Abstract: This paper tries to shift the contrast of debates between 'scholasticii' and 'politici' away from conceptualizing it in terms of theology vs. rationalism, since in a way both share a modern, rationalist outlook: It is argued that the practice of politics is recognized by both Machiavelli and his scholastic counterpart Girolamo Savonarola as deeply characterised by prudential and "realist" considerations. The main difference seems to be the conceptualizing of one's own historical situation, of the eventual success of one's own practice and of societal development in terms either of a teleological framework or of radical contingency. Put this way, the same arguments that allow Machiavelli to move away from the former framework then cast doubts also on the possibilities of a rational political theory, in the sense of transparent and certain knowledge and understanding.

The paper draws on Claude Lefort's interpretation of Machiavelli in order to highlight a radically immanentist perspective in the 'Principe'. The Machiavellian approach involves a distinct methodological perspective on politics, on power, and on history that is contrasted with a rationalist paradigm that is prominent in political theory, but has been sharply criticized already by Machiavelli himself.

Keywords: Modernity, Realism, Immanence, Teleology, Political Theory, Political Theology, Second Scholasticism, Girolamo Savonarola, History of Social Sciences, History of Political Thought, the Political, the Social, the Imaginary.

1. Introduction
Machiavelli’s arguably a-moral theory – the fact that he suggests a political leader to override moral concerns when it is necessary for the security of either the commonwealth, the state or just his personal rule – is taken to be a first important step in the early modern realization of a proper logic of politics. In this sense, it is poised against more traditional theories that would submit the behaviour of a political leader to an ethics based on the Christian virtues like benevolence, liberality, justice, and faith. In fact, the discussion of these virtues takes a central place in the Principe, and for Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli thereby quite consciously repudiates a very specific discourse, namely a neo-Roman civic republicanism. The point of Machiavelli’s manoeuvre seems to be the establishment of an ethics of statecraft that is independent of individual morals. But besides humanist or republican treatises on the virtuous prince in his quest for glory and excellence, another prominent genre in which theories of political rule had been formulated, is the writings of scholastic authors. In these writings, matters of individual decisions and behaviour would be integrated with larger, more systematic theories of the nature and purpose of political rule, of law and justice in general, of the purpose of the commonwealth, the origins of political authority etc. And they would be connected to reflections on how the whole natural and supernatural universe as a whole had been created, what order, structure and purpose can be seen in it. Thomas Aquinas’s De regno ad regem Cypri was certainly not the first work in this genre, but, along with the more elaborate Aristotelian framework in his Summa Theologiae, and along with Giles of Rome’s De regimine principum, it helped define the genre. These scholastic authors shared a common, Aristotelian idea about how politics made sense only in the

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1 This is supposed to mean something quite different from what J.G.A. Pocock and others have described as civic humanism, a theory that, according to Skinner, Machiavelli along with many contemporaries had abandoned for good anyway. This debate has not been concluded; cf. e.g. J.G.A. POCOCK, The Machiavellian Moment, Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1975; Q. SKINNER, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997, chap. 4–6., esp. pp. 128–138; M. GEUNA, Skinner: pre-humanist rhetorical culture and Machiavelli, in: (edd.) A. Brett et al., Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006, pp. 50–72.

2 This book was actually not completed by Thomas Aquinas himself, but by a pupil of his, Ptolemy of Lucca. The combined work was known as De regimine principum and has been attributed for a long time to Thomas alone.
context of a relation of individual ethics to life in a community, even of an eschatological endeavour and, more importantly for the present purpose, they shared an idea of how the *science and knowledge* of politics was constituted and related to other branches of knowledge. Their teleological perspective led these authors to find the essence of politics in its being a means of achieving a non-political goal, peace and ultimately beatitude, the achievability of which was deposited with and in human nature. A striking contrast to these traditional approaches lies in the *Principe’s* focus on the question «by which means political rule can be achieved and conserved». But surely this question did not suddenly fall out of the blue sky on Machiavelli’s desk and we should be more careful in investigating how it paralleled and diverged from its more immediate predecessors. While this has been done to some extent for the relation between Machiavelli and the civic humanists and republicans, which I am bypassing completely here, I want to get started by discussing a few things that are remarkable in the comparison between Machiavelli and Girolamo Savonarola.

