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Machiavelli's Power: A 500-Year Legacy of Political Struggles

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The year 2027 marks the 500th anniversary of the death of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), a thinker whose influence has profoundly shaped the trajectory of Western political and philosophical thought. Machiavelli's work marked a radical departure from the dominant intellectual traditions of his time. Whereas medieval political philosophy was largely grounded in theological frameworks and normative ideals—often centered on divine order, natural law, and Aristotelian virtue—Machiavelli introduced a strikingly secular and realist perspective. Moreover, in *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*, he redefined political agency by emphasizing empirical observation, “effective truth”, historical contingency, the strategic use of power, but also the fundamental role of the people for durable power.

In doing so, rather than prescribing how rulers ought to behave in accordance with moral or religious ideals, Machiavelli sought to understand how power is acquired, exercised, and maintained. His attention to *fortuna* and *virtù* reflected an unprecedented effort to theorize political life in terms of human initiative and worldly circumstances, rather than metaphysical principles.

This innovation not only disrupted long-standing assumptions about the relationship between ethics and politics but also laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in modern political thought. Machiavelli may be regarded as one of the first thinkers to articulate a vision of politics as an autonomous sphere, governed by its own logic and irreducible to moral or theological norms. In this way, one should recognize that his work anticipated key elements of modern political realism, influenced Enlightenment thinkers, who were grappling with questions of republicanism and sovereignty. Moreover, Machiavelli continues to influence contemporary debates on power, statecraft, and institutional design. By challenging the traditional synthesis of virtue and governance, he opened a new philosophical tradition that helps us understand the dynamics of modern politics.

As a matter of fact, Machiavelli's provocative insights did not go unnoticed by subsequent generations of philosophers across Europe. From the French moralists to Enlightenment thinkers, crossing through the Italian republican tradition, the German Idealists, and key figures in the British philosophical canon, his work provoked both admiration and criticism. While, in France, Rousseau famously reinterpreted Machiavelli not as a teacher of tyranny but as a covert defender of republican liberty, in Italy, his legacy informed debates on civic virtue and national identity, especially during the *Risorgimento*. Also, in the context of German Idealism, philosophers such as Hegel and Fichte engaged deeply with the main themes of Machiavelli's thought—such as state power, historical contingency, and the autonomy of political life. In the English-speaking world, Thomas Hobbes echoed certain Machiavellian concerns in his account of sovereign authority and the role of fear in maintaining political order, while later figures like Edmund Burke, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill approached the problems of governance, utility, and institutional stability in ways that, even when implicitly, responded to a Machiavellian framework. It is clear that, across these diverse

traditions, Machiavelli's treatment of conflict, political necessity, and the mechanics of power became a persistent point of reference—both admired and criticized but never ignored.

In this way, although Machiavelli predates the formal articulation of social contract theory, his reflections on the foundation and maintenance of political power raise questions that would become central to later thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Unlike contractualists, he does not posit a consensual origin of political authority: he focuses, instead, on the effective exercise of power. In doing so, the necessity of founding acts, and the management of conflict appear as constitutive elements of the political order. This perspective offered fertile ground for rethinking the premises of the social contract tradition, especially regarding the role of coercion, contingency, and historical circumstance in the legitimacy of political institutions.

Moreover, Machiavelli remains a central figure in the work of several influential contemporary scholars. Quentin Skinner, for instance, has explored Machiavelli's contributions to the republican tradition, emphasizing his role in redefining political liberty and civic virtue. And John Pocock, in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), traced the lasting impact of Machiavelli's philosophy on the development of Atlantic republicanism and the crises of political authority. While Maurizio Viroli has offered a powerful reinterpretation of Machiavelli as a moral and patriotic thinker, reclaiming his republican commitments against the caricature of pure cynicism, Miguel Vatter has engaged Machiavelli within the broader horizon of biopolitics and post-foundational political theory, especially in dialogue with Foucault. In his book *Le travail de l'œuvre Machiavel* (1972), Claude Lefort proposed an interpretation of Machiavelli as a thinker of radical democracy and freedom. For his part, Louis Althusser made Machiavelli a thinker of the present of political reality who managed not to evade it to the detriment of theory. Within contemporary analytic philosophy, Philip Pettit proposed situating Machiavelli in the genealogy of the republican ideal of freedom as non-domination. Still within this context of a historical approach, Paul Rahe has, in turn, provided a more critical reading, situating Machiavelli as a revolutionary figure who challenged classical and Christian political norms in the name of a new, secular realism.

