

## Freedom, Equality, and Conflict: Rousseau on Machiavelli

Abstract: Rousseau's praise for Machiavelli in the *Social Contract* goes along with his condemnation of partial association and political conflicts. Yet Machiavelli builds his theory precisely around the idea of the constructive role of conflicts, seeing the irreducible multiplicity of the many as the source of a positive conflictuality. Is the ontological primacy of Rousseau's singularity in the general will compatible with the political primacy of Machiavelli's conflictual multiplicity? By exploring Rousseau's strategy in his use of Machiavelli, I will argue that the key to interpreting the ambiguities of Rousseau's reading lies in the evaluation of the differences in the relationship between multiplicity and singularity in both authors. While the people produces an immanent and conflictualistic ground for power in Machiavelli, in Rousseau it is subjected to a transcendent process of ontological submission to the general will.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau is ordinarily associated with the cultural and political background of the French Revolution. He is also accused of having inspired, *malgré lui*, the ideology and the resulting policies that culminated in the Terror and the 1793 civil war.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example by H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (Westport, Conn., 1963). See J.H. Mason, 'Forced to be free', in R. Wokler (ed.), *Rousseau and Liberty* (Manchester and New York, 1995), pp. 121-38. References to Rousseau and Machiavelli employ the following abbreviations: SC and DOI: respectively *On the Social Contract* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. D.A. Cress, in *The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis-Cambridge, 1987); D: *Discourses on Livy*, trans. H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov (Chicago and London, 1996); P: *The Prince*, ed. Q. Skinner and R. Price (Cambridge, 1988); FH: *Florentine Histories*, trans. L.F. Banfield and H.C. Mansfield (Princeton, NJ, 1988).

However Maximilien Robespierre's comments sound an implicit disavowal when he declares that 'the plan for the French Revolution was clearly written in the works of Tacitus and Machiavelli,' without mentioning Rousseau.<sup>2</sup> Robespierre is probably echoing here what had already become an established *topos*, shared by Rousseau himself, namely the so-called 'republican interpretation' of Machiavelli. Machiavelli the monster, Machiavelli the inspirer of the worst tyrants on earth had slowly but steadily become Machiavelli the defender of freedom and the partisan of free republics.<sup>3</sup>

With his authority, Rousseau quickly becomes the most important apologist for Machiavelli in the XVIII century. They share several themes, such as the interest in the role of the legislator, the effects of culture and education in the progress and decadence of societies, the political role of religion, the preference for an army of citizens against an army of mercenaries, and so on. Given the growing importance of debate on Republicanism in these decades, Machiavelli definitely appears to be one of the main sources for Rousseau.

And yet a problem – if not a riddle – in the interpretation of their relationship is immediately evident for the historian of political thought. Machiavelli is widely recognised as the apologist of social and political conflict within a free republic. For him, freedom results

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<sup>2</sup> M. Robespierre, 'Sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention nationale dans l'administration intérieure de la République', *Oeuvres*, ed. by A. Soboul and M. Bouloiseau (Paris, 1958-67), vol. X, pp. 350-66, en. trans. 'Report on the Principles of Political Morality', *Virtue and Terror* (London, 2007), p. 109. On Rousseau and the French revolution, see J. McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution: 1762-1791* (London, 1965), I. Fetscher, *Rousseaus politische Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), pp. 258-304, and R. Barny, *L'Eclatement révolutionnaire du rousseauisme* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Being associated with Tacitus, moreover, is not a new argument. The 1683 influential translation of and comment on *The Prince* by Amelot de la Houssaye had already suggested joining the two authors, in the name of political realism and love of freedom. Bayle and Diderot, more or less implicitly, share this position. Such a pool of influential opinion defuses the strongest-ever ideological attack against the author of *The Prince*, namely the *Anti-Machiavel* of Frederic II and Voltaire. See Frédéric II, roi de Prusse, *Anti-Machiavel. Oeuvres philosophiques* (Paris, 1985). On de la Houssaye, see J. Soll, *Publishing the Prince: History, Reading, and the Birth of Political Criticism* (Ann Arbor, 2005).

precisely from conflicts and divisions: between the plebs and the senate in Rome for example, as well as between the people and the *Grandi* in Florence. Rousseau's comments on divisions and political conflicts are also well known: nothing is worse for him than the 'partial association' that might arise within the State, and even the conflictual debates that might ordinarily emerge within an assembly are to be feared. The opposition is clear and relates to one of the most fundamental problems of political theory, namely the relationship between order and conflict. Moreover, Rousseau bitterly criticizes several philosophers, and only says good words, in the *Social Contract*, for the Marquis d'Argenson and Machiavelli. And if it was not enough of a puzzle, when Rousseau praises Machiavelli, he precisely makes use of his argument on the positive role played by social conflicts. This puzzle points out to one of the most fundamental and yet unexplored questions in the history of early modern political thought.<sup>4</sup>

Only a few works have been devoted to the comparison between these two authors. And although all of them touch upon the issue of conflicts (with a variety of emphasis), none of them seem able to offer a solution for Rousseau's ambiguous statements on Machiavelli. I suggest that there are two main reasons for this inability to offer an adequate explanation to this problem. The first is that scholars tend to misinterpret Machiavelli's own defence of political conflict, thus producing an unsatisfactory response to the problem represented by Rousseau's comments on it; the second reason is that they tend to isolate Rousseau's quotations of Machiavelli, failing to consider them in the context of both Rousseau's larger work and the wider political thought of the period.

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<sup>4</sup> The puzzling aspect of this question, however, is often overlooked by scholars. See, for example, C. Mossin, 'Creation, Destruction, and the Continuity of Order', in H.R. Lauritsen and M. Thorup (eds.), *Rousseau and Revolution* (London-New York, 2011), p. 145: 'The development of partial societies represents the most serious enemy of society according to Rousseau, *in agreement* with Machiavelli and Hobbes' [italics mine].

In this article, I am going to show the different approaches Machiavelli and Rousseau have to the theory of conflict. Whereas Rousseau considers the many through their necessary sublimation in the singularity of the general will and supports the absolute, albeit democratic, order that it generates, Machiavelli sees the irreducible multiplicity of the many as the source of a positive conflictuality. I will show that Rousseau's ambiguity is not based on a misunderstanding of Machiavelli. On the contrary, Rousseau has understood Machiavelli much better than his modern critics have. However, Yet the ontological primacy of Rousseau's general will *is* incompatible with the political primacy of Machiavelli's conflictual multiplicity. I will support my thesis both by 1) underlining a powerful convergence between Machiavelli and Rousseau in texts where the name of Machiavelli is not mentioned and that are normally not considered by scholars, and by 2) putting Rousseau's comments on social conflict in the wider intellectual environment of his own period. In this background, they will appear less ambiguous than they appear to us.