**II. Girolamo Savonarola**

The fate of Girolamo Savonarola is one of Machiavelli’s favourite examples for the illustration of his teachings. For Machiavelli, it is an example of very recent time – Savonarola had been burnt on the stake only in 1498, the very year that Machiavelli took the office of second chancellor of the Florentine Republic – and it is an example where the relation of abstract ideas, ethical demands, and political practice is evidently crucial. Backed with warnings, visions and apocalyptic prophecies about an imminent divine scourge, Savonarola had urged the Florentine people to repent and reform themselves just as well as their republic and its institutions. Political events facilitated his rise, such as the expedition of Charles VIII of France into Italy, who in 1495 stood at the gates of Florence and was understood to be the fulfilment of Savonarola’s gloomy prophecies. When Piero de’ Medici fled from Florence, this left Savonarola as the city’s leading public figure. In this role, he successfully inspired legal initiatives to rid the city of all sorts of immoral behaviour, to reform the city’s constitution and to prevent a return to (Medicean) tyranny. While in many discussions of renaissance politics, Savonarola is represented as a millenarian preacher with an over-demanding ethical programme and bigoted followers, we do well to take note of his 1498 treatise *Circa il reggimento e governo della città di Firenze*. This was clearly inspired by Aquinas’s and Ptolemy’s *De regimine principum* and sought, rather soberly, to develop arguments of the older work in the specific Florentine context of his days. Suggesting more than just an application of abstract principles inherited from scholastic authorities to the concrete case of Florence, Savonarola sought to ground the force of his arguments in their *historical plausibility*. While he begins rather classically with a derivation of political power from man’s God-given nature, with the

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3 This orientation of man and of politics towards a transcendent goal is of course an idealization – introduced here for the purpose of marking a desire of distinction on Machiavelli’s part – which was adopted only to a certain extent by the respective authors. Among the more "immanentist" authors, Marsilius of Padua seems to stand out, with a «secular» conception of political order and a focus on efficient causality that takes a significant distance from an Aristotelian approach and is in interesting ways analogous to Machiavelli’s arguments. Cf. V. SYROS, *Die Rezeption der aristotelischen politischen Philosophie bei Marsilius von Padua*, Leiden, Brill, 2007-2008; for explicit comparisons between Marsilius and Machiavelli, see e.g. B. BAYONA AZNAR, *Marsilio de Padua y Maquiavelo: una lectura comparada*, in: *Foro Interno* 7 (2007), pp. 11–34; J.C. GARCIA, *Conflito, Democracia e o Renascimento Italiano: Marsílio e Maquiavel*, in: *Revista da Seção Judiciária do Rio de Janeiro* 19/35 (2012), pp. 205–212.


5 For this aspect, cf. *supra*, note 1.

6 In fact, the "Savonarolan" republican constitution survived until 1512, when the Spanish restored the Medicean rule (and drove Machiavelli out of office, too).

classical distinction of different types of government and with the remark that, «absolutely speaking, [... the government] of a king is best»⁸, in the particular case of Florence, a republican government is best. And the reason for this is not a general issue like human corruptibility, which attaches the greater risk to monarchical government, but rather historical experience: Savonarola insists that the «nature of the people»⁹ must be considered. Then one supposedly finds that the Italian people can hardly support monarchical rule because of their ingenious and hot-blooded nature, which is confirmed by the historical observation that no monarchical government could ever unite large parts of Italy for a long time¹⁰. And these character traits are especially prominent in the Florentine people. But it is not only the observations of the theoretician that find a mere confirmation in historical experience; the mentioned nature itself is constituted historically, «custom is a second nature»¹¹. After which Savonarola spends quite some effort to explain how the ancient custom of Governo Civile in Florence has been taken on and impregnated the minds of the citizenry so as to make the Governo Civile the form of government that is «naturally» adequate to Florence. In the conclusion of this part of his treatise, Savonarola gives yet another spin to the argument with a demonstration that the Florentine Governo Civile and the efforts to maintain it are under God’s blessing and that its maintenance against all odds can be explained only by His active intervention. In this way, the historical considerations are crucial elements in an argument that starts traditionally – with human nature and the purpose of political power – and ends in a political theology: in Florence, the Governo Civile is divinely ordained. The central second part of the treatise consists of an extensive (almost 30 pages) exhortation concerning the vices and the wicked behaviour of the tyrant and the bad consequences it has for the city, and again especially for the city of Florence. If it weren’t for the subsequent publications of Machiavelli, one would certainly find good reasons in this part to give credit to Savonarola as an exceptionally sensitive and realistic observer – he describes in detail the schemes and stratagems that rulers use (and had in fact used in Florence in recent times) in order to attain their goals. The tyrant conceals how, when, and by whom decisions are made, so that his subjects can never imagine to understand politics; he cultivates disagreement among the citizenry in order to «divide and conquer»; he deals rewards and restrictions, so that excellent men cannot rise, while those who do rise are mediocre and depend on him; he commands an army of informers and uses various strategies to insinuate them into the citizen’s private affairs, while openly interfering with and monopolizing the city’s public affairs; he subtly subverts the laws and installs arbitrary rule; he honours sycophants, extorts presents, etc. And every time he seems to promote his virtue or the public good, it is just a sham meant only to enhance his public image¹².