As Machiavelli famously states in his *Discourses on Livy*, “since all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall.”¹ Echoing like a Heraclitean philosophy, this crucial insight underscores the dynamism and volatility inherent in political life. One understands thus how the power is always subject to flux, crises, and external forces: a theme that resonates deeply in the contemporary world. In fact, even today, Political entities, social structures, and even ideologies are in constant transition, shaped by unforeseen events—be it through military conflicts, economic shifts, or technological revolutions. Are we not witnessing, now, the unfolding of a global order in perpetual motion?

In the face of today's complex and volatile geopolitical landscape, Machiavelli's thought emerges with renewed urgency. From the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, to intensifying economic rivalries—such as the strategic competition between the United States and China—the exercise of power increasingly reveals itself as a domain marked by contingency, conflict, and strategic calculation. In a world still reeling from the disruptions of a global pandemic, and now confronting mounting ecological crises, mass migration, and the erosion of stable political consensus, Machiavelli's insistence on the fragility of order and the necessity of prudential judgment seems more relevant than ever. As the global political landscape continues to shift under the pressure of crises, Machiavelli's reflections on power, strategy, and the interplay of *fortune* and *virtù* remain crucial to understanding the forces that shape contemporary society.

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 23 (I 7).

Moreover, the rise, especially in the West, of populist and authoritarian movements, which often embrace a Machiavellian pragmatism, demonstrates how political leaders today use power, control of information, and emotional manipulation to secure their grip on authority. The rise of digital disinformation, the manipulation of perception, and the capacity to control societies through advanced surveillance technologies further echoes Machiavelli's insight into the theatrical and constructed nature of political legitimacy. In this digital age, where social media and big data allow unprecedented influence over public opinion and individual behavior, Machiavelli's work offers critical reflections on the ways to welcome the specificity of popular power into the political game. In fact, far from being a relic of Renaissance statecraft, Machiavelli provides conceptual tools for understanding a world in which ethics, power, and survival are deeply entangled, and where the ability to respond effectively to fortuna remains the mark of political *virtù*.

From this standpoint, Machiavelli's thought continues to challenge the illusion of stability in human affairs and emphasizes the need for political actors to remain vigilant, adaptable, and pragmatic. The idea that nothing is ever fixed in human affairs not only speaks to the uncertainty of the present moment but also invites us to reconsider the role of leaders, institutions, and citizens in a world where the flux of history seems ever more pronounced.

In this context, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Machiavelli's death, the *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* invites scholars in the field to submit original papers that engage with the themes outlined above. We welcome contributions that explore Machiavelli's philosophical influence across different historical periods, intellectual traditions, and contemporary political thought. The deadline for submission is June 2026. We welcome submissions that critically engage with Machiavelli's legacy and its contemporary relevance. Suggested topics are listed below to guide prospective contributors:

- Historical Studies on Machiavelli's Writings: Context, Interpretation, and Legacy
- Machiavelli and the Foundations of Political Realism
- Machiavelli and the Philosophy of History
- Potentials of Machiavelli's thought to resist its reduction to Machiavellianism
- *Fortuna* and *Virtù*: The Dynamics of Power in Machiavelli's Thought
- Machiavelli and the Ethics of Power
- The Machiavellian Legacy in Republicanism and Democracy
- Machiavelli and the Social Contract Tradition
- Machiavelli's Influence on Contemporary Political Philosophy
- Machiavelli, radical thinker of democracy and conflict
- Machiavelli and popular sovereignty
- Leadership, Power, and Governance Today
- Machiavelli and the Digital Age: Politics in the Era of Information Warfare

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