge to know the true value of the goods and evils which customarily move us, as there are many more such things than a single person would know how to imagine. Thus, for this it would be necessary to know perfectly everything that is in the world.

Since you have already told me the principal maxims concerning private life, I will content myself with now hearing those concerning civil life, even though civil life often leaves one dependent on persons of so little reason that up to this point I have always found it better to avail myself of experience rather than reason, in matters that concern it' (*Correspondence*, AT 4: 405-6).

⁵ TN: the source for this quotation appears to be Jacques Chevalier's introduction to his edition of René Descartes, *Lettres sur la morale. Correspondance avec la princesse Elisabeth, Chanut et la reine Christine* (Paris: Boivin, 1935), xiv.

⁶ TN: Letter from Descartes to Elisabeth, September 1646; *Correspondence*, AT 4:490.

⁷ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 487, cited in CpA 6.3:55.

⁸ TN: Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes*, op. cit., vol. 1, AT 11: 439-440tm.

or that our brain can erroneously sense a pain in the foot that is merely conveyed to it by the nerve joining the foot to the brain.⁹ Descartes' answer is that it is preferable that nature deceive us sometimes, rather than deceive us always;¹⁰ it mostly happens that we eat healthy meats and we are thirsty for good reason, and the brain is 'far more often excited by a cause hurting the foot'.¹¹ *Ergo*, it is more reasonable that nature has decided to speak in general, rather than always to remain silent.

These three cases, drawn from works of different status, ultimately all have the same form: the mind finds itself in an *equivocal* situation. Is my King legitimate or not? Is the path that I am about to take dangerous or not? Is this meat poisoned or not? Has my foot been struck or not? In the first case, the King knows the answer and not I; in the two others, it is Providence that knows it, or has chosen it for all eternity. In other words, in principle there is no equivocal situation, either in nature or in society, which has not been solved from above. We know this, then, from considering the *ordinary* course of Providence, whose reassuring frequencies are denoted by expressions such as 'almost always', 'in these cases' (first text), 'even if' (second text), 'usually', 'in this encounter' (sixth Meditation). In all three cases the human mind – knowing, as a result of its indispensable reading of Descartes' metaphysics, that God cannot deceive us, and founding itself on this very metaphysics, not in order to settle the difficulties of real life situations, of that whole zone that one will henceforth call 'fortune' [*la fortune*], but so as not to allow these difficulties to create an aporia in being – must reproduce, or mime, the ways of Providence. The mind decides to lift the equivocal factor, which it knows can only cause difficulties or confusion, rather than a genuine *problem*. The ambiguous course of fortune must be submitted to the univocal divisions of the soul. Three decisive wagers follow from this: [26]

1. The subject *must* consider his prince as legitimate: '*it should be supposed* that the means he used to establish himself in power were just...', '*it seems* that in these cases God gives the right...'¹²
2. The traveller must choose the path with the best reputation, even if this decision leads to no knowledge about the outcome of the journey. 'Nevertheless, we should not be indifferent as to which one we choose'.¹³
3. If I am hungry, I will eat. If I am thirsty, I will drink. The only taster who might check my foods for poisons is Providence itself; if the Pope has such a taster, man does not. If I have a pain in the foot, I will attend to it. Without suspicion.

In short, fortune presents me with situations that are reflexive:

xRx (the King is the King (for himself), and I must not judge him)

or symmetrical:

⁹ TN: Descartes, 'Sixth Meditation', *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, AT 7: 83-90.

¹⁰ TN: Descartes, 'Sixth Meditation', AT 7: 89: '[I]t is much better that it [nature] should mislead us on this occasion than that it should always mislead when the body is in good health.'

¹¹ TN: Descartes, 'Sixth Meditation', AT 7: 89.

¹² TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 487; cited CpA 6.3:55.

¹³ TN: Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, AT 11: 439.

xRy implies yRx.

(1. if the unjust prince has his throne in the same way as does the just, then, alas! – the just and the unjust are alike.

2. if the poisoned meat tempts me like the healthy one does, then, alas! – healthy and poisoned food are alike).

And my soul must act as if these situations were not reflexive or asymmetrical.¹⁴ It is a matter, at any cost, of tipping the scales one way or another, scales whose equilibrium only ever indicates the degree of indifference, the lowest degree of freedom. Resolution has no other power.

* * *

On the other side of this structure, there is another aspect that consists in re-establishing a symmetry, an indifference, even at the point where Providence seems not to mince its words.

Thus, in the letter to Elisabeth of 6 October 1645, a ruse of reason is evoked in order to render political engagement a merely optional matter [27]:

I confess that it is difficult to measure exactly just to what degree reason ordains that we be interested in the public good. But also this is not a matter in which it is necessary to be very exact. It suffices to satisfy one's conscience, and one can in this matter give a lot to one's inclination. For God has so established the order of things and conjoined men together in so tight a society that even if each person related himself wholly to himself and had no charity for others, he would not ordinarily fail to work for them in everything that would be in his power, so long as he used prudence, and principally if he lived in a century when mores were not corrupted.¹⁵

A more precise text gives us the key to this invitation to indifference (the letter to Elisabeth of 15 September 1645):

After having thus recalled the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the greatness of the universe, there is also one more truth the knowledge of which seems to me quite useful. This is that, even though each of us is a person separate from others and, by consequence, with interests that are in some manner distinct from those of the rest of the world, one must, all the same, think that one does not know how to subsist alone and that one is, in effect, one part of the universe and, more particularly even one part of this earth, one part of this state, and this society, and this family, to which one is joined by his home, his oath, by his birth.¹⁶

'One must, all the same, think' just as, with regard to the prince, 'it must be supposed' – a litaneutical expression. But this text also allows us to see that there is only a single structure: *metaphysice*, nothing is reflexive or symmetrical, but rather unilateral and decisive. Faced with fortune, the soul must arrest reflexivity, displace symmetry, upset balance and equilibrium, but neither can man do anything about it, because at bottom there are no clear and distinct ideas of the collective. He has such ideas of God and of the soul, immediately; about the universe, he has them mediately; but of society, he has none (or only in the very long term, according to Descartes' initial moral theory). My interests are distinct from everybody else's, herein resides the

¹⁴ Let the unjust prince acknowledge that he is not a prince! Let the healthy meat show itself, and disavow the poisoned! Or at least let Providence, if not me, recognise its univocal paths!

¹⁵ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4:316-17tm.

¹⁶ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4:293.

principle: 'justice between sovereigns has different limits than that between individuals'.¹⁷ But Providence has so conjoined me to the rest of the world that I cannot move my little finger without rendering some service. In its Holland cheese, there is no rat, however solitary and well-fed, that refuses to profit from the hand that feeds it.¹⁸

A method arises from this, one that is rationally correct and perfectly efficient, and not a word of which contradicts Cartesian metaphysics (for I object as much to those who talk of there being definite policies in Descartes [*de la politique chez Descartes*] as to those who would see in Machiavelli's work anticipated objections to Cartesianism; the question here is not one of prophetic [28] refutations, or of a retrospective papering over of the cracks, but rather of the relation between a place and *its* non-place) and one that Descartes is able to employ against Machiavelli, as follows:

First rule (of optimism through lifting equivocations):

Providence, in its metaphysical perfection, has created only asymmetrical truths (for nothingness, if it has no properties, cannot possess that of inverting being).

*So, if fortune leads you to believe that xRy implies yRx , instead your soul should assume that the true relation is only either xRy or yRx .*¹⁹

Second rule (of optimism through equivocation about dangerous univocities):

Providence, in its metaphysical perfection, has created only symmetrical truths.

So, if the urgencies of life or the blows of History present you with an unequal situation, one where xRy implies non- yRx (for example, the prince has taken power unjustly, and nobody can confuse him with a just prince), let your individuality (the union of your soul and body), by trusting its inclinations, and by not requiring you to measure too precisely 'just how far reason' commands you to take an interest in 'public affairs', re-establish the ordinary symmetries of fortune. Then you can by rights proceed to the application of rule number one.

