

On the intellectual origins of the *abolition des privilèges*: the Machiavellian criticism of
liberality.

The paper that served as the basis for the seminar was my contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, edited by John Najemy. This piece had already been accepted by the editor, but, while at the Italian Academy, I returned to it, made some additions, and developed a new line of research for a future article on Chapter 16 of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Presenting some results of this new research was the subject of the main part of my talk.

The piece for the *Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, on the history of political ideas, seemed to me to be useful for our seminar and appropriate to the theme of our fellowship this year: "cultural transmission." Indeed, it deals with the fate of Machiavellian ideas in political thought from the age of revolutions to the present. Within the formal limits of the genre, this piece attempts to offer several cultural and intellectual coordinates and reflections on "cultural transmission"; that is, what is conserved, what is lost, what is put in *reserve*. It promotes, within a necessarily schematic representation of the historical process, a counter-intuitive hypothesis: despite the progress in historical and philological studies over the two last centuries, Machiavelli is no better understood today than he was before the age of revolution. Certain central issues of his political thought have become almost completely obscured, and it may be useful to rediscover them.

I focused my talk on one specific issue in order to offer a development, or a broader illustration, if not yet the complete demonstration, of the argument of a particular paragraph in my contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*. The argument deals with "liberality" (in short, the moral obligation to give freely), and comes under the heading *economics and society*:

One should avoid retrospective judgments that evaluate Machiavelli from the standpoint of socio-economical categories and methods of analysis that emerged only during the 19th century, and focus instead on those aspects of economic and social life relevant to Machiavelli. A historian of French finances argues that the

long disintegration of “liberality,” a concept central to the socio-economic culture of the Ancien Regime, began with Machiavelli. Politically, this disintegration was achieved in part by the abolition of the feudal system in 1789. On an intellectual and cultural level, a major moment of this disintegration is the article “liberality” of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* (1765). Machiavelli’s critique of liberality, which cannot be reduced to a mere provocative attack against the humanist and Christian catalogue of virtues, has led political thinkers of the Ancien Regime to examine power from a financial and fiscal perspective. But political thinkers of our time have generally overlooked this important element of Machiavelli’s theory. Either the critique of liberality in *The Prince* is simply ignored, as in the famous essay *On the Gift* (1923-24) by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, where the ideal of a gift-based society is advocated; or it is confused with a sarcastic attitude toward ideas of equality and social justice, comparable to those of disillusioned liberals like Pareto.

In this passage, I mention a seminal article by the most innovative historian of French finance as an authority for sustaining my point (Alain Guery, in *Annales*, 1984, available on the web at <http://www.persee.fr>). But, I am in fact extending some of its conclusions by logical conjecture based on a careful reading of this difficult article on the political and social meaning of the gift during the *longue durée* of Ancien Regime. While at the Italian Academy, by expanding my research up to 1789, I have found historical evidence that further documents and confirms the argument, and I am still trying to build new understanding on this basis. Part of my talk involved presenting this new research; another part offered an introduction to Machiavelli’s major text concerning the criticism of liberality (*The Prince*, Chapter 16) and involves a molecular analysis of the exchange of an n for an m during the editorial process, the rediscovery of that n , and the misinterpretations that persist even in the most recent (corrected) editions of Machiavelli’s masterpiece. A more precise interpretation instead leads to new findings concerning the political and social effects of the Florentine financial structure and the meaning of the discourse on liberality in that context.

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