⁹ «[L]a natura del popolo» (Ibid., p. 16).
¹⁰ «[C]ome si è visto sempre nell’Italia, la quale sappiamo per la esperienza dei tempi passati insino al presente, che non ha mai potuto durare sotto il reggimento di un Principe. Anzi vediamo che essendo piccola provincia, è divisa quasi in tanti Principi quanto sono le città, le quali non stanno quasi mai in pace» (Ibid., tratt. I, cap. III, p. 18), [my emphasis]. Cf. also p. 21: «E questo molto meglio dichiara l’esperienza, che è maestra delle arti».
¹¹ «[L]a consuetudine è un’altra natura» (ibid., p. 19). This is actually a thought which already appears already in Thomas Aquinas’ De regno.

¹² On Savonarola and the relation Machiavelli-Savonarola, see also M.L. COLISH, Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment, in: Journal of the History of Ideas 60/4, 1999, p. 597-616; L. Polizzotto, The elect nation. The Savonarolan movement in Florence 1494-1545, Oxford, Clarendon, 1994; A. MCQUEEN, Politics in Apocalyptic Times. Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment, forthcoming. It is worthwhile to note that, just as with assessments of Machiavelli’s own religious beliefs, there is hardly a scholarly consent on his attitude towards Savonarola – was it harshly critical, was it rather ambiguous or was he even in some respects heir to Savonarola’s approach? Typically, these texts emphasize the apocalyptic character of Savonarola’s sermons more than the present investigation. But while the contrast between Savonarolas’s history as salvation history and Machiavelli’s history as oscillation between rule and contingency confirms the present argument (cf. below, IIIc), I prefer to focus on the ethical (in contrast to: political) character of his approach first.
But two points remain somewhat underexposed: First, Savonarola is not entirely clear about the reasons and motives that the prince pursues – is it immediately pride, lust and greed, and avarice, or is it that the Prince above all wishes to secure his status? And second, while he depicts in detail an impressive repertoire of tricks, he does not explain on account of which forces each trick operates and proves to be successful and how they converge to one common movement. One important common denominator of those strategies is obviously the attempt to forestall the establishment of processes and associations of vital and well-informed public political deliberation, another one is the active manipulation of the discrepancy between appearance and reality. But these are not subjects that Savonarola would recognize and discuss explicitly. By contrast, he dedicates an extra chapter to how the tyrant stands opposed above all to Christian life: «There is nothing more odious to the tyrant than the service of Christ and the Christian life, for it is directly his opposite, and one opposite seeks to dispel the other one».

In fact, the third part of the treatise explains how to design republican institutions in Florence and how the Florentine citizens should behave in order to prevent a tyrant from taking control over the city. Savonarola describes the institution of a Great Council and how it could be kept operative. And since, on Savonarola’s initiative, Florence already had such an institution, he finally describes how the citizens should behave in order to perfect it, and what benefits they can expect from such behaviour and perfection. The gist of the argument is that, if the citizens follow the virtues of Christian piety, of devotion to the common good, of concord, and of justice, in good confidence that it was God himself who has given them their form of government, then God is assuredly going to lead them to the perfection of their government, to reward them with spiritual and temporal prosperity, and to expand their rule and empire. Living according to the mentioned virtues and convictions, they can and must rely on God illuminating their conventions and councils and sending them servants with special advice when it comes to more arcane issues. In other words, trying to live in piety, concord and justice, the citizens can and should rely on God providing Florence with good decisions, with prosperity and with peace and security. Some of the more decisive political developments and events are beyond intentional human planning anyway, especially with regards to external security: «And because sometimes someone makes himself a tyrant by force of arms, and you cannot resist force with reason, we cannot give further instructions for this case». Savonarola thus emphasizes both human free will and the dependency on divine support and intervention. As is well-known, when Pope Alexander VI finally and decidedly confronted Savonarola, when he excommunicated him and used his considerable power to pressure the Florentine government, the preacher failed to mobilize the popular support he had gained against this adversary. His outspoken reliance on divine backing even turned directly against him when, in order to prompt a divine miraculous “sign”, he was tried by ordeal and burned at the stake. It turned out that the people had supported him not for his or even its own sake, but for the relation he was thought to entertain with a transcendental power, and when he was unable to substantiate his claim of such a relation, the disappointment was so much the griever and turned against him. For Machiavelli, Savonarola’s
complex theoretical rationale and its political context was well-known and of great influence. It provided him with several points on which to attach his own discourse. Of these, we will discuss in turn how Machiavelli transformed Savonarola’s idea of reliance on Divine intervention into his own (dual) concept of fortuna and virtù, how he pushed Savonarola’s analysis of stratagems beyond the discussion of the tyrant’s wickedness, and the role he assigns to historical experience.