It follows from these two (non-Cartesian) rules that the Prince simultaneously plays the role of a decisive Providence and responds to life's urgencies [29], and that one must be willing sometimes to attest to the legitimacy of his power (by invoking the ordinary metaphysics of decrees from above, founded on eternal reason) and sometimes to dissimulate his usurpations (by appealing to the benefit of doubt that

¹⁷ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4:487; cited CpA 6.3:55.

¹⁸ TN: The French reads: '*Dans son fromage de Hollande, il n'est rat, si seul se croie-t-il, qui ne profite aux Levantins eux-mêmes.*' This is a reference to a poem from Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, 'Le Rat qui s'est retiré du monde', 'The Rat who withdrew from the World': 'The sage Levantines have a tale/About a rat that weary grew/Of all the cares which life assail/And to a Holland cheese withdrew...'

¹⁹ When it comes to the equivocations of fortune or of life, Descartes always proceeds in this way; without mentioning the second maxim of his provisional moral code (which cannot be evoked here because of its status), we might cite for example:

- the famous passage in the 4th Meditation on indifference, on the lowest degree of freedom.
- Article 170 of the *Treatise on the Passions*, against irresolution.
- The whole letter of 6 October 1645 to Elisabeth, notably this passage: 'But as one can have different but equally true considerations, of which some lead us to be content, and others on the contrary prevent us from being so, it seems to me that prudence demands that we dwell principally on those which give us satisfaction. Almost all the things in the world are such that we can regard them from a side which makes them appear good and from another which makes us notice defects. And I believe that if one must make use of one's skill in something, it is principally to know how to look at them from the angle which makes them appear most to our advantage, as long as this does not involve our deceiving ourselves' (*Correspondence*, AT 4: 306).

accompanies the equivocations of fortune's hazards). Indeed, this could be the definition of divine right: that nobody knows whether what the King decides is due to inspiration or to calculation, whether he continues Creation by prolonging it in History, or breaks it by establishing something new.

The conjunction that I have made of these two rules is by no means some underhanded indictment of Descartes. It is enough to say that there are no clear and distinct ideas in politics, which itself changes nothing about our knowledge that Providence governs the world. One must therefore wager that the King who reigns is the good one; Cartesianism is shaken neither by the possibility nor by the necessity of making a wager. Divine veracity serves as the ultimate guarantee behind the lifting of sensory equivocations.²⁰ Simply, Cartesianism is not incompatible with absolute Monarchy (it neither requires it, nor banishes it). But that we should give this guarantee (to whom?) does not prevent us from drawing attention to the two procedures Descartes uses when faced with Machiavelli.

Reading Descartes' two letters on Machiavelli will convince us that there is scarcely a passage, or even a sentence, that does not obey these laws. The essential text is the one cited above²¹, which confers the right to use force and legitimacy on the prince who thinks of himself as legitimate (I think myself just, therefore I am: the comparison with the Cogito is inevitable). Just as we might expect, this text obeys our two rules:

1. The means the prince employs in order to establish himself seem equivocal to us. So, let us suppose that God, by right, etc...
2. But also: the means by which the prince establishes himself before our eyes appear to have the character of a usurpation. So we should re-establish the equivocation: no one can know what goes on in the thought of the prince. Machiavelli 'has not made sufficient *distinction*' between just princes and unjust princes, and this serves to subvert Justice. However, we must not attempt to distinguish whether such and such a prince is just, as this would overthrow the prince (and clarity in this domain is impossible). Indeed, by overly explicating the thought of the prince concerning his own legitimacy, one will end up rendering him obscure, just like the truth, as Descartes often reminds, whose very examination of what it is offends it.²² [30]

Similarly, the Prince has to distinguish between his friends and his enemies, and if he can do anything he likes against the latter, he cannot against the former. What Machiavelli is talking about is situated beyond love and hate, and if Descartes retains Machiavellianism it is only against enemies, which nullifies its effect.

Take the following phrase by way of example: 'As for allies, a prince ought to keep his word to them exactly, even when this is disadvantageous to him. For the reputation of always doing what he promises *can never be more disadvantageous* than useful.'²³

Such a phrase, in my view, is proof that Descartes' realism, whereby with respect to particulars he consents to almost everything Machiavelli says, nevertheless remains infallibly subordinated to a metaphysical decision; one must posit that breaking one's word will always serve the prince less than keeping it would. Now, it is

²⁰ 'The terms that awaken only sensible ideas are all equivocal', says Malebranche (*The Search for Truth*, VI, 2, 2).

²¹ TN: i.e. Descartes' letter to Elisabeth of September 1646, *Correspondence*, AT 4: 487.

²² 'It is a notion so transcendently clear that it is impossible to ignore' (letter of 16 October, 1639).

²³ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 488; CpA 6.3:55.

obvious that there is no possible historical assurance for such a thing. All the refutations of the letter of September 1646 may thus be referred back to an assurance of this type, and they draw on our two rules. In the majority of cases, we must then apply the first rule and hope for the best, which is always possible – the end of the first letter on Machiavelli again attests to this: 'Since in all worldly affairs there are some reasons for and some against, one should consider principally those that make one approve of what happens'.²⁴

The second rule is more difficult to apply, but it functions so long as the text of Machiavelli the adversary is *interpreted*. This is what happens in the following passage:

Thus I disapprove of the maxim of chapter 15 [of *The Prince*], which claims that, 'as the world is very corrupt, it is impossible that one will not ruin oneself if one always wants to be a good man, and that a prince, in order to maintain himself, must learn to be wicked when the occasion requires it'.²⁵ That is, unless perhaps by a good man he means a superstitious and simple man who does not dare to go to battle on the Sabbath, and whose conscience can be at rest only if he changes the religion of his people. But thinking that a good man is he who does everything true reason tells him to, it is certain that the best thing is always to try to be one.²⁶

Of course, Descartes can content himself with disapproving of Machiavelli when he counsels evil, but the deontology he follows [31] also requires him to refute such counsel as soon as Machiavelli offers a reason for it. Now, they are in agreement with regard to the corruption of the world (that is, they agree to use this phrase that was current in the language of the day), but here Descartes goes further than he needs to: he goes so far as to admit that it is true that the good man will *always* be ruined, on condition that by 'good man' Machiavelli means 'the superstitious man'. And indeed, Machiavelli means nothing else: a good man, when all is said and done, is a man who would not dare to fight on the day of the Sabbath. So Descartes' 'unless' thus becomes 'rightly', the concession is made the cause, reticence becomes avowal, and the restriction is universalized. 'It impossible not to become ruined, if one always wants to be a good man' is not some disillusioned aphorism in Machiavelli, but (and obviously the whole of *The Prince* must be read to give value to this sentence) that which designates as such the hitherto unthinkable and unthought field of what must here be called politics. This is the new place that Machiavelli *institutes* (for if the Prince, the Medicis, or whoever, do not know how to establish a new principality in the Italy of the Renaissance, then Machiavelli, armed with examples and history, will fortify a new place for it in the domain of theory). It is relative to this place that it can rightly be said that 'every good man is merely superstitious'. But this is a phrase uttered by Descartes, as if reluctantly, as an intolerable paradox. And doubtless no Cartesian²⁷ would have gone so far, moralizing more than his master, but doubtless the founder of the Cogito and modern philosophy possessed greater ability than his successors to venture to the limits of his own thought. Here he both does and does not cross this limit by stating, in a lightning-flash and in the exact form of a denegation, the truth of his a-politics [*son apolitique*].

For it must not be said that Descartes does not understand Machiavelli's realism. He knows and says that immoral means can be used in politics, and when it comes to realism, there is always room for discussion. Descartes' deafness [*surdit *] is more fundamental, and with him all classical politics is deaf. In Machiavelli he does not encounter an objector, and nor does he receive a lesson in realism in *The Prince*.