Yves Lévy is the first modern scholar who openly engages with the question of Machiavelli and Rousseau.<sup>5</sup> Lévy maintains that Rousseau has not fully understood Machiavelli's position. Whereas Machiavelli is a realist who accepts doing only what is possible, here and now, Rousseau is an idealist who pursues the perfect project of

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<sup>5</sup> Y. Lévy, 'Les parties et la démocratie', *Le contrat social*, III (1959), 2, pp. 79-86 and III (1959), 4, pp. 217-21 and 'Machiavel et Rousseau', *Le contrat social*, VI (1962), 3, pp. 169-74. Before Lévy's articles, a few attempts had been made to analyse Machiavelli's influence on Rousseau. In his *Macchiavel* [sic], *Montesquieu, Rousseau* (Berlin, 1850), J. Venedey had boldly maintained that the three authors 'umfassen in gewisser Beziehung den ganzen Kreis der Staatswissenschaft', respectively representing absolutism, constitutional monarchism, and democratic republicanism. Yet Venedey does not really engage in a serious comparative analysis of their works. V. Waille directly follows Venedey in his *Machiavel en France* (Paris, 1884), but he does not go much further than listing a set of topics commonly shared by the philosophers, and arriving at the general conclusion that 'Rousseau partage [...] les opinion de Machiavel, dont il diffère par l'humeur rêveuse, par l'amour passionné de la nature, par la croyance à l'excellence native de l'homme, et par l'allure oratoire' (p. 240).

democracy. Therefore Rousseau is pushed to follow the classical Platonic and Christian tradition of absolute condemnation of every kind of conflict in order to support the process that will lead to the formation of the purest and highest form of will, namely the general one. Thus Rousseau misinterprets Machiavelli who, in fact, did only support certain kind of divisions, namely those based on political parties, and blames, like every other author in the history of political thought, the conflicts based on factions. Rousseau seems to underestimate this distinction, so much that one thinks he is voluntarily misinterpreting Machiavelli. But Lévy ultimately shows that this is not the case, and that, by wrongly interpreting Machiavelli's text, Rousseau is in fact creating a contradiction.

A few years later, Paolo M. Cucchi offers an interpretation that tries to save Rousseau from himself.<sup>6</sup> Rousseau has not misinterpreted Machiavelli, according to Cucchi, because in fact Machiavelli only 'seems' to support social conflict for the benefit of freedom, while being very well aware that this system is far from being 'perfect.' Moreover, Machiavelli does not say that divisions are positive, but merely says that they are not negative, and that only organised divisions do not harm the republic.<sup>7</sup> These organised divisions, therefore, unproblematically correspond to Rousseau's 'deliberations', described in *Social Contract* II,3. When Rousseau quotes the conflictual argument of Machiavelli, he has in mind his idea of individual 'deliberation'. Following a similar pattern, Roger Payot suggests that Rousseau has correctly understood Machiavelli, but without really explaining how.<sup>8</sup> Besides the dubious claim that their common membership in the middle-class makes them

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<sup>6</sup> P.M. Cucchi, 'Rousseau lecteur de Machiavel', in M. Launay (éd.), *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et son temps. Politique et Littérature au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1969), pp. 17-35.

<sup>7</sup> This is also the conclusion of A. Jourdan, 'Le Machiavel de Rousseau: Politique et religion' in J. Leerssen and M. Spiering (eds.), *Machiavelli: Figure-Reputation, Yearbook of European Studies VIII* (1996), pp. 63-93.

<sup>8</sup> R. Payot, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Machiavel', *Les Etudes Philosophiques* (1971), pp. 209-23.

share an impartial point of view, detached from concrete and particular interests, Payot avoids the problem of conflicts<sup>9</sup> by saying that Rousseau's comments are not surprising, and they in fact are coherent with Machiavelli's.

More interesting are two articles published in the 80s, by Lionel A. McKenzie<sup>10</sup> and Maurizio Viroli.<sup>11</sup> McKenzie's thesis is that Rousseau's dialogue with Machiavelli is indeed centered on the concept of 'interests', which correspond to the 'humours' of Machiavelli, and therefore point toward the semantic area of conflicts. However, Rousseau hides his real feelings, and instead of openly engaging with his source, he prefers to maintain an exterior agreement with Machiavelli, while at the same time rejecting his opinion on the positive character of conflicts. McKenzie's thesis is interesting insofar as it situates Rousseau within a complex field of theoretical and historical problems such as the Republican interpretation of Rousseau's political thought, the coherence and relationship of Machiavelli's different works, and the anti-Machiavellian literature of the 18th century. Yet this thesis is also undermined, once again, by what is in my view a weak interpretation of Machiavelli's theory of conflicts. Whereas, for McKenzie, Rousseau condemns every group and partial association, Machiavelli only condemns factions and is in favour of parties. Rousseau is therefore distorting Machiavelli's real intention, in order to use it on his own account and be able to hold his own ambiguous position.

Claiming the primacy of rhetorics over politics, Viroli mainly focuses on questions of language. He maintains that the use of a common Republican vocabulary by the two authors

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<sup>9</sup> P.M. Vernes, 'Nicolas Machiavel chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau: des leçons aux rois aux leçons aux peuples', in *Actes du colloque franco-italien de philosophie* (Paris, 1977), pp. 77-89 also takes this tack, and it is therefore irrelevant for the present discussion.

<sup>10</sup> L.A. McKenzie, 'Rousseau's Debate with Machiavelli in the Social Contract', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XLIII (1982), pp. 209-28.

<sup>11</sup> M. Viroli, 'Republic and Politics in Machiavelli and Rousseau', *History of Political Thought*, X (1989), pp. 405-20.

is the key to explaining the apparently ambiguous position of Rousseau. Rousseau, according to Viroli, only partially supports Machiavelli's vision. Both, for example, prefer a mixed form of government rather than a pure democracy, which should be understood not so much as a form of government of the people, but rather as an institutional mechanism allowing the people to appoint magistrates and hold public offices.<sup>12</sup> When it comes to the question of conflict, Viroli re-interprets them not according to Machiavelli's political position ('the disunion [...] made the Republic free and powerful') but according to the institutional results that some laws (and not others) supposedly produce, despite the conflicts, for the common good. Conflicts, in this sense, would perform the function of 'selecting' good laws (those in favour of the common good) over bad laws (those that have a partial and partisan character).