III. Niccolò Machiavelli

IIIa) (Reliance on) divine intervention and "virtù"/"fortuna"

For Machiavelli, Savonarola figures as a "prophet" unable to translate his merits and his moral authority to political force. While political power and success is based on popular support, and while Savonarola is a prime example of a leader grounding his authority on such popular support, it is not enough to simply have such support, not enough merely to be liked; this needs to be mobilised, translated, channelled into social and political force, and taken quite some way into concrete programmes and actions. Not assuming these tasks and rather choosing to depend on divine intervention and on altogether external circumstances, Savonarola could not but perish. Actually Machiavelli does not at all dispute the merits that Savonarola had earned by improving the citizens’ morals, fighting against tyranny and corruption, and reforming Florentine institutions. Still, Savonarola’s problem was that he did not manage to provide for a forceful support for himself. As we have seen, he had even described the very mechanisms that rulers have often used to strengthen their position of power – only he declined from making any use of them for the sake of his status or for the sake of the stability of the republican regime he helped to found. Savonarola has apparently failed to recognize to what extent these mechanisms are related more to the establishment of public authority in general than to the particular wicked goals and designs of a tyrannical ruler. Consider what he had to offer to more honest citizens and politicians in place of such mechanisms: In the absence of a reliable connection between intentions, actions, and their consequences, a reliance on favourable divine intervention, and a virtue ethics that is meant to deserve and invite such intervention.

Commentators have pointed out that Savonarola and Machiavelli seem to agree in their assessment of the limited purview of human intentional action, with the small difference that the latter replaced God with fortuna. But this overlooks three crucial things: First, that fortune is far less well-intentioned than God; to the contrary, the point is rather that, however virtuous a person may be, the success of his actions depends on blind and fickle contingency. Second, that political virtù also consists in never surrendering to contingency, in trying to act while taking the uncontrollability and unpredictability of politics into account. The virtuous prince eventually succeeds in restraining fortune, which is like a river, by making provisions, like building dams and levees. And it seems he can even enhance his chances by impetuousness, i.e. by refraining from calculating, but going forward with resolute action. And third, Machiavelli unambiguously explains that fortuna is not really a transcendent power or even a subject after all, but an illustrative device meant to clarify the unpredictability of the contexts of political action and at the same time their recognisable responsiveness to determinate action. What this illustrative device effectively represents is the set of historical circumstances, the respective constellation of social and political powers, of armed forces, of ideas and convictions. These determine the options an agent has and the success his actions meet; it is their complexities and ambiguities, not their transcendence, that withdraws them from the realm of reliable calculation and intentional planning. The challenge for the political practitioner as well as for the theorist is then to «understand» the options that lie in this set of circumstances, its proper momentum and its constraints.

17 A ruler who newly came into power and does not neglect his duties (understood in a Machiavellian sense), can earn double glory, according to Machiavelli: «First, for having laid the foundation of a new rule; and then because he consolidated and honoured it by good laws, a good military, and good examples» (MACHIAVELLI, Principe, cap. XXIV...). Savonarola obviously failed in establishing a good military, and possibly also in giving good examples (of political art and prudence).


on timing – without being able to clearly and distinctly grasp all those conditions in their various possible meanings, in their varying degrees of determination and in their latent mutual dependency. *Virtù* is the capacity to see the meaning(s) implicit in the respective constellation and to act so as to meet them halfway. In order to understand those contexts and the impact that (one’s own) actions can have, Machiavelli shows according to which logic they typically operate. He explains that he is interested in the *verità effettuale*, in the efficient causes that are susceptible of determining political developments, and he contrasts these with the ineffective causes presumed by Savonarola and others.