²⁴ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 492; CpA 6.3:57.

²⁵ TN: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull [1961] (London: Penguin, 2003), 50tm.

²⁶ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 490; CpA 6.3:55.

²⁷ There can be no question of Spinoza here, who made for Machiavelli the *place* that is well known.

He stumbles not on a contradiction, or on any obstacle. There is nothing he is trying to evade. Simply, he is entirely *unaware of* another place²⁸, a difference without identity. Or again, the unconscious instant of this lightning-flash that makes him say 'unless' opens up to him, in order for it to close again forever, the very place of history, and reveals to him, by way of a likely joke, the point at which his ahistoricism encounters and excludes the *verità effettuale della cosa*.²⁹ [32]

And to cure this wound, which is all the more serious for being imperceptible, he will read Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, so as to declare to Elisabeth in the letter of November 1646: 'I have since read his *Discourses*, in which I noticed nothing bad.'³⁰

All the *Discorsi*, in order to overcome the one book that is the *Prince*, to re-establish disequilibrium after the equivocal oscillation, to save optimism; a heavy and innocent volume, measured by its weight of reassurance, like the metaphysical and blank restfulness of the Sabbath that balances out the work of the week.

Annex

To clarify what I have said about the unilaterality of the Cogito and the symmetries of Fortune, I ask for permission to add a column to the structural table drawn up by Michel Serres in an article, published in the *Revue Philosophique* (no. 2, April-June 1965), to which I owe a large debt. On the basis of a persuasive reading of a passage of Descartes' Rule III, Serres has brought to light an analogy of structure between very different levels of Cartesianism: an analogy that applies as much to the intra-intuitive order of the Cogito, subject to non-transitivity (to unilaterality), as to the discursive, transitive order that requires a displacement of thought. In this connection, one can recall that the pre-geometrical contents of the Cogito (which it is fully entitled to perceive), in other words the relations of necessity and sufficiency between the three dimensions [of space], do not fall under the jurisdiction of the evil demon, which lies in wait for the soul as it moves around [*à ses déplacements*], rather than in its immobile apperceptions. The order of reasons as a discursive method is only guaranteed subsequently, and by God. I add to this that the relations, intransitive and transitive, which found two different orders, have the effect of reducing the radical *disorder* of Fortune. This could be depicted at each level as follows: [33]

MICHEL SERRES' TABLE		OUR ADDITION: THE FIELD OF FORTUNE, in other words, of morality and politics, which contains:
Method	Intuition Deduction	equivocations to be dispelled
Mechanical model	Topography Transmission	equilibriums to be destroyed
Geometrical model	Spatial Intuition Sequence of similarities	'difficulties encountered' to be resolved
General model	Figure Movement	an immobility (a confusion of the mind) to ward off

²⁸ TN: '*il méconnaît entièrement un lieu autre*'; *méconnaître* can mean to misjudge, to misunderstand or to be unaware of, but in keeping with the translation of Miller's articles in this volume, it could also be translated as to miscognize.

²⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 15 [Bull trans., 50].

³⁰ TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 531; CpA 6.3:61.

Philosophy	Cogito, sum	Order of Reasons	an irresolution of the mind to be cured
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Remarks:

1) The line that separates our column from Serres' table represents the passage from fact to right or law [*droit*], from opinion to philosophy, etc.

2) Under the column of intuition one could also place *books*, and under that of deduction, *travels*. Books and travels (the book of life) are, in the leading [*conduite*] of life, the two privileged figures of learning (*Discourse on Method*, I), such that once they are fulfilled and experienced as two impasses, only philosophy is left to lead one to the truth.

II The Point of Support and the Point of View³¹

'History' and 'politics' were named as such above, with impunity. These terms are meant to signify the new field of historical materialism, which had to wait until Marx to find its place. This wait must be given its status here; or rather, this non-wait, since while waiting for the production of a science, those who exist wait for nothing. I mean that Descartes precisely did not [34] wait for Marx in the way that one leaves a field for a future pioneer to clear; he simply ignored the field and stitched up the land registry in another way. Nor was Machiavelli waiting for anything by declaring that such a field was arable and by making room for it in the ideological earth that was given to him. For Machiavelli, however, can that which has not yet been cleared even be called a field? Can one announce a *terra incognita* upon which one has only just begun to tread?

If we speak of history, we must recognize that Machiavelli at least did not invent what had been *given*. He found History as historical past, as a set of exploits and stories, already made, just as Descartes did; and like Descartes, like everyone, he was familiar with History in the sense of actions to accomplish, decisions to take, campaigns to lead and speeches to make, discussions to arrange and armies to muster. Descartes participated in many military campaigns, and Machiavelli was the organizer of a few others.

It is this History, which above we called the domain reserved to Fortune, that Machiavelli declared to be an eternal return:

No one should be surprised if, in discussing states where both the prince and the constitution are new, I shall give the loftiest examples. Men nearly always follow the tracks made by others and proceed in their affairs by imitation, even though they cannot entirely keep to the tracks of others or emulate the virtue [*virtù*] of their models. So a prudent man should always follow in the footsteps of great men and imitate those who have been outstanding. If his own virtue fails to compare with theirs, at least it has an air of greatness about it.³²

This is why 'the prince should read histories'.³³ More, there is history only to the extent that already-found solutions have been forgotten. So if it is history in the traditional sense one wants to speak of, then Machiavelli was a reader of the Ancients, of Livy first and foremost, and he was immersed more than anyone in the Ancients,

³¹ TN: 'Le point d'appui et le point de vue.'

³² *The Prince*, opening of chapter 6 [Bull trans., 19tm].

³³ *Ibid.*, end of chapter 14 [Bull trans., 49].

we might dare to say more even than Bossuet himself, who subscribed to the idea of a general progress in history, or at least to that of the impossibility of leading [*reconduire*] what he called an 'epoch' back to another one.

But one point is essential: the idea (which only just qualifies as transcendental) that paths are always already blazed by others, supports the idea that examples to be followed should prevail over principles to be discovered. It is here that something changes radically: it cannot even be said that Machiavelli reasoned by *starting from* examples (as Leibniz did); rather he reasoned *by* examples. In *The Prince*, in the last (and often attained) instance, there is nothing but [35] examples. He says magnificently: 'In this world, there is nothing but vulgarity.'³⁴ With examples, he is always magnificent. As with Nietzsche³⁵, the eternal return goes hand-in-hand with a pluralism that has no other recourse than itself. And it was no coincidence that Elisabeth the dethroned Princess – the one who read *The Prince* with the ulterior motive of effecting a restoration, the one who had a real interest in reading it,³⁶ the one who, being a princess with nothing more than 'the title',³⁷ should bring the grain of history (thrones and battles, injustices and derangements [*déraisons*]) to the Cartesian millstone – understood Machiavelli's design without needing it to be spelled out, and who, after having partially justified Cesare Borgia for authorizing prompt acts of violence instead of a 'long sequence of miseries', pulls herself up by saying: 'But if he is wrong to have made these general maxims from those cases which occur in practice on very few occasions, others do the same [...] and I believe that this comes from the pleasure they draw from putting forward paradoxes that they can later explain to their students.'³⁸ All that remained for Descartes was simply to accentuate the princess' concession, and to say 'it is true that it was his [Machiavelli's] plan to praise Cesare Borgia that led him to establish general maxims for justifying particular actions which could have been difficult to excuse.'³⁹ In Machiavelli's work, Descartes cannot but misunderstand [*méconnaître*] (not by any blunder, but because classical rationalism, and in particular the theory of legal right, defines itself as subsuming every example under a law, and not a law under an example) the status of examples, which are not examples of anything, but rather the very matter, if not the motor, of History, and which designate the forces which move it, the processes which command it; in short, the structures that historical materialism had to produce. For here, unless things are seen through to the end, to the point of the possibility of science, one can only consider the facts that Machiavelli cites as examples of something else, thus leaving no other choice than to compensate for the charge of empiricism (a great insult in the West) by pointing up the merits of realism (itself no great praise in the West).