Consequently, Viroli repeats the moderate *mantra* that good conflicts characterised the history of Rome only before the Agrarian Law while bad conflicts characterise the later history of Rome as well as the whole history of Florence. This could have brought Rousseau to interpret at least the positive conflicts as tools to produce a pure form of will. But in fact, apparently without an explanation, Rousseau decides to reject every form of conflictuality, even the normal dialectic taking place in public assemblies. Therefore, Rousseau sticks to the traditional idea of *concordia* and entirely rejects Machiavelli. Viroli does not give any explanation of Rousseau's seemingly contradictory support of Machiavelli's conflictual position. The similarity doesn't go much beyond the common use of a Republican vocabulary, and Viroli fails to give a serious account of their respective political positions.

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<sup>12</sup> Besides being based on a dubious interpretation, this thesis is also problematic insofar as Rousseau would agree with Machiavelli for a different reason and, most of all, with an opposed political goal in mind. If Machiavelli supposedly supported a mixed government (which I do not believe), he would have done it in order to make it stronger. Rousseau, on the contrary, maintains that, insofar as it is divided, the mixed government is weaker and therefore the less dangerous government *vis-à-vis* the people, the real sovereign.

Although with some differences, all the aforementioned scholars share the assumption that Machiavelli make a distinction between good and bad conflicts, as well as between parties and factions.<sup>13</sup> They come to this view by assuming a classical *topos* of the scholarship on Machiavelli, which is to contrast the conflict that precedes the Agrarian Law in Rome with both those following the Gracchi reform and those characterising the history of Florence.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the *Discourses* should be opposed to the *Florentine Histories*, where the Machiavellian apology of conflicts, according to this interpretation, is undermined by the tragic political history of Florence. The consequence of this interpretation is that Rousseau has – wholly or partially – misunderstood Machiavelli and his argument on conflicts.

Now, in chapter III,6 of the *Social Contract*, Rousseau develops the following argument: 1) a ‘political sermonizer’ should advise the prince to ground his power on the people, precisely as Machiavelli does, on the ground that ‘the people’s force is their force’; 2) but, against Machiavelli this time, ‘they know perfectly well that this is not true’, because ruler’s interest is rather that the people should be ‘weak and miserable and incapable of ever resisting them’; 3) therefore, against Machiavelli once again, the prince should think about himself and his own utility against that of the people. And here Rousseau famously adds his curious statement that ‘Machiavelli has made [this truth] apparent. Under the pretext of teaching kings, he has taught important lessons to the peoples. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is the book of republicans’. In the 1782 edition, Rousseau adds a footnote to further explain this idea: ‘Machiavelli was a decent man and a good citizen’. Therefore he could not say all he

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<sup>13</sup> This is also the conclusion of R.D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ, 1968) who claims that, on this ground, Rousseau does not rule out a certain kind of ‘pluralism’ as a ‘necessary fact of political life’ (p. 334).

<sup>14</sup> See for example F. Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, NJ, 1965) and Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2000).



wanted to say and ‘had to disguise his love of liberty’. *The Prince*, therefore, should be interpreted according to its own hidden message, and read upside down. This argument had previously been made by several apologists for Machiavelli, who had contributed to the establishment of the Republican tradition.<sup>15</sup> *The Prince* does not contain the real thought of Machiavelli. Because it was written under the yoke of the Medici, it is in fact the opposite of what Machiavelli really thinks,.

Thus Rousseau seems to fluctuate between two opposite understandings, both relating to Machiavelli’s teaching, as in some sense all the aforementioned scholars suggest. The problem though, that in my view they fail to indicate, is that Rousseau himself offers interesting clues to a different interpretation of both Machiavelli’s thought and his own apparently contradictory argument. In fact, he adds that ‘the contrast between the maxims of his book *The Prince* and those of his *Discourses* [...] and of his *History of Florence* shows that this profound political theorist has until now had only superficial or corrupt readers’. Although unjust toward many readers who courageously worked to outline the Republican interpretation of Machiavelli, Rousseau’s remarks sound interesting from my point of view. Not so much because he sets aside *The Prince* from the other works, but rather insofar as he joins the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*, whose separation is on the contrary essential to maintain what modern scholars generally maintain, namely the difference between good and bad conflicts, between parties and factions, between Rome and Florence. Implicitly, but vigorously, Rousseau is suggesting a different reading of Machiavelli, as well as an understanding of the Florentine that is deeper than that claimed by his modern interpreters.

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<sup>15</sup> This interpretation was developed as early as the 16th century, for example by Alberico Gentili in England, and by Louis Le Roy in France. See A. Gentili, *De legationibus libri tres* [1585] (New York, 1924), vol. 2, p. 156, and L. Le Roy, *Les politiques d’Aristote* (Paris, 1599). On Machiavelli’s heritage in the early modern European thought see G. Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell’età moderna* (Bari-Roma, 1995).

Therefore, if we follow a different interpretation of Machiavelli himself, a less ambiguous image of Rousseau's reading can be formulated.

Scholars have tended to read Machiavelli's praise for social conflict through the opposition between parties and factions, as well as the related opposition between political vs economic conflicts. Whereas the former are supposedly moderate, can be institutionalised, and can produce good laws for the sake of the common good, the latter are supposedly violent and extreme, cannot be institutionalised, and lead to the corruption and decadence of the republic. Within the former, only political honours are at stake, while the latter are mainly focused around wealth. This opposition becomes particularly evident in the *Florentine Histories*, where Machiavelli supposedly condemns the factional spirit of the Florentine politics, opposing it to the virtue of Rome.<sup>16</sup>

However, in my view, a closer analysis of Machiavelli's works allows us to reject this opposition. Although sketched in the first chapters of *The Discourses*, the contrast between moderate and political conflicts on the one hand and violent and economic conflicts on the other, is already dismissed by Machiavelli himself in the later chapters of *The Discourses*, and then more pointedly in the *Florentine Histories*. Machiavelli is more and more interested in showing how politics and economics cannot be separated, and that in fact Florence is the paradigm of the concrete possibility of transformation, precisely for the very nature and intensity of its own conflicts. As Machiavelli clearly states in chapter III,1 of the *Florentine Histories*, the conflicts in Florence 'brought the city to a wonderful equality'.<sup>17</sup> Although 'injurious and unjust', the desires of the Florentine people brought the city to 'the point that

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<sup>16</sup> For this interpretation see for example G. Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli* (Bologna, 1993) and G. Inglese, *Machiavelli: l'arte dello Stato, la cognizione delle storie* (Roma, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> FH III,1

it could easily have been reordered in any form of government by a wise lawgiver'. The opposition between the two kind of conflicts is therefore not convincing.