**IIIb) Wicked scheming and the management of appearances**

Think of Machiavelli as taking a stand on the question of effective forces in his description of how ecclesiastical principalities, i.e. how the Church state manages political power. At first glance, Machiavelli seems to chime in with the Church’s claims which explain a special character of this commonwealth: Founded precisely on divine intervention and providence, on spiritual union and sacramental authority, it stands apart from normal, secular commonwealths (in a certain way, it is the prime example of a Savonarolan commonwealth guided, protected and developed by God himself). Hence, it need not obey the otherwise universal laws and imperative of politics:

> Costoro soli hanno stati, e non li defendano; sudditi, e non li governano: e li stati, per essere indifesi, non sono loro tolto; e li sudditi, per non essere governati, non se ne curano, né pensano né possono alienarsi da loro. Solo adunque questi principati sono sicuri e felici. [These are the only princes that have states without the necessity of defending them, and subjects without governing them; and their states, though undefended, are not taken from them, whilst their subjects are indifferent to the fact that they are not governed, and have no thought of the possibility of alienating themselves from their princes. These ecclesiastical principalities, then, are the only ones that are secure and happy.]

However, as he continues to describe the marvellous development that the ecclesiastical state has taken with Alexander VI, it becomes clear that, in the eyes of Machiavelli, this picture of a transcendentally blessed commonwealth must not be trusted. It is simply not the special nature of the ecclesiastical commonwealth that is at the roots of those developments, but an exceptionally apt leader, Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia. It was his clever politics – his keeping the Roman grandi, the Colonna and Orsini, in check, his elimination of Savonarola, his changing of alliances with and against the French, his strategic appointments of cardinals and the diplomatic and military missions on which he sent his son, Cesare Borgia – that has produced the immense growth of power of the Church

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21 The sketch of this community seems to evoke first of all the Church as the community of believers, united as the one mystical body of Christ (cf. e.g. Rom 12:5) with Christ as its head. And with regard to this body, the spiritual authority of the Church was not very controversial in catholic theology. The most common story suggested that its foundation was on the one hand the giving of the keys to the heavens to Peter by Christ himself (Mt 16:19), and on the other hand the apostolic succession which continued and perpetuated the sanctified character of ecclesiastical government through episcopal ordination (e.g. Acts 6:5-7). Now, precisely in Savonarola’s sermons and in the apocalyptic mindset popular in the Florence of those days, the spiritual destiny and stewardship of Florence was closely coupled with its temporal development and customs. At least for this reason, if not in a more general perspective, Machiavelli played on the delicate relation between this mystical body / spiritual authority and the Church’s temporal authority over the papal states, which was neither meant to be infallible nor of an uncontroversial genealogy. Cf. e.g. P. PARTNER, *The Lands of St. Peter. The Papal State in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1972 and P. PRODI, *The Papal Prince: One Body and Two Souls: the Papal Monarchy in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982; cf. also again COLISH, *Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment*.