But Elisabeth had understood the essential point: 'The author's maxims tend towards [the justification of] establishment [*tendent à l'établissement*].'⁴⁰ Now, the establishment of the prince is that innovation [*nouveauté*] that did not take place historically, but whose theoretical place Machiavelli discovered – and the theoretical innovation is what [36] has to guarantee that examples can be used without

³⁴ *Ibid.*, end of chapter 18 [Bull trans., 58tm].

³⁵ Here it is necessary to follow faithfully Gilles Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche in his *Nietzsche and Philosophy* [1962], trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

³⁶ In 1640, the year in which she read it, a book had appeared on the legitimacy of re-establishing her House, which had been overthrown at Montagne-Blanche in 1620. Descartes, it is thought, was at, if not a participant in, this battle.

³⁷ Letter from Elisabeth to Descartes, 10 October 1646, *Correspondence*, AT: 4:522; CpA 6.3:59.

³⁸ TN: *Ibid.*, AT 4:521, CpA 6.3:58.

³⁹ TN: Letter from Descartes to Elisabeth, November 1646, *Correspondence*, AT 4: 531; CpA 6.3:61.

⁴⁰ TN: *Ibid.*, *Correspondence*, AT 4: 520; CpA 6.3:58.

subsumption, that there is always an example to establish or institute [*instaurer*].⁴¹ Example is opposed to model. In justice one sets or makes an example, precisely so that things do not start all over again. And it is this institution that imposes upon the symmetry of eternal return the unilaterality of the new.

By way of a countercheck, one might now produce the following analogy between Descartes and Machiavelli, whose formal criterion is the substitution of asymmetry, 'xRy implies ~ (yRx)', for symmetry, 'xRy implies yRx'. The Prince in Machiavelli would then play the role of the Cogito in Descartes, which indeed institutes the unilateral, hypermathematical relation of the 'I think' to the 'I am' (in the same way as the straight line implies the line, and not the reverse). The site of unilateral relations would thus be metaphysics in Descartes, corresponding to the new politics in Machiavelli, while the symmetrical domain of Fortune in Descartes would be the analogue of 'cyclical' history in Machiavelli:

	DESCARTES	MACHIAVELLI
SYMMETRY	Fortune, place of equivocations	The eternal return in history
ASYMMETRY	The decision of the Cogito	The establishing of the new Prince

However, if we take into account the fact that for Descartes the prince is the author of his own legitimacy, we might also sketch another configuration that would render analogous not formal relations but domains:

	DESCARTES	MACHIAVELLI
THE GIVEN	Fortune: one must support the just Prince	The establishing of the new Prince, finally decentering eternal return
METAPHYSICS	The Cogito: the unilaterality of Right	Transcendental History: eternal return

Now the very possibility of these two analogies and the impossibility of preferring one over the other is enough to show that such a structure is not fruitful and should be abandoned. Apparently the Prince [37] is like a Cogito, and the Cogito like a Prince. But in fact they both belong to different fields. The fields established by each of the authors (metaphysics, historical materialism) appear to have the function of putting order into the ambiguous field of Fortune, but by means of two radically different operations: in Descartes, metaphysics makes possible in principle the subsumption of cases under the rule that encourages a wager on the legitimacy of the prince. In Machiavelli, it is materialism which makes impossible the subsumption of examples under any rule; it is this that subverts the notion of the rule and historicizes it by exemplifying it. In sum, from whichever side our analogies are approached, there is always one through which the difference emerges. It is precisely because Machiavelli declares that there is no law except of the object of which it can be the law (not the example of the law, but the law of the example, just as there will be laws of *the* mode of capitalist production in Marx), that there can be no recourse here to an analogism understood in the structural sense; insofar as the aim is to make an analogy between two objects, one of them in particular, *rather than either one indiscriminately*, will repel it. So we must leave open the break between Machiavelli

⁴¹ TN: '*Or l'établissement du prince est cette nouveauté qui n'eut pas lieu historiquement, mais pour laquelle Machiavel trouve son lieu théorique, et la nouveauté théorique est ce qui [36] doit garantir que les exemples peuvent être employés sans subsumption, qu'il y a toujours à instaurer un exemple.*'

and Descartes, without taking account of the difference between epochs, while admitting that Machiavelli himself barely advances beyond this break.

To summarize: to say that a difference cannot let itself be 'structuralized' is to denote the effect of a break; and to declare that the process of exemplification in Machiavelli is such that he cannot pass off the laws he states either as rationalist subsumptions or as empiricist generalizations, is enough to give the reason for this difference and to indicate this break. Machiavelli is neither a rationalist, nor an empiricist; nevertheless nor is he a scientist or scholar [*savant*], which would prevent us from naming his break as epistemological in a Bachelardian sense, were it not for the fact that that nobody is capable of inhabiting a break, not Descartes, not Machiavelli, not we, not I – one must be either before or after it, and it is by giving rise to a science that both the break and one's stepping over it are constituted. The only breaks, therefore, are epistemological. In order to assign to Machiavelli his own place, we might then take up the formula that Georges Canguilhem applies to Galileo: he was in the true, he did not say the true⁴² – except that, in the true, Machiavelli does not say much, even if he hazards a few steps, as a lone rider.

Let us try to clarify so unstable a position:

- I. Archimedes, according to Pappus: 'δσζ μοι ποῦ στῶ καί κινῶ τήν γήν' [Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth]. [38]
 - II. Descartes: 'Archimedes demanded just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable'.⁴³
 - III. Machiavelli: 'Nor I hope will it be considered presumptuous for a man of low and humble status to dare discuss and lay down the law about how princes should rule; because, just as men who are sketching the landscape put themselves down in the plain to study the nature of the mountains and the highlands, and to study the low-lying land they put themselves high on the mountains, so, to comprehend fully the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to comprehend fully the nature of princes one must be an ordinary citizen'.⁴⁴
 - IV. Descartes: 'As for the rest, I am also not of the opinion of this author in what he says in the preface: [the preceding text follows]. For the crayon represents only those things that are seen at a distance, but the principal motives and actions of princes are often such particular circumstances that one can imagine them only if one is a prince oneself, or perhaps if one has been party to their secrets for a very long time'.⁴⁵
- 1) From the first proposition, the deduction is made that if it is always possible to place oneself on Sirius in order to see Archimedes raise the Earth, then this can only be done by virtue of image and illusion. In fact, the Archimedean point is a point of knowledge; a good Archimedean, Platonist in his soul, can

⁴² Georges Canguilhem, 'La Signification de l'œuvre de Galilée et la leçon de l'homme', *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences* 17: 68-69 (July-December 1964), 218; reprinted in his *Études d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences* (Paris: Vrin, 1968).

⁴³ Descartes, beginning of the second Meditation [Cottingham trans., 16].

⁴⁴ *The Prince*, Dedication to Laurent de Medici [Bull trans., 3-4]. Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 273.

⁴⁵ In the letter of 10 October 1646 we come across Elisabeth's final return [*reprise*] to Descartes' view on this issue.

know that experience is of no use, and that mechanics alone proves the possibility of such a point of support, without one's occupying it. *Therefore only two possible positions remain*: to be at [*sur*] the decentred point of science, or to remain on the round face of that which is not science.