Now, what happen if we read Rousseau's ambiguous interpretation of Machiavelli not through the eyes of the traditional canonic explanation of Machiavelli's theory of conflict, but rather following this less orthodox interpretation? I think that Rousseau's interpretation itself, in its joining the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* and opposing them to *The Prince* in one of the key passages of the *Social Contract*, suggests the logic of this hypothesis. My thesis is that this reading throws a new light not only on Machiavelli, but also on Rousseau. I am not claiming that all the inconsistencies can be stripped away from his use of Machiavelli. In fact, Rousseau consciously suggests the necessity of an ambivalent treatment of Machiavelli's inconvenient position.<sup>18</sup> However, these puzzling inconsistencies can be more deeply understood and more clearly explained. Moreover, Rousseau's ambiguity on Machiavelli's conflictual theory mainly derives, in my view, from a tension that is internal to Rousseau's argument itself. And, in fact, it contributes to making this tension even sharper.<sup>19</sup> The analysis needs to be carried out on Rousseau's text itself, both when he quotes

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau has good words only for Machiavelli and the Marquis d'Argenson in the *Social Contract*. The reader who is familiar with the marquis' writings, though, knows that in the *Lettres juives* he boldly states that if he were a monarch, he would order the burning of the works of Machiavelli since he seeks to enslave truth to interest. See R. Shackleton, 'Montesquieu and Machiavelli: a Reappraisal', *Comparative Literature Studies*, I (1964), pp. 1-13.

<sup>19</sup> I consciously employ this term in order to avoid any suggestion that Rousseau's argument is 'contradictory'. There is no contradiction in Rousseau's thought, but rather a tension, whose manifestation can be seen by following the development of his work. Something similar is at the heart of the interpretation by the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who heavily employs the notion of multiple *décalages* in Rousseau's thought. See L. Althusser, 'L'impensé de Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, VIII (1967), pp. 5-42, en. trans. *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx: Politics and History* (London, 1972), pp. 111-60. Here, though, *décalage* is translated by 'discrepancy'. I think that the choice that better reflects Rousseau's concept would have been 'deviation'.

Machiavelli and when he develops the core of his theory in the *Social Contract*, namely the theory of the general will.<sup>20</sup>

Let's start from the famous text on the general will in chapter II,3. Rousseau has in mind a mathematical model to describe how the general will has to be determined:

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will.

The latter considers only the general interest, whereas the former considers private interest and is merely the sum of private wills. But remove from these same wills the pluses and the minuses that destroy each other,<sup>21</sup> and what remains as the sum of the differences is the general will.<sup>22</sup>

The mathematical metaphor surrounding the process of artificial construction and 'calculation' of the general will, namely the will of the sovereign, points to a powerful set of ideas, very well established in the culture of the time, and to the widely shared scientific approach to social sciences (Rousseau is certainly influenced by Leibniz and Spinoza, as well as Pascal, Malebranche and Leibniz).<sup>23</sup> Yet it should not hide under the veil of a rigorous

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<sup>20</sup> On the general will, see P. Riley *The General Will before Rousseau: the Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton, NJ, 1986). Although Riley's discussion of the place of Machiavelli in Rousseau's philosophy does not go into depth, his conclusion is that Rousseau's general will includes a panoply of authors and ideas inherited from the past, including Machiavelli's civic *virtù*.

<sup>21</sup> Here Rousseau puts his footnote on d'Argenson: 'Each interest, says the Marquis d'Argenson, has different principles. The accord of two private interests is formed in opposition to that of a third. He could have added that the accord of all the interests is found in opposition to that of each. If there were no different interests, the common interest, which would never encounter any obstacle, would scarcely be felt. Everything would proceed on its own and politics would cease being an art'.

<sup>22</sup> SC II,3.

<sup>23</sup> In a clear Spinozist tone, Rousseau compares 'le grand problème en politique à celui de la quadrature du cercle en géométrie et à celui des longitudes en astronomie' in his *Letter to*

constructivism or mathematic precision an implicit tension between what I would call a positivistic moment and a jusnaturalistic moment.

The positivistic moment is what makes possible for Rousseau the articulation among different types of will, and the supremacy of the general will over them all. Individuals can have a private will, contrary to or different from the general will. They can have a private interest totally different from the common interest. The opposite, though, cannot be said, insofar as the sovereign ‘neither has nor could have an interest contrary to [that of private individuals]’. This asymmetrical relationship between the many and the one makes the sovereign ‘perfect’ by definition, no matter what it does or says or thinks. As Rousseau boldly states: ‘the sovereign, by the mere fact that it exists, is always all that it should be’.<sup>24</sup>

The tension, though, in my view emerges from the fact that the sovereign does not pre-exist the individual. The ‘multitude’ becomes the sovereign by and through the act of calculation of the general will. The general will is therefore not the premise, but rather the promise of the union. Moreover, it does not exist once and for all (as it does for Hobbes) through the mechanism of representation, which is an absurdity for Rousseau), but it must be re-calculated over and over again. Nor does it exist through the mediation of a ‘trust’ (as for Locke, whose delegation of the legislative power to the sovereign is explicitly rejected by Rousseau). The unification of the multitude in the body of the sovereign must be constantly reiterated for Rousseau in the process of ‘deliberation’, which corresponds to the actual exercise of the people’s will. And this introduces a further dimension within Rousseau’s argument, one that is clearly jusnaturalistic insofar as a higher model of

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*Mirabeau* dated 26th July 1767, in *Lettres philosophiques*, ed. H. Gouhier (Paris, 1974), p. 167. On Spinoza and Rousseau see R. Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Paris, 1950) and P. Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la révolution* (Paris, 1954).

<sup>24</sup> SC I,7.

perfection needs to be constantly and repeatedly considered. This is where Rousseau decides to confront Machiavelli's argument:

If, when a sufficiently informed people<sup>25</sup> deliberates, the citizens were to have no communication among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good. But when intrigues and partial associations come into being at the expense of the large association [the] result [...] is less general. [...] For the general will to be well articulated, it is therefore important that there should be no partial society in the state and that each citizen make up his own mind alone.<sup>26</sup>

The calculation of the general will should happen in a solitary and isolated dimension, where every individual is alone, facing rather than producing the general will.<sup>27</sup> But if it is so, the promise becomes a premise once again, and the general will necessarily

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<sup>25</sup> 'Populace' in Cress's translation, p. 156, but *peuple* in Rousseau. For that reason I modify Cress's text here, following both F. Watkins's text, included in Rousseau, *Political Writings* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 28 and J.R. Bush, R.D. Masters, and C. Kelly in their translation and edition included in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4, (Hanover and London, 1994), p. 147. The question is of course of major importance, insofar as the use of 'populace' masks Rousseau's consciously ambiguous use of *peuple* and pushes him, on the contrary, towards the natural law theorists *à la* Hobbes and their opposition between the *populus* and the *multitudo*.

