

“Machiavelli and the Modern Left”

Niccolò Machiavelli, the Renaissance author best known for *The Prince*, is frequently regarded as a consummate cynic. Yet he has been not only a provocation but an inspiration throughout the subsequent history of political thought. This was true for the entire twentieth century, which witnessed an ever-growing interest in the Florentine thinker among historians and philosophers alike. One of the most surprising dimensions of this modern engagement with Machiavelli is surely his recurring presence as figure and motif within left-wing philosophical discourse. In light of the failure of the twentieth-century's revolutionary experiments, as well as its own entanglements with those experiments, how could radical theory understand its past and imagine its future? What vision could supplant the dimming of utopia? Such questions have frequently led recent theorists into melancholic resignation, but they have also provoked innovative and rigorous attempts to rethink the project of radical politics as radical democracy. How is it that Machiavelli, a thinker indelibly associated with the cynical and amoral manipulation of politics, could become an inspiration for theorists of a robust democratic life? This course will examine this curious history of influence and transformation. Starting with an examination of key texts by Machiavelli himself, we will then trace his reception in European intellectual history, focusing upon the twentieth century. Among authors we will consider will be Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, John McCormick, and Antonio Negri.