- 2) If we apply this deduction to the second proposition, the only point of support that remains is that of the Cogito, since every historical or terrestrial point of support wavers in equivocation. Thus the guarantee of the Cogito is God alone, the counter-point of the Cogito: Lacan writes that 'Descartes' approach is, singularly, one of safeguarding the *ego* from the deceitful God [39], and thereby safeguarding the *ego's* partner – going so far as to endow the latter with the exorbitant privilege of guaranteeing eternal truths only insofar as he is their creator.⁴⁶ The fourth proposition confirms the second and denies that the point of support of the Cogito can be a point of view upon History. Everyone, including the Prince, only has his Cogito for himself, and even supposing that the Prince by divine grace possessed some clear idea about the legitimacy of his taking of power that was refused to us, it would nevertheless remain true that no subject would have any more right to look over it than would one Cogito over another. Lacan again: "'Cogito ergo sum", *ubi cogito sum* [...]. Of course, this limits me to being there in my being only insofar as I think that I am in my thought; to what extent I really think this concerns me alone and, if I say it, interests no one."⁴⁷
- 3) In Machiavelli, the thought of the Prince interests the thought of the subject. That no doubt means that it is up to men to make, or at least to write, their own history. But, if we apply the preceding deduction to this proposition III, it means that there are only two points: the point of view of a science which, as it has recourse to historical exemplification, ceases to be Platonic and becomes experimental, and which therefore is simultaneously the point of support for establishing the new in theory and the point of application where this establishment takes (its) place in history.

What we should retain from this confrontation of topics is that there is only ever one point from which one knows, and that in Archimedes and Machiavelli this point of knowledge can be assigned, and doubles itself with a point of application (the Earth, the matter of history), the difference being that when one is a Platonist it is not necessary to experiment, but when a Machiavellian it is.

In Descartes, there is only one point of view, that of philosophy or metaphysics, to which all others must be referred [*rapportés*].

Above all, we should retain that, beyond the above-designated points, there is no other point, and in particular no *tertium* [40] *punctum*, no Sirius from which to consider Descartes and Machiavelli, and the epistemological point at which we situate ourselves to designate the break is itself no doubt only a point of view; a non-Cartesian one, but just as philosophical. This is why it is necessary, on account of the impossibility of finding a structure without difference that governs both Descartes and Machiavelli (and also, on account of a finite and limited number of possible positions, a structure that might simultaneously integrate the sixteenth century and Machiavelli), to exclude all recourse to an archaeological configuration.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Lacan, 'Science and Truth', *Ecrits*, 865/735 [reprinted in CpA 1.1:16].

⁴⁷ Lacan, 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious', *Ecrits*, 516/429.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault allows us to understand precisely this with regard to politics in *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), page 218 [*The Order of Things* [1970] (London: Routledge Classics,

A metaphysics without break cannot intersect or tally with a thinking that is thoroughly subject to the break that situates it,⁴⁹ on the basis of a field of empiricity that it has not yet shaken off as thoroughly as metaphysics, in a new field that it neither traverses nor dominates, but where it maintains itself. Were such an intersection tenable, then the Cartesian system would suffer just as much as would Machiavellian establishment [*instauration*].

This to-and-fro between the point of view and the point of support that is the Prince (I support you with my knowledge, support me with your weapons) and that bears experimental witness to historical science, cannot coincide with the Cartesian exclusion of fortune as a place of equivocations, with that universal point of view which has need of all its most immobile obviousness in order to perceive its contents, and of divine veracity to authorize its displacements. This is why extension itself is without any privileged point. Cartesianism is a quasi-Eleaticism and not a dialectic.

With regard to the place of the true that Machiavelli laid down while failing to say it – he still appeals to *virtù* to name the foundation – it is therefore left to Cartesian metaphysics not to fill or block it up, but rather to deny or repudiate it, and this is the function of the theory of clear ideas, which denies them to politics. We should avoid any geneticism: I say the function, not the goal. The Cogito is not the refusal of politics as a science, but the means for doing without it. So there can be no Cartesian politics. Or rather, yes there can: Cartesian politics is a politics like any other; not a science, but a strategy. [41]

III 'The scales in which conjectures about the past make promises about the future oscillate'⁵⁰

If materialism means abandoning the subsumption of examples under a rational law and adoption of the epistemological point of view according to which there can only be theory insofar as it is a theory *of* its objects, we will admit Machiavelli's materialist epistemology as an example of historical method. It's this materialism that we were trying to establish above. But in this way, all that is attained is a materialism in history, proving by example that there are only examples, and not the materialism *of* history; the latter remains something *encountered*, *given*, instead of being an object to be constructed. So, materialism itself will be an epistemological project, the faithful philosophy of a science yet to come, an owl that took flight too soon, a monster. Thus in order to show that what is at stake is something other than history as it is read or made, we would need to show that it's a matter of history as we construct it, or history as we understand it through theory. We will not claim that Machiavelli himself proceeded in this way, but merely that he indicated the intentions and the direction, and gave himself the minimum of means for doing so. The solution is the following: Machiavelli does not content himself with given history, nor does he manage to construct the theory of history; rather he remains between the two, which means something if we can say that he *undoes* the first kind of history. For this purpose the concepts of primary historicization and secondary historicization will now serve as our keys.

2002), 223], by explaining that the adequation of the system of wealth to the configuration it implies does not come without the cost of a *transformation* from which natural history, for its part, is exempted, since it is already theoretical [*théorique*] by nature: 'Wealth is a system of signs that are created, multiplied, and modified by people; the theory of wealth is linked throughout to politics.'

⁴⁹ TN: '*Une métaphysique sans coupure ne peut recouper une pensée qui subit de part en part la coupure qui la situe,...*'

⁵⁰ TN: '"*La balance ou les conjectures sur le passé font osciller les promesses du futur*". The quotation is from Lacan; see the following note.

They will be introduced in the following propositions, which summarize a passage from the end of the first section of Jacques Lacan's Report on the Congress of Rome, where he picked out precisely the point that commands (and from above) all the sciences known as sciences of interpretation. It would do historians no harm to examine these propositions, since they continue to move back and forth between the empirical chain [*chaîne*] of detailed events to the idealist flesh [*chaire*] of risky resurrections, always leaving one of these two seats vacant.

I. 'For Freud [...] it is a question of remembering [*ré-mémoration*], that is, of history; he rests the scales – in which conjectures about the past make promises about the future oscillate – on the knife-edge of chronological certainties [*certitudes de date*] alone. Let's be categorical: in psychoanalytic anamnesis, what is at stake is not reality, but truth, because the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present.'⁵¹[42]

It follows from this that history has to acknowledge:

(a) the knife of chronological certainties, certainties of date; this is the intolerable point of reality that history (of the subject) cannot do without, and the only meaning that the word reality should henceforth receive: a kernel of the impossible, according to Lacan's expression, i.e. the empirical minimum, which, as it is the minimum, is itself not even empirical (that the head of Louis XVI was cut off is indeed a fact, a real, but to know what this willed and meant it is not the order of reality, but of truth).⁵²

(b) that this dimensionless knife can assign no date unless the fact produced is already submitted to primary historicization: 'the events are engendered in a primal historicization – in other words, history is already being made on the stage where it will be played out once it has been written down, both in one's heart of hearts and outside.'⁵³

(c) that the conjectures of a conscious discourse upon a past that is already by itself historical cannot but be the work of a secondary historicization, one that needs to constitute the first history retrospectively by undertaking, with what is left of it, the distortions that are necessary to maintain a discourse stitched up with lies or blank spaces.⁵⁴

II. Therapeutic and scientific work consist in unstitching the secondary distortions that have persisted under [psychic] censorship, and which are nourished negatively by it during the perfecting of the 'current historicization [*historisation actuelle*]', which consists in saying to the subject not 'your unconscious was in reality your history', but instead that 'your "*history*" was, in truth, *the unconscious*'. In this sense, primary historicization finds its place after secondary historicization. We have thus taken advantage of the subject's modicum of freedom in order to make the knife vacillate, and to substitute, for the contorting historicization of conscious discourse, true history

⁵¹ Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' [1953], *Ecrits*, 256/213.