<sup>26</sup> SC II,3. The last sentence in the original French is 'chaque citoyen n'opine que d'après lui'. Bush, Masters, and Kelly opt for 'each citizen gives only his own opinion', while Watkins translates it as 'each citizen should have personal opinions only'. Although the text is open enough for interpretation, I think that, in this case, Cress's translation better reflects Rousseau's spirit by stressing the solitude of the dimension in which the decision has to take place, as Rousseau himself makes clear at the beginning of the passage: 'si [...] les citoyens n'avaient aucune communication entre eux [...]'.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In the same way that a people should not have prejudices or be isolated from foreigners, in their 'simplicity of nature'. See J.N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: a Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), p. 170.

pre-exists the process of its production, in the same way that the final cause pre-exists the entire causal process that leads toward it. The general will has precisely to be seen, in my view, as the final cause of the will of the many *qua* the many. It is intended to be realised, by Rousseau himself, through a passage from potentiality to actuality.

Later on, he will more clearly explain this passage to actuality by saying that not only is obedience due to any law, but also the consent must be given

to all the laws, even to those that pass in spite of [one's own] opposition [...]. When a law is proposed in the people's assembly, what is asked of them is not precisely whether they approve or reject, but whether or not it conforms to the general will that is theirs. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on this matter, and the declaration of the general will is drawn from the counting of votes. When, therefore, the opinion contrary to mine prevails, this proves merely that I was in error, and that what I took to be the general will was not so.<sup>28</sup>

One could try to solve the tension by saying that, *vis-à-vis* the sovereign, only individual wills exist, while *vis-à-vis* individuals, only the general will (or at least the idea of the general will) exists.<sup>29</sup> The fact remains that the process of calculation, whatever its nature is and however it is performed, must be checked and validated by its correspondence to an

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<sup>28</sup> SC IV,2.

<sup>29</sup> It can be argued, as H. Arendt does in *On Revolution*, that this tension does not resolve the problem, but rather displaces it from the social to the anthropological dimension. J. Charvet, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Rousseau* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 99, maintains for example that 'Rousseau's solution to his social problem would produce an internal conflict within each man between [the moral will] and [the particular will]'. A conflict that finds its metaphysical expression in the profession of faith by a Savoyard vicar. Although focusing largely on social conflict, and stressing the 'obscurity' of Rousseau's theory (p. 134), Charvet does not discuss the role played by Machiavelli.

idea that has a higher perfection that is simultaneously ontological and political. On the one hand, Rousseau establishes the ontological primacy of the sovereign (the people) vis-à-vis every other subject (the multitude, the individual, the government, the partial associations), by claiming its absolute perfection. On the other hand the process of calculation somehow imposes the confrontation of the multiplicity of possible decisions (all of them imperfect by definition) not among themselves, but rather immediately with the general will. The truth and perfection of the general will, therefore, ends up turning upside-down its own process of production and appropriating its actual exercise via a kind of teleological movement.

One can also argue that this problem arises from the tension between the descriptive moment of reality (i.e. partial societies exist, and they tend to obscure and suffocate the general will) and the normative moment of the project (i.e. partial societies must be crushed, so that the general will can emerge). The truth and perfection of the general will, in any case, is not merely an hypothesis for Rousseau. It represents his strongest idealistic belief in its own existence, above and beyond real societies: by dismissing any mythical or ideological treatment of the general will, Rousseau makes it, in some way, more real than reality itself.

Is there any space for social and political conflict within this ideological and teleological process? It doesn't seem so. Rousseau's condemnation of factions and partial associations is therefore not astonishing. What is astonishing and puzzling, however, is that he quotes Machiavelli precisely to support his idea of calculation of the general will. A more thoughtful consideration of the main passages where the Florentine's opinion on conflicts is summoned, in II,3 and in III,9 of the *Social Contract*, is therefore needed. Scholars have not stressed the different style of the quotation. While the first is a simple transcription of Machiavelli's text, the second is a long and articulate comment.



‘For the general will to be well articulated – Rousseau says – it is [...] important that there should be no partial society in the State and that each citizen make up his own mind alone’. The State, therefore, must be united. And then he adds, in Italian, the quotation from *Florentine Histories* VII: ‘It is true that some divisions are harmful to republics and some are helpful. Those are harmful that are accompanied by sects and partisans; those are helpful that are maintained without sects and partisans. Thus, since a founder of a republic cannot provide that there be no enmities in it, he has to provide at least that there not be sects’.<sup>30</sup> A curious quotation, without any comment, given the fact that 1) Machiavelli’s text does not support Rousseau’s argument, at least not entirely, and that 2) Rousseau omits what Machiavelli clearly states immediately before the passage quoted, namely that ‘those who hope that a republic can be united are very much deceived in this hope’.

How are we supposed to read this quotation that Rousseau does not comment upon? Two options are possible: either 1) Machiavelli has to be read turned upside down.<sup>31</sup> In this case, there does not in fact exist any difference between positive and negative divisions. This in turn means that Rousseau has perfectly understood Machiavelli (according to my own thesis), but also that his use of Machiavelli is contradictory, because whereas Machiavelli’s text would mean that all divisions are positive, Rousseau wants to suggest that none of them is; or 2) because these are the *Florentine Histories*, it is in fact true that some

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<sup>30</sup> FH VII,1.

<sup>31</sup> As we know, Rousseau is well aware of the political conditions under which Machiavelli was writing and his relationship with his patrons. Book VII of the *Florentine Histories* deals with the second half of the 15th century, and a period when the Medici influence on Florentine politics is becoming extremely heavy. Rousseau is also aware that the more the historical account approaches this period, the more Machiavelli must be careful, balancing his own political standing, the historical truth, and the fact that the work itself is supposed to bring him back to the public sphere and the political activity, unconditionally ruled, by this time, by the Medici family. Should the last part of the *Florentine Histories* be read in the same way that *The Prince* should be read?

divisions are positive, and others are negative, but the quotation is still problematic because whereas Machiavelli's text would mean that at least some divisions are positive, and people are deceived when they hope that a republic can be united, Rousseau still wants to suggest that none of them is, and that union is clearly the aim and target of a republic.