state. Over the course of Machiavelli’s treatment of these developments, it becomes clear that they can be analysed in purely secular terms and that such an analysis does not lack in explanatory force at any point. In the extraordinary chapter on the ecclesiastical principalities, Machiavelli in the end shows how these states can be analysed just like any other, and how in fact they are states just like any other. I want to illustrate the general direction this analysis takes by a further comparison to traditional scholastic discourse. While the suggestions in Machiavelli’s Principe are often very original and at any rate not just inherited from scholastic theories, the issues he touches have frequently been debated in such theories for a long time already. Consider the case of the classical «super-virtue» justice. Machiavelli mentions justice among the possible virtues of a prince, but he completely sidesteps questions of the meaning and content of justice. And while Savonarola had already focussed rather on the effects and consequences of just behaviour for the commonwealth, Machiavelli analyses it even more «externally»: He reflects on the consequences of the mere appearance of just behaviour in the public sphere. And, for justice as for the other virtues, this «external» analysis is almost all there is to them – Machiavelli seems intent on saying that, as far as politics is concerned, the very truth of those virtues is to be found in how the respective behaviour appears to the public. Similarly, in all issues the Principe seems to adopt the perspective of the ruler, but usually includes reflections on how he appears to his subjects as a person and as an institution. After all, apart from him being and aiming to remain ruler, there is little question about his motives and interests, his personality and character traits, his ethical life or even his eventual salvation. For Machiavelli, being a ruler or, more generally, to act politically means to try and manage appearances so that one can calculate as far as possible the perceptions of the citizens and play with their desires. Claude Lefort has expended considerable effort to describe how Machiavelli all over the place thus analyses a distinct, «imaginary» level of political phenomena. Herein lies a more subtle contrast to Savonarola: Whereas the latter emphasizes that the root of evil lies in a prince’s worry about his reputation, Machiavelli points out that this caring for it may very well be his principal task. In addition to actual arms and the possible reliance on violence, the prince must learn how to play on expectations and beliefs, he must be in command of artifice and trickery, as Machiavelli illustrates with the prominent metaphor of the lion and the fox. However, Machiavelli’s characteristic approach goes so far as to ruin the idea of "true” intentions, motives and convictions that would somehow "lie behind" the appearances. Insofar as these exist at all (and even if they exist, to a large extent they are certainly already shaped and informed themselves by what is merely apparent), they have no bearing on what actually happens and how it should be judged. Finally, it must be said that the ruler cannot be thought of as a subject that would be constituted independently of the desires and perceptions of his subjects, able to objectively assess them, to predict their behaviour and to calculate the effects of his own actions with reliable certainty. He must be wary of falling himself for this image of an instance with a more universal vocation, which he yet has to foster. In fact, this is one of the occasions where Machiavelli ponders the motives and aspirations of the prince: in order to demote them to second rank and to heteronomy – they have to be put into practice with considerable reflexive moderation and long-term considerations. At any rate, let us keep in mind that, while the forces at play elude certain knowledge, they are certainly not transcendent forces in the sense of either divine or structural norms or interventions.

IIIc) Historical experience
The absence of a concern with the purpose of political society is far more than a coincidental neglect on Machiavelli’s part that could very well be remedied in a more extensive and complete account. His disregard for the question of a subject which possessed the powers to know about and govern the development of human society is countered by a discussion which puts an emancipated human history

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23 Justice is one of the objectives that should organize civic behaviour also according to Savonarola. Cf. G. Savonarola, Trattato del reggimento ..., tratt. III, cap. II, (ed.) Silvestri, p. 62sq. Another telling topic could be the role of peace in the different discourses.


25 Cf. Machiavelli, Principe, cap. XVIII, (ed.) Martelli, p.???.

26 Cf. Ibid., capp. XVI sq and XXI, pp. ???
in its place. In history, men shape their societies, provide them with meaning and orientation; and from history any knowledge of society must be gained, be it for theoretical or for practical purposes. But at the same time there is no history "as such", as a coherent, substantial and universal entity that would unfold over time, ensuring that events follow some logic or order, or make sense. There is only that which happens and which could, at any time, happen otherwise; there is only the respective history of the particular context at hand (which can hardly be limited and circumscribed precisely, however). Both in the Principe and in the Discorsi, historical examples illustrate a logic which seems to govern political dynamics. And yet, at a close reading, the same discussion of historical examples reveals that it is not really a «logic» that is at work in politics. The laws of political developments are not really laws at all, and e.g. the same behavior in similar contexts by different persons might meet different success. After all, is not one of the points of Machiavelli’s discussion of Cesare Borgia that for all his political ability, and although he did everything right, yet he could not free himself from the dependency on external factors and agents? In both major treatises, Machiavelli addresses potential political actors, even revolutionary leaders (Giuliano or, in the end, Lorenzo de’ Medici in the case of the Principe, his young republican interlocutors in the Orti Orticellari in the case of the Discorsi) and teaches them to develop a sensorium for analyzing and understanding the diverse dimensions of their own situation, and the crucial point seems to be to understand this situation as a specific moment in an open history. It is certainly necessary to understand the present situation thoroughly, including how far it results from a conjuncture of concrete historical developments (the social conflicts, the revolt of the Ciompi and its fate, the force of the condottieri and of mercenaries, the basis of their power, its conditions and their respective development, the role of the pope and the Church state, of the nobles in Rome and in Florence, of the French and Spanish kings, Savonarola’s ideas, reforms, and his fate, the general renaissance fascination with ancient Rome etc., etc.) and how it thus possesses a certain proper "momentum". But at the same time, these developments are not perfectly univocal and the immediate, let alone the remote future are anything but determined. At any moment, an agent does not only have a choice, but the consequences of his or her options are not determined. Political action consists in positioning oneself in this field, taking risks, pre-empting without controlling Fortuna, and, not least, exerting influence of one’s own. A good part of one’s influence needs to be invested in order to position oneself at the head of this socio-historical momentum, or at least, in order to appear as such. One of the more important strategies for this consists in an active, public (re-)interpretation of history. Except for speaking of «control», the modern saying is quite right: «Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past».