⁵² 'History [...] constitutes the emergence of the truth in reality [*dans le réel*]' (Lacan, *Ecrits*, 257/214).

⁵³ TN: Lacan, *Ecrits*, 261/216; Regnault's original French citation includes an error, replacing Lacan's 'the events' with 'the elements'.

⁵⁴ Unless one wants to understand nothing of it, one should not consider our order of exposition as itself historical. [It's a matter of] the time, if you like, of knowing. [*Temps, si l'on veut, du savoir*].

– the true history which, by leading this discourse back to its alleged origins, is the only one able to rid the stitched-up narrative of its distortions, hems and hitches, and to 'reorder past contingencies by giving them the sense of necessities to come.' [43]

III. It is necessary to apply the preceding [operation] to History. 'Apply' is a bad word, because the structure here is the same, and there is no reason that any agency [*instance*] should be inscribed in this play of historicizations and retrospections that might be pertinent enough to allow an individual aspect of this play to be distinguished from a collective one. The unconscious, as is well known, is no more collective for Freud than it is for Marx, and the categories of individual and society should be left here to the false questioning of romantic sociologists. Nevertheless, it is fully legitimate to invoke here the whole problematic of 'coming-to-consciousness' [*prise de conscience*] according to Marx who, in the Preface to the *Contribution to Political Economy*, lets it run its course, without guiding or swelling it, through the channels and dikes [*digues*] of the mode of production – as when he speaks about the 'ideological forms under which men assume consciousness' of the conflict between productive forces and the relations of production, and demands that we carefully distinguish these forms from the science of this conflict (and we might add: and also, from the science of these forms).⁵⁵

IV. The preceding must be applied with all the more reason to politics, which, as action, presupposes a freedom and an end, and which more than anything else makes the truth emerge in the real.

Now these considerations of ends and tasks to be accomplished receive their theoretical status when we say that secondary historicization has first of all the function *in actu* [*en acte*] of an *ideal* (and following Kant one could say: of an imperative, for this is what defines political action as 'practical'). This is the role, as Lacan says, played by the 'supposed laws of history' insofar as they are eminently progressivist and give to history the biological form of the development of a seed, for one does not escape this geneticism when representing history as task or ideal. To this project – for it is one – Bossuet and Comte equally conspire, as does the Marx of 'coming to consciousness', along with every politician *by necessity*, including Machiavelli himself. Witness this text from the *Discorsi*:

I repeat therefore that, as an incontestable truth to which history as a whole bears witness, men may second their fortune, but cannot oppose it; may follow the weave of its thread, but not [44] break it. I do not believe for all that they should give up. Though they know not the end, and move towards it along obscure paths and deviations, there is always hope; and from this hope, they should draw the strength to never give up, no matter what the misfortune and misery in which they might find themselves.⁵⁶

However, applying again the principles outlined above, we should add the following: secondary historicization is not science, and whoever has a science of history or a science of semblance [*d'un semblant*] must go further and lead the censored ideas (all the stronger for being censored) of subjects and peoples back to the primary historicization, so as to rub out [*biffer*] the primitive trauma and obtain cures in

⁵⁵ One could connect Marx's phrase 'Mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve' to Lacan's phrase, cited above, concerning the freedom of the subject between past contingencies and necessities to come. This in-betweenness [*entre-deux*] of the subject is the place that remains to it for becoming conscious of a task, with the help of science.

⁵⁶ TN: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book II: 29, trans. Leslie Walker, ed. Bernard Crick [1970] (London: Penguin, 2003), 372m. 'Fortune blinds Men's Minds when she does not wish them to obstruct her Designs' (368).

analysis and history. For whoever speaks only of progress, for whom progress applies as if to an embryo, wants neither to change nor to be cured.

We can then thus establish a principled difference between authors of secondary historicization and those of science (possible or real), that is, at bottom those of primary historicization, of history without censorship or distortion. To the side of the deceitful chatter that normally occupies the centre of our attention, there must be a place, an ambiguous and vacillating place, both for historians of the primary [historicization] and for scientists [*savants*], scientists capable of pushing as far as the complete undoing of the official pages [of history] and of demolishing the machines of consciousness. This co-incidence can only take place in history. In saying that Machiavelli is both beyond the break and yet only ventures a few steps, I do not mean to give him any other place than this one, which is unstable but leaves no seat vacant for the established historians.

A) The 'secondary' historians of classical times are those who have cast a cloud or veil over the prince's usurpation and who, concealing the fact that primitive traumas had already been historical events (and not origins without tears), sketch out a continuous and progressive history. This genre of history perhaps began when Polybius (who Machiavelli had read) said in the Preface of the first book [of his *Histories*]:

Just as Fortune made almost all the affairs of the world incline in one direction, and forced them to converge upon one and the same point; so it is my task as a historian to put before my readers a single point of view of the means by which she has brought about the execution of her design. It was this peculiarity which originally determined me on undertaking this work. Another reason was that I had seen that nobody of our time had taken up the task of writing a universal history [...]. No one as far as I knew, who by assembling all the facts and setting out their order, had gone to the trouble of making us see the beginning, the motifs, and their conclusion.⁵⁷ [45]

This genre continues when Bossuet divides into epochs a Universal History monarchized to the core. Historians of progress, of the ideal, and of hopes and expectations [*espérance*].

*One day all will be well, this is our hope
All is well today, that is the illusion,*

says Voltaire,⁵⁸ another progressivist historian, failing to see that [*méconnaissant que*] he says in two lines the same thing twice, for if 'one day ...', why not 'today'?

Machiavelli also sometimes has recourse to this genre of history when he wants to encourage, reassure and, simultaneously, deceive. The unessential side of Machiavelli.

We can now, by differentiating them, deduce the principal respective discordances in this concert between Descartes and Machiavelli.

B) Descartes, one will recall, remains within the limits of classicism, but sometimes ventures right up to them. Consequently, he rarely proceeds to secondary historicizations other than negatively, in the form of a denegation. To put it another way, he declares two things:

⁵⁷ TN: *The Histories of Polybius*, vol. 1, trans. E.S. Shuckburgh (London: Macmillan, 1889), 4.

⁵⁸ Voltaire, 'Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne, ou examen de cet axiome "Tout est bien"', online at http://www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/09/13_Lisbonne.html.

- the prince himself is the author of the legitimacy of his taking power, which properly designates the primary historicization that cannot but define every event – as Lacan says, any assumed instinctual stage is before all else a historical stigmata:⁵⁹ 'a page of shame that one forgets or undoes, or a page of glory that obliges'. This applies to the prince, who is immediately his own historian.

- consequently nobody can gossip about the prince, which serves right away to veil his primary historicization under a cloak of illegibility, to which one cannot even impute any dissimulation: the King is naked, but nobody sees it, and nobody sees the cloak either. A Bossuet weaves more ample ornaments around the actions of princes. He turns them into epochs. For Descartes, there is therefore no History, as what is primary is the affair of princes, who are better placed than us, and as what is secondary is whatever suffices to wreath what is primary in smoke. This absence of history is due to the fact that the truth cannot be explained in words: what is evident [*l'évidence*] evades historicization. [46]

C) As for Machiavelli, he spent his time reading Livy, i.e. reviewing the origins before they were sewn up (and little matter that here Rome serves as the figure of the origin). Machiavelli is the one who bears [*qui porte*] the efficacy of the unconscious as much with respect to seizures of power in the past as to the powers to be seized one day – to be seized soon. He is to be counted among the historians who perform a renewal or a 'leading back' [*reconduction*], a role which is similar to that of the analyst. He is on both the side of the ideal and of progress. 'On both sides', as two texts attest:

1. The first chapter of Book III of the *Discorsi*⁶⁰ is entitled: 'In order that a religious institution or a state should long survive, it is essential that it should frequently be restored to its original principles.' Machiavelli explains therein that the function of this return to origins is to re-consolidate a power: 'it is desirable that there ought to elapse at most ten years between these great actions [*grand coups*] [that suddenly recall one back to the origins], because by this time men begin to change their habits and break the law [*user les lois*]'⁶¹. Such is the progress of secondary historicization. It is therefore necessary to undo it and return to the origins, either because events oblige it, or because one decides it for oneself: this decision can then take the symbolic form of a 'recapture [*rattrapage*] of the State':

The magistrates who governed Florence from 1434 to 1494 used to say that it was necessary to 'reconstitute power' every five years; otherwise it was difficult to maintain it. Now, by 'reconstituting power' they meant re-instilling men with that terror and that fear which they had instilled when they first assumed power, and chastising those who, according to their principles, had behaved as bad citizens. But as the remembrance of this chastisement disappears, men are emboldened to try something fresh and to talk sedition. Hence provision has of necessity to be made against this by restoring that government to what it was at its origins.⁶²

(When Machiavelli himself, prince of science, undertakes this procession back towards the origins, it is not by chance that he celebrates it with some adornment:

⁵⁹ Lacan, 'Function and Field', *Ecrits*, 261/217.

⁶⁰ Louis Althusser was able to extract this chapter from the constraints of its Livian context.

⁶¹ TN: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III:1 [Crick ed.: 388].

⁶² TN: *Discourses*, III:1 [Crick ed.: 388].

When evening comes [47] I return home and go into my study, and at the door I take off my daytime dress covered in mud and dirt, and put on royal and curial robes; and then decently attired I enter the courts of the ancients. Affectionately greeted by them, I partake of that food which is mine par excellence and for which I was born. There, where I am not ashamed to talk with them and inquire the reasons of their actions; and they out of their human kindness answer me. And, for the duration of four hours I feel no worry of any kind, I forget all my troubles, I stop dreading poverty, and death itself ceases to frighten me.⁶³ And because Dante says that it is not science unless one retains what one has understood, I noted down from these conversations what I believed was essential, and composed a short work *De principatibus*, where I excavate to the best of my power the problems posed by such a subject: what is sovereignty, how many species of it are there, how one acquires it, how one keeps it, how one loses it.⁶⁴

This is a letter that locates secondary historicization (the stripping away of mud and dirt), the return to primary historicization (the dialogue with the dead), and the moment of science, with its 'time for comprehending' and its 'moment for concluding'.⁶⁵

2. But one can also carry out this return to principles in a fashion other than symbolic, by having recourse to the *virtù* of the single citizen. And then it is no longer about leading back, but about establishing or instituting. This is what is foreseen in the chapter cited above, but also by the entire conclusion to *The Prince*, which calls upon Laurent de Medici, or any X, to introduce into the matter of history a form that is proper to it, and to lift the curtain on novelty. Novelty being marked as follows: 'Besides this, we now see here extraordinary, unprecedented signs brought about by God: the sea has opened up; a cloud has shown you the path; the rock has poured water forth; here manna has rained; everything has converged for your greatness. The rest you must do yourself.'⁶⁶ The rest – let us understand historical experimental science, which Laurent will hasten to miss, and whose banner Machiavelli alone brandishes. The scales that made the exile of San Casciano into a solitary victor, and the Prince of the Medicis [48] into the representative of all the setbacks⁶⁷ suffered by

⁶³ TN: The standard English translation has 'I give myself up entirely to them' here; cf. Crick, 'Introduction', *Discourses*, Crick ed., 71. See following note.

⁶⁴ Machiavelli, Letter to Francesco Vettori, [10 December] 1513. TN: What is presented here is a translation that stays close to Regnault's French citation (of a text originally in Italian); for an alternative English translation of the letter, see Roberto Ridolfi, *Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 151-152, cited in Crick's introduction to Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 71.

⁶⁵ TN: For Lacan's distinction between the 'time for comprehending' and the 'moment of concluding', see his 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty', *Ecrits*, 209/171.

⁶⁶ *The Prince*, chapter XXVI [Bull trans., 83].

⁶⁷ In this sense Georges Mounin is right to call Machiavelli an 'unarmed prophet' (Mounin, *Machiavel* [Paris: Seuil, 1958], 202). Mounin's *Machiavelli* does a good job of cleaning-up and leading us back to Machiavelli. Unfortunately, Mounin's thesis that, since he is ignorant of economics (which is true), Machiavelli is neither a precursor nor a founder of Marx's science, seems to us insufficient to contest Machiavelli's materialism when it comes to history, which we have tried to establish. This is because Mounin holds that 'both before and after Machiavelli, there have always been two solutions, equally metaphysical and eternal', namely the compatibility or incompatibility of morality and politics. I think that Machiavelli is *beyond* the debate between these two terms, terms which, if separated, are reconciled, and if reconciled, break apart. The relation between morality and politics is precisely a non-problem for Machiavelli and no doubt a non-problem *tout court*. All the 'baggage' that is dragged along by the name of Machiavellianism is nothing more than the reinscription, within public discourse, of an innovation that has nothing to do with it. Elsewhere, Mounin adds (cf. 224-225) that this opposition, before being philosophical, is to be found first of all in the facts. This is to adopt the realism of 'the thing before the word', of 'the thing without words'. An eternal mirror! One day, some Archimedes of

an Italy that was about to be tamed by the European powers, rests on nothing but the double-edged blade of the return to origins. For if to return to them is to shore up one's power, then victory will go to whoever returns first. But whoever returns has perhaps already been back several times before. Thus, in its great regular Orders, and in the conversion it performs on itself with Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, Machiavelli explains, the Church shores up an old power, one that operates through the confessional, wherein the word is spread that those who govern are good. So the rest that is still to be done is clear: it involves making someone who never passed through the origins to go back to them – a process that will require that this person undo all that has covered them over. *The Prince* has the precise function of developing this second possibility of the return to principles, now confided to the sole *virtù* of the innovator.

* * * * *

Further on in the chapter of the *Discorsi* on origins we read: 'it is as the physicians say, when talking of the human body: *Quod quotidie aggregatur aliquid, quod quandoque indiget curatione* [Every day it absorbs something which from time to time needs treatment].'⁶⁸

The body – whether that of a patient or of the corpus of history – is thus the historicized thing from which, in order to treat it, one must remove what it has secreted, and add whatever will revive it. [49]

Where Descartes' medicine is content (less and less towards the end, it's true) with nature and its mechanical exercise, Machiavelli already perceived origins and retrospection.

If it is a nature, it is no longer an origin, and if it is an origin, it is a historicization. In nature, the one which Grace visits, and in the name of which Descartes proclaims 'let the prince do what he wants, let him pass', Machiavelli already saw the throne of usurpation; there is no throne that is not already usurped, and no nature whose chatter does not seek to justify it and itself.

Off to the side of Descartes and Machiavelli, and off to the side of the question, there are historians of the ideal and of germination. Between Descartes and Machiavelli, there is this misunderstanding: the former's suspension of judgment makes him misunderstand the Discourses that the latter puts forward on the proper names past and present that are inscribed or repeated in the contorted book [*le livre distordu*]. These exemplary proper names⁶⁹ make clear the refusal of subsumptions, which I have termed materialism, and surround themselves with justifications, and it belongs to one of them, 'Machiavelli', inscribed in the margin, to lead them back to their original inscription, who thereby risks reinforcing the trace of the name as much as he risks crossing it out forever. It is a work of dehistoricization, which clears a place for historical science, but remains on its threshold.

For, of a science, there is no historicization but rather a historicity.⁷⁰ [50]

language will write, rather forcefully: 'show me a death without words [*une mort sans phrase*], and I will believe in reality.' But this Archimedes has already come.

⁶⁸ TN: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III:1 [Crick ed.: 386].