I think that the inconsistency can be at least partially solved by reading the second key passage, chapter III,9 on 'the Signs of a Good Government'. In a footnote, Rousseau writes that

riots and civil wars may greatly disturb the leaders, but they are not the true misfortunes of the people, who may even have a reprieve while people argue over who will tyrannize them. It is their permanent condition that causes real periods of prosperity or calamity. It is when everything remains crushed under the yoke that everything decays. It is then that the leaders destroy them at will, *where they bring about solitude they call it peace* [Tacitus, *Agricola*, 31].<sup>32</sup>

If, on the one hand, a bitter irony suffuses the whole passage and the idea that people argue over who will tyrannize them, on the other hand the rest of the footnote stresses without ambiguity the link between freedom and conflict. Rousseau mentions the Fronde, ancient Greece, and then the authority, once again, of Machiavelli:

It seemed, says Machiavelli, that in the midst of murders, proscriptions, and civil wars, our republic became more powerful; the virtue of its citizens, their mores, and their independence did more to reinforce it than all its dissensions did to weaken it.

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<sup>32</sup> SC III,9, footnote.

A little agitation gives strength to souls, and what truly brings about prosperity for the species is not so much peace as liberty.<sup>33</sup>

The message seems clear: liberty – and therefore conflict – rather than peace leads to prosperity.. And yet the quotation must be carefully scrutinised: ‘our republic’, Machiavelli says. Which republic is Rousseau thinking about? And which work of Machiavelli is he referring to here? It cannot be ‘our’ Rome, because in the *Discourses* Machiavelli maintains precisely the opposite: whereas Rousseau mentions murders, proscriptions, and civil wars, Machiavelli writes that ‘the tumults of Rome rarely engendered exile and very rarely blood. [This divided Republic] sent no more than eight or ten citizens into exile because of its differences, and killed very few of them’.<sup>34</sup> Thus it must be ‘our’ republic in the proper sense, i.e. Florence. But then the reading that I am suggesting of Machiavelli is confirmed once again, because notwithstanding the many murders, proscriptions, and civil wars – or rather because of them – Florence was brought to the possibility of freedom, but certainly not to peace and harmony. Rousseau, once again, has perfectly understood Machiavelli, but he keeps using him in an apparently contradictory way to support his own thesis.

Where does the contradiction come from? In other words, what is the blind spot of Rousseau’s political theory that prevents him from either entirely abandoning the reference

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<sup>33</sup> Ivi. G. Namer, *Rousseau sociologue de la connaissance* (Paris, 1978), claims that Rousseau targets here Voltaire and his apology for peace. And yet Rousseau would not have the courage to entirely follow Machiavelli on his own ground: ‘Rousseau est tenté par la thèse que Machiavel énonce crument dans les *Discorsi*, suivant la quelle la guerre civile peut être une condition de la démocratie; [...] mais, si la nostalgie de la violence est constante, l’inhibition est permanente devant l’émeute et la revolution; ce n’est donc pas un hasard, si, au lieu du texte de Machiavel qu’il connaît, il donne une version transformée [...]’ (p. 195). However, Namer neither discusses Rousseau’s choice, nor explains why this ‘modified version’ is relevant to it.

<sup>34</sup> D I,4.

to Machiavelli or unconditionally adhering to his own theory? To grasp this blind spot, in my view, two things are necessary: a broader approach to Rousseau's political thought, beyond the analysis of the actual quotations of Machiavelli, as well as a wider reference to the political sensibilities of the period.

The first thing to be considered here is the theme of 'equality'. Rousseau declares that 'liberty' and not necessarily 'peace' brings about prosperity, and then he refers to Machiavelli on Florence. Now, Florence's liberty and prosperity was due, for Machiavelli, to the fact that the people had progressively destroyed the ancient nobility and established a 'wonderful equality', namely an economic situation more favorable to a popular government and to freedom, a position Machiavelli consistently holds throughout his intellectual production. Specifically in this passage, Machiavelli is explicitly linking freedom and equality, through social conflict.

A passage in the *Observations* on the King of Poland's response must be quoted here. For Rousseau, once a people has been corrupted, it is impossible to bring it back to the ancient virtue, by means, for example, of more equality: 'You would try in vain to destroy the sources of evil. You would take away in vain the nourishment of vanity, idleness, and luxury. You would even return men in vain to that first equality, preserver of innocence and source of all virtue. Their hearts once spoiled will be so forever. There is no remedy short of some great revolution – almost as much to be feared as the evil it might cure – and which is blameworthy to desire and impossible to foresee.<sup>35</sup> Engaging with the theme of corruption, in chapter I,17 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli asserts on the contrary that 'corruption and [a]

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<sup>35</sup> *Observations de Jean-Jacques Rousseau de Genève sur la réponse qui a été faite à son Discours* (1751), en. trans. *Observations by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 2, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (first Discourse) and Polemics*, ed. by R.D. Masters and C. Kelly (Hanover and London, 1992), p. 53. This does not mean, of course, that human nature can not be improved, 'at least in principle', as R. Wokler, *Rousseau* (Oxford, 1995), puts it.

slight aptitude for free life arise from an inequality that is in [the] city; and if one wishes to make it equal, it is necessary to use the greatest extraordinary means, which few know how or wish to use'.<sup>36</sup> The two texts point in a different direction: whereas for Machiavelli it is possible and necessary – although difficult – to recover the ancient virtue by restoring equality, for Rousseau, even if it were possible, it would be useless and dangerous. At stake here, in both cases, are the political effects of 'economic equality' and how they relate to conflict.<sup>37</sup>

This points us to another work where Rousseau does not mention Machiavelli. Yet his implicit presence is so strong that, in my view, it can be considered Rousseau's most Machiavellian text. In part II of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau develops his seminal argument on the introduction of private property and the consequent decline of the human species. Here, in an extremely powerful passage, he describes the feelings of those who stole what was previously common, and called it 'property'. They now fear the 'perpetual war' in which they can lose what they have acquired:

regardless of the light in which they try to place their usurpations, they knew full well that they were established on nothing but a precarious and abusive right, and that having been acquired merely by force, force might take them away from them without their having any reason to complain.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> D I,17. Both Cucchi and Levy had already pointed out the similarity with Machiavelli's text. However, they do not mention the fact that, although the topic is similar, Machiavelli's and Rousseau's arguments go in opposite directions.

<sup>37</sup> Instead of a cleavage between the two authors, Jourdan, 'Le Machiavel de Rousseau', sees here a convergence between them, in the name of 'moderation' and 'civil liberty', which goes hand in hand with a certain form of equality.

<sup>38</sup> DOI, II, p. 69.

Their situation is miserable. Incapable of uniting against the poor, the rich have a wonderful idea and they invent ‘the most thought-out project that ever entered the human mind’, namely the idea of a ‘common good’ and a common interest between exploited and exploiters:

‘Let us unite,’ [they say], ‘in order to protect the weak from the oppression [...] and assure everyone of possessing what belongs to him. Let us institute rules of justice and peace to which all will be obliged to conform. [...] instead of turning our forces against ourselves, let us gather them into one supreme power that governs us according to wise laws, that protects and defends all the members of the association, repulses common enemies, and maintains us in an eternal concord.’<sup>39</sup>

The rich are scared and isolated, and by way of this amazing invention, the ‘common good,’ they are able to transform their weakness into their force. This intense passage of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* unambiguously echoes Machiavelli’s strongest pages from book III of the *Florentine Histories*, where the ideology of concord, social harmony, and the imposture of a ‘common good’ is boldly swept away.<sup>40</sup> When he reconstructs the Tumult of the Ciompi of 1378, Machiavelli stages a series of fictional dialogues opposing the discourse of the Gonfalonier Luigi Guicciardini to that of an anonymous leader of the plebeian rebels. The political climate is similar to the fictional situation staged by Rousseau: the *Grandi* are

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<sup>39</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>40</sup> G. Namer, *Rousseau*, p. 206, claims that it is only by explicitly denouncing the anti-popular politics of the aristocracy that Rousseau is able to make explicit what remains implicit in Machiavelli, namely the indirect revelation about the art of the prince in deceiving the people and distracting it from the real problems of politics by making unnecessary wars. In fact, Rousseau can explicitly read this position in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*. This makes his choice of quoting from this book even more significant.

scared and divided, and they try to praise union.<sup>41</sup> Machiavelli reveals the hidden and dark side of the common good: no common ground is possible between exploiters and exploited until the causes of exploitation are removed:

if you observe the mode of proceeding of men, you will see that all those who come to great riches and great power have obtained them either by fraud or by force; and afterwards, to hide the ugliness of acquisition, they make it decent by applying the false title of earnings to things they have usurped by deceit or by violence.<sup>42</sup>

The Ciompi orator represents a scandal in the history of political thought. His discourse is a direct and forthright acknowledgment that politics is primarily an assertion of force. It is the discovery that force can only be asserted through violence that then gives form to the law. It is the recognition that fraud is the only means to acquire riches and power, and that violence and usurpation are the hidden ground of every 'acquisition', that those who come to power later 'make decent' by calling them 'earnings.' There is no such thing as honest earnings, in the same way that there can be no such thing as the 'common' good.

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<sup>41</sup> FH III,11: 'What do you get out of your disunion other than servitude? Or of the goods that you have stolen or would steal from us other than poverty? For those are the things that, with our industry, nourish the whole city; and if it is despoiled of them, they cannot nourish it; and those who will seize them, as things ill acquired, will not know how to preserve them: for this, hunger and poverty will come to the city. These Signori and I command you, and if decency permits we prey you to still your spirits for once and be content to rest quietly with the things that have been ordered through us, and if ever you wish something new, be pleased to ask for it with civility and not with tumult and arms. For if they are decent things, you will always be granted them, and you will not give occasion to wicked men, at your charge and to your cost, to ruin your fatherland on your shoulders.'

<sup>42</sup> FH III,13.

It seems to me that Rousseau has meditated deeply on Machiavelli's strongest conclusions about social conflict, its origins, and the link between equality and liberty.<sup>43</sup> Rousseau echoes Machiavelli's most radical pages, as well as his most 'plebeian' accents, in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*.<sup>44</sup> He seeks inspiration in Machiavelli against the *philosophes*, the *Encyclopédistes*, and the aristocratic culture within which they too easily tend to find accommodating compromises.

When he comes to the *Social Contract*, though, the tone changes dramatically. This is no longer the time for revealing the hidden side of politics. This is not the time for a destructive criticism, but rather for a constituent theory.<sup>45</sup> And this change in the tone will happen, as we know, precisely under the flag of the absolute unity and harmony within the general will. Echoing once again a teleological language, the common good, previously denounced as a subterfuge of the rich, becomes nothing less than the 'end' of the institution of the state: 'The first and most important consequence of the principles established above is that only the general will can direct the forces of the state according to the end [*la fin*] for which it was instituted, which is the common good'.<sup>46</sup>

The political programme of the *Social Contract* itself refers to harmony and unity above all, and it has an extraordinary resemblance to the fictional speech of the rich quoted above: 'Find a form of association which defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by means of which each one, while uniting with all,

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<sup>43</sup> On this point, see K.D. Schulz, *Rousseaus Eigentumskonzeption. Eine Studie zur Entwicklung der bürgerlichen Staatstheorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> This is also the conclusion of G. Namer, *Rousseau*, pp. 47-8: 'Il nous semble donc qu'en partant de la lutte des classes, et non de la guerre interindividuelle, le pacte social du second discours [...] se rapproche [...] de Machiavel, dans la mesure, où, on le sait, l'auteur des *Discours sur Tite-Live* fonde toute la vie politique sur la lutte de la noblesse et du peuple'.

<sup>45</sup> On the artificial construction of the common good as the 'crucial question' of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, see J. Charvet, *The Social Problem*.

<sup>46</sup> SC II,1.



nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.<sup>47</sup> Equality does not mean, as it did for Machiavelli, the destruction of the rich and the reappropriation of richness by the many.<sup>48</sup> It means, on the contrary, moderation and primacy of the middle class over the extremes in the name, once again, of the common good.<sup>49</sup>

But in order to neutralise the radicality of Machiavelli's thought, Rousseau has to manipulate Machiavelli's argument even further. Next to the quotation of Machiavelli in *Social Contract* II,3, where he blames partial societies, Rousseau adds another puzzling reference by declaring that 'such was the unique and sublime institution of the great Lycurgus'.<sup>50</sup> Although the importance of Lycurgus is widely recognised, scholars does not have fully stressed all the implications of referring to him in this context: how does Rousseau's mentioning of the mythical Spartan legislator sound next to Machiavelli's name?

The classical tradition speaks about Lycurgus as the legislator who imposes equality in Sparta by redistributing lands. Although Herodotus and Thucydides do not particularly

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<sup>47</sup> See SC I,6.

<sup>48</sup> Praising the historical role played by Rousseau in the formation of Scientific socialism, Marxist philosopher Galvano Della Volpe also maintains that the dialectic between the *Discours* and the *Social Contract* develops around a fundamental difference concerning the issue of equality and inequality. 'Mentre il *Contrat social*, per la sua fondamentale ispirazione etico-politica gisnaturalistica [...] non poteva offrire immediatamente che una soluzione egualitaria borghese del problema del *Discours* [...] la portata storico-problematica del *Discours*, invece, del suo criterio di un *egualitarismo mediatore di persone* [...] trascende non solo ogni soluzione egualitaria democratico-borghese ma persino democratico-socialista [...] per risolversi – postulando un nuovo piano storico – nella futura realizzazione egualitaria del comunismo scientifico'. See G. Della Volpe, *Rousseau e Marx* (Roma, 1957), pp. 73-4. For a different Marxist interpretation, see A. Illuminati, *J.-J. Rousseau e la fondazione dei valori borghesi* (Milano, 1977).

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, SC II,11, footnote: 'Do you [...] want to give constancy to the State? Bring the extremes as close together as possible. Tolerate neither rich men nor beggars. These two estates, which are naturally inseparable, are equally fatal to the common good. From the one come the fomenters of tyranny, and from the other the tyrants. It is always between them that public liberty becomes a matter of commerce. The one buys it and the other sells it'.

<sup>50</sup> SC II,3.

stress this aspect in the biography of the mythical Lycurgus,<sup>51</sup> Plutarch very clearly does, thus becoming the main source and inspiration for the men of the French revolution: when the Convention was set at the Tuileries on the 10th May 1793, a bust of Lycurgus was placed on the orator's tribune. 'Let's ask Lycurgus – says the deputy Brival the following day in his speech – how he made the Spartans the most virtuous and wise people of Greece, and he will answer that he succeeded by making all the citizens equal'.<sup>52</sup> Curiously enough, Rousseau consciously avoids the reference to Plutarch and the egalitarian character of Lycurgus' legislation.<sup>53</sup> He certainly avoids the reference to what he could read in Machiavelli himself, i.e. that 'Lycurgus with his laws made more equality of belongings in Sparta and less equality of rank'.<sup>54</sup> Once again, then, Rousseau is trying to undermine the most radical conclusions of Machiavelli on the link between political freedom, economic equality, and social conflict.

Besides the use of a common Republican vocabulary and the apparently similar use of the same categories, if Rousseau feels entitled to use Machiavelli's conflictual argument to support his own non-conflictual theory, he probably has something at least slightly different in mind when he talks about social and political conflicts. The historical perspective, here, helps a great deal. It was not uncommon, in the 18th century, to think about conflict as an element producing a certain kind of union rather than disunion, by thinking about societies and their free economic forces as opposed to the State and the constraints imposed by their political dynamics.

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<sup>51</sup> Herodotus, I,65, and Thucydides, I,18,1.

<sup>52</sup> See C. Mosse, 'Due miti politici: Licurgo e Solone', in S. Settis (a cura di), *I Greci: Storia, cultura, arte, società* (Torino, 1996), II, p. 1325 and also C. Mosse, *L'Antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>53</sup> Especially if we have to take seriously Rousseau's tribute to the 'excellence' of Plutarch in his capacity at grasping heroes' characters through the details of their lives. See *Emile*, IV. Yet in his *Parallèles entre les deux républiques de Sparte et de Rome* (1751-53), for example, Rousseau himself never gives details on the character and nature of Lycurgus' laws.

<sup>54</sup> D I,6.

A relevant example of this strategy is the *Anti-Machiavel* of Frederic II, in which the Prussian sovereign and friend to Voltaire, attempts to tame Machiavelli's theory of conflict in this same way. Although 'nothing contributes better to the force of a monarchy than the intimate and inseparable union of all his members', yet 'republics must somehow entertain some form of jealousy among their members, because if the parties do not watch out over each other, the form of government becomes a monarchy'.<sup>55</sup> Frederic's preference is of course not for this form of government, and yet he suggests that powers should watch over each other in the republics, echoing a fundamental principle of modern Liberal constitutionalism.

We find a similar idea in Montesquieu's attempt to neutralise the extreme theories of Machiavelli. In the *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* (1734), for example, Montesquieu argues the necessity of tolerating the conflicts between the plebs and the senate, in order to allow men to vent the ambitions typical of human nature. In his masterpiece *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu goes much further, developing his original reading of Machiavelli's theory and arguing for the institutionalisation and constitutionalisation of conflicts within the modern logic of a reciprocal control of powers within the State. The Liberal paradigm developed by Montesquieu is in my view the most powerful attempt to neutralise Machiavelli's assumptions<sup>56</sup>.

This is the background against which Rousseau must make his own choice. He is well aware of the extreme character of Machiavelli's positions, and how they interpellate his own theory. He is aware of the historical context and the current debate surrounding the

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<sup>55</sup> Frederic II, 'L'Anti-Machiavel', XX, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> Rather than only moderate them, as suggested by Paul Carrese, 'The Machiavellian Spirit of Montesquieu's Liberal Republic', in Paul A. Rahe, *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy* (Cambridge, 2006) pp. 121-42.

name Machiavelli. He is also aware of the originality of his own theory, which has to contend with powerful alternative discourses: the more moderate positions of the *philosophes* – specifically, Liberal constitutionalism and the balance of powers endorsed by Montesquieu – on the one hand, and the enlightened absolutism represented by Frederic II and Voltaire on the other. Whereas the former had attempted to tame Machiavelli’s theory via the institutionalisation of conflicts, the latter had violently attacked him and his theory of conflicts. Both, though, shared the idea that some form of disunion could in fact be seen as a kind of union.

Beyond the explicit references to Machiavelli, Rousseau touches upon this problem in several other parts of his work, when he actually tackles the problem of social conflict and of the turbulences of a republican way of life.<sup>57</sup> The tensions within Rousseau’s discourse seem to arise whenever the necessity of the balance of powers clashes with his preference for an absolute supremacy of the legislative power. But even more important, as I tried to show above, those tensions emerge out of the ontological status of the sovereign power itself *vis-à-vis* the individuals who constitute it or, in other words, between the way the relationship between the many and the one is conceptualised. Machiavelli’s political theory proves to be the ultimate litmus test of Rousseau’s theory.

When it comes to the discussion of the role played by conflict within the state, *vis-à-vis* both Rousseau’s groundbreaking idea of the general will and the historical debate surrounding the name of Machiavelli, what is to be done? Should the name of Machiavelli be obliterated and hidden behind the condemnation of partial societies? This would mean, in practice, joining those condemning him, and missing the opportunity to contribute to his

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<sup>57</sup> M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought* (Chicago and London, 1990), p. 