The reconstruction and reinterpretation of the past, the analysis of the present and the effort of political action are closely intertwined aspects of political practice. Against this methodological and epistemological backdrop, Machiavelli’s writings exhibit a practical character in quite another sense than the advice-books and theoretical treatises that have been so prominent in his days. In fact, he is involved in precisely such a re-interpretation of history; very obviously in the Discorsi, but also in the Principe. His tongue-in-cheek uptake of mythical political founders and their achievements, his biting sarcasm and his ironic, almost absurd affirmations of the most simplistic conventional axioms can hardly fail to effectively discredit these very axioms. In this way, they are working on an inversion of this public discourse perhaps much more effectively than by confronting and denying those venerable principles directly.

IV. "Late scholastic" political theory
We have seen how Machiavelli’s approach sought to distance itself in characteristic, methodological and epistemological ways from (what he must surely have perceived as being) Savonarola’s and the older scholastic discourse. As a final point, I want to examine if these new methodological and


28 Emancipated from salvation history, that is – a contrast that is most striking when one compares the Principe to apocalyptic texts like the sermons of Savonarola. However, a different assessment, focusing on the last chapter of the Principe, is offered by McQUEEN, Politics in Apocalyptic Times.

epistemological ways are peculiar to Machiavelli or if there are analogous movements in other contemporary discourses. In particular, I want to test this with regard to Francisco de Vitoria, who wrote at about the same time, had not only a masterful command of the scholastic tradition but also, through his studies in Paris, a thorough knowledge of Renaissance letters, and who has contributed to the establishment of a discourse about society, law and politics ("Second Scholasticism") that was for quite some time even more successful than Machiavelli’s. Is this new discourse founded on similar premises and can its success be explained in terms of the needs of the time? While I cannot go into detail with regard to this latter question, I am going to delineate a line of argument that in a certain sense runs altogether parallel to Machiavelli’s.

In *De potestate civili*, written and presented as a lecture in 1528, taking its cue from Rom 13,1: «There is no power but of God», Vitoria very much picks up the traditional line of reasoning: He inquires how and why political power came into the world, whether or not it was given to men by God, and indeed he focuses much more on the structure and qualities of a "good order" than on strategies of handling political power. He argues that only God, i.e. a subject that transcends human society can account for political authority and legal obligation. Or so it seems. Looking more closely, we see Vitoria advancing an argument according to which power and commonwealth are constituted inseparably and in relation to one another: There is not at first a political community that could somehow deliberate whether or not to install political power, but political community comes into being precisely when a distinction is made between political power and society. The mere existence and recognition of some factual, "social" power (wealth, influence, strength of arms) is not sufficient to establish a commonwealth – what is crucial is the essential articulation of power to the collective action of the community on itself. Political power for Vitoria means a capability or power of the community itself over itself, not some quality or capacity of individual agents. Obviously this argument is anything but a contractual theory of the foundation of political power, where individual natural persons would convene and deliberate about their privately formed preferences and then come to a consensus to constitute political power. In fact, the very moment which the metaphor of the contract is meant to elucidate, the moment of constitution, the actual emergence of political power, remains unexplained and mysterious. In this sense, political power "as such" cannot be at the disposal of the community and its existence again has to be presupposed – but the articulation is something that pertains to concrete socio-historic practice. So, as the argument proceeds, Vitoria explains how institutions are necessary and how the designation of office-holders works (and in these questions, everything depends on the consent of the people). On several occasions, Vitoria quite consciously elaborates a quasi-fictional discourse that links concrete practices and actions, e.g. legislative acts, to the presumed process of a self-governing commonwealth, using "as if"-constructions or fictional

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32 Cf. VITORIA. *On civil power*, cit., § 7, p. 11: «Therefore I conclude that power exists in the commonwealth by God’s ordinance. But the material cause on which this naturally and divinely appointed power rests is the commonwealth. The commonwealth takes upon itself the task of governing and administering itself (gubernare/administrare se ipsam) and directing all its powers to the common good».

33 Of course, instead of «power necessarily has to be presupposed», Vitoria rather says «power has been given to men by God», but in terms of their discursive function, these two formulations are equivalent: We cannot know the ultimate foundation of power, and yet we know for sure that it is there. And even in a theological reading, the authority of power derives primarily from the dignity of a community governing itself, and only very remotely from God who has made the world and man so that these communities seem natural.
historical accounts\textsuperscript{35}, both of which mix public discourse with the more technical arguments of juridical disputes (\textit{praesumptiones factorum/iurum}). Thus they have consequences both in the technical logic of juridical discourse and in the imaginary realm of public discourse.

While the (Spanish) scholastics of the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} century thus seem not to abandon their teleological framework\textsuperscript{36}, they clearly make room for social practice in the constitution of normative validity and political authority, they exhibit some sensitivity to the fact that the processes of this constitution have a performative-hermeneutical dimension which sets them apart from strictly logical derivations and they tend to regard this social practice as a historically dynamic and open process\textsuperscript{37}. Also, they are very original and influential in their concern with practical matters and tend to regard social practice not just as a field of application of principles developed in theory, but as an epistemic resource itself: As a meta-ethical approach, their doctrine of probabilism, for example, meant that in order to acknowledge the legitimacy and rationality of social practice it is necessary to abandon the primacy of determinate, univocal reasoning and rely on the historical record and on a form of complementary, reconstructive and uncertain reasoning\textsuperscript{38}. These findings suggest that scholastic discourse on social, political and generally practical matters was undergoing a substantial transformation in terms of its epistemological, methodological and meta-scientific convictions, too – a transformation that was in important respects analogous to the transformation prompted in a more radical way by Machiavelli. This turn to immanence and history in the theoretical reflection of social life can then perhaps be taken to be a crucial step to what we consider as modernity.

V. Conclusion

It is most adequate to think of Machiavelli as charting a field of practice for theoretical description. The diverse dimensions of this practice, the particular subject-matter of the social, with its aspects of scale, inertia, irregularities, path-dependence, and notably its sub-field of politics with its aspects of conflict and identification, of law and violence, of hegemony and ideology, are examined in order to create a sensitivity for the autonomous logic that this field possesses. The \textit{Principe}'s overarching question «by which means political rule can be achieved and conserved» on the one hand presupposes the very existence of political power which is not questioned, but at the same time power is presented as a fragile and precarious thing. The traditional questions of how there can be a legitimate power, of what its purpose is, are not touched at all, instead one learns how one can get hold of it. And yet, not alone is this not easy, it is even never fully achieved but an interminable historical undertaking. In the \textit{Principe}, the creation of political power, its essence and the relation of the means of achieving and conserving power to its essence are all treated, but in a way that is fundamentally unlike the traditional discourses under these headings: Whereas authors like Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Savonarola and even Machiavelli's contemporary Francisco de Vitoria started their treatises with the creation of political power, in the sense of how and why it came into the world for the first time, Machiavelli discusses

\footnotesize{34 «[L]aws passed by a king have the same force as if they were passed by the whole commonwealth, as explained above. But laws passed by the commonwealth bind everyone – hence they bind the king, even if he himself passed them» (Vitoria, \textit{On civil power}, § 21, cit., p. 40), [my emphasis].}

\footnotesize{35 Cf. Francisco de Vitoria, \textit{On the American Indians}, in: IDEM, Political Writings, cit., pp. 231–292, q. 2, art. 1, p. 255.}

\footnotesize{36 Compare even more explicitly Vitoria’s own defence of his final-cause-approach against a material theory of science in Vitoria, \textit{On civil power}, cit., § 2, pp. 4–6.}

\footnotesize{37 On the corresponding formation of historical accounts of particular societies, cf. A. Pagden, \textit{The Fall of Natural Man. The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology}, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982.}

How one can found "new modes and orders" and new states at any time. While the former authors explain the essence of power in terms of its purpose or final cause, Machiavelli conveys that the essence of power must be understood from its material cause, that is, from the physical and imaginary substances which political dynamics modulate. And of course this attachment of power’s essence to its substance instead of its purpose also affects the discussion of adequate and inadequate means to achieve and conserve power.

With this profile, Machiavelli contributes to an extensive and important transformation in the way that modern theory reflects on society and politics, hermeneutically analysing particular institutional, cultural and ideological processes and appreciating both the weight of history and the freedom of political agency. And we have seen in how far Machiavelli’s contribution is much more radical than analogous expositions by his contemporaries. While these may perhaps offer more convincing accounts of specific problems and how to eventually solve them, e.g. of possible ways to feed morality back into theory and practice, it is from Machiavelli that we can learn best what the modern insight into the nature of the social-historical-political complex is in the first place.

**Bibliography**

**Sources**


**Studies**