⁶⁹ We should refer back to the start of the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx begins his calculations on classes on the basis of substitutions of proper names operated by the revolutions of Cromwell, 1789 and 1848 (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire* [1852], chapter 1). This is how one writes History.

⁷⁰ The concept of which is to be constructed. Cf. Althusser, *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Maspéro, 1965), vol. 2, 58ff.

Part Two: Latent Discourse⁷¹

Let us now move the reader out of the way of the mild delirium that looms before us. In what way will he understand the fact that, while all that can be expected of Descartes is a strategy, nevertheless those who attribute to him a politics '*indigent curatione*' [are needing treatment], i.e. are in need of cure and leading back [*reconduction*]? A cure is what Elisabeth requested from Descartes: 'They promise me that in Germany I will have enough leisure to study it (your method), and I will not bring there any greater treasure, from which I hope to take more satisfaction, than your writings. I hope you will permit me to take the work on the *passions*, even though it was not able to calm those that the last piece of misfortune has excited. It must be that your presence brought the cure to them, since neither your maxims nor my reasoning had been able to' (letter of July 1646).⁷² Cure in the sense that one might take the waters; but what is this 'last piece of misfortune'?

In 1680 Elisabeth died, shrouded in devotion, as an Abbess at the Lutheran monastery of Herford: shrouded from every clear idea, and filled [*assombrie*] with gloom by an 'entourage of people whom melancholic devotion she suffered as a martyrdom'. Had she forgotten the mechanics on the basis of which the man who had left her thirty years previously, had for her dismantled this melancholy?

For *then* [*ensuite*], in 1650, he died, far from her, close to a reigning Queen, and because she was an early-rising Queen [*une Reine matinale*]⁷³: he to whom she had said, 'it must be that your presence brought the cure, since neither your maxims nor my reasoning had been able to.' Her transference onto him of all that the caresses of those who surrounded her, by dint of proliferating, had deprived her – for thirty years, 'keeping all these things in her heart', she would have to apply this transference to her own reason, the only possession [*bien*] which, being the best distributed,⁷⁴ was left to her of a dead man.

For *then*, returning to that year of 1646 when she would come to miss without recourse this presence, did she not hand [51] her cure over to those miraculous fountains he had told her about at The Hague? They would be, these fountains, so many figures, ciphers, landmarks or rings, which would recall her to the past order of reasons, but without being able to take their place, in the philosopher's absence.⁷⁵

This is why, in that letter of 10 December 1646, which is an abridged account of her whole life, the Princess will proceed by leaps and gaps, and by jumping from one subject to another: the whole of her life of exile and her resentment over her usurped throne she would condense in the figure of Machiavelli, and the role of Doctor of Princes she would displace onto Descartes, the philosopher: 'I find that the rule you observe in his preface is false because the author has never known a person who sees clearly all that he sets about doing, as you do, and who by consequence, in private and retired from the confusion of the world, would nevertheless be capable of teaching princes how they should govern, as seems to be the case from what you have written.'⁷⁶ And with this reiterated epistolary transference, she moves on to the

⁷¹ First read the four letters that follow [i.e. the letters of Descartes and Elisabeth published as CpA 6.3].

⁷² TN: *Correspondence*, AT 4: 449; CpA 6.3:52.

⁷³ TN: This is a reference to the suggestion that Descartes' death of pneumonia, in Stockholm in February 1650, might have been brought on by his obligation to teach his employer Queen Christina early in the morning.

⁷⁴ TN: an echo of the famous opening of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*: '*Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée*'.

⁷⁵ TN: '*Ce seraient, ces fontaines, comme autant de chiffres, de jalons, d'anneaux qui la rappelleraient à l'ordre des raisons passé, mais n'en pourraient tenir lieu, le philosophe vacant.*'

⁷⁶ TN: *Correspondence*, 10 October 1646, 146.

fountain at The Hague, which, in the remainder of the letter (of 10 October 1646) causes her reason to wobble, despite appearances: this clear and distinct water is reputed for its purgative properties, but it also a white water, mixed with milk, 'said to be refreshing', which will triumph over her on her last day. What weight would tip the scales to the side of clarity? How to settle the equivocation? Everything here, even the cipher or coded message [*chiffre*] she evokes at the end, attests to her need to know more about her history.⁷⁷

And now here he is, who was to meet her arbitrary message with an arbitrary response, and who, subjecting her demands to secondary historicization, takes up her own weapon against Machiavelli, to accuse him of improperly generalizing from examples (Cesare Borgia). Then, reinforcing in his response the hiatus of a sudden change of subject with an 'also' that lays it bare ('Your Highness has also noted very well the secret of the miraculous fountain' [November, 1646]), he will take up the said Fountain and invent, regarding it, a rapid and mechanical alchemy. The strangest thing about this letter is that he rivals her credulity, since he produces on this occasion a text so out of the ordinary that Martial Gueroult couldn't resist citing it in a brief biography of Descartes: 'I even dare to think that interior joy has some secret power to make Fortune more favourable.'⁷⁸

Does this invitation to make do without him, all reason drained [*toute raison bue*], and to take her chances at the roulette of Fortune, not resolve a more secret drama? Definitely – [it resolves] the misunderstanding between Descartes and Machiavelli, through Elisabeth's [52] intervention, wheeling around the *Discourses* of the two Others. Even more definitely, [it refers to] the crime that was the occasion for her inviting Descartes to read Machiavelli, and which she calls 'our last piece of misfortune' in the July letter. As Baillet tells us, 'at the time a rumour spread that a very dark act had been perpetrated on the advice of Princess Elisabeth.' This dark act was the murder by Philippe, her brother, of [François] de l'Espinay for having 'cajoled' their sister Louise: 'Princess Elisabeth, her elder sister, who is a virtuous girl, who is so well educated and who is more shapely than her sister, cannot endure the fact that the Queen her mother sees in a good light a man (l'Espinay) who had made such a great affront to their house. She incited her brothers against him; [...] the youngest of them, named Philippe, harboured the deepest resentment of this injury, and one evening, near the place in The Hague where one went out for a walk, he attacked Espinay.'⁷⁹ Another day, Louise's lover was killed in Philippe's presence. Elisabeth and Philippe were then driven away from Holland by their mother.

Now, if a repressed Machiavelli returns to Elisabeth at this moment, was this not so that she could reread in him the authorization to get rid of scoundrels, and to put in her brother's hands the task of avenging less their sister's liaison than the flippancy of the Queen of Bohemia (who was well pleased, so the story goes, that her daughter Louise had been enjoying herself), their mother, who was undeserving of the throne, and so to make of her brother a new Prince, an Orestes who might exorcise [*conjurât*] the crucial image of her dethroned Father?

But the fountains of science were not to flow again for her Highness, who could do no more than bequeath her House to speculative philosophy, and her

⁷⁷ TN: 'Il n'est pas jusqu'à ce chiffre allégué dans la fin qui ne marque sa demande à en savoir plus long sur son histoire.' This may be an echo of the reference to a secret code or cipher in Elisabeth's letter of 10 October 1646, AT 4: 542; CpA 6.3:59.

⁷⁸ Descartes, letter of November 1646, cited by Martial Gueroult in the *Dictionnaire des auteurs* (Laffont: Bompiani, 1964); the rest of the letter, on the play of chance, should also be read. TN: Regnault writes 'joie extérieur' instead of 'joie intérieure', as the letter itself has it; the passage is printed correctly at CpA 6.3:60.

⁷⁹ Tallement des Réaux, *Historiettes*, and AT 4: 450.

Oedipus to the cloister. The pot of history would have to simmer some more, cooked by Freud with his cure, and Marx with his mandrake.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ TN: '*Il faudrait qu'il en cuisât encore à l'Histoire, Freud de sa cure, Marx de sa mandragore.*' This may be a reference to Machiavelli's play *La Mandragola* [*The Mandrake*], published in 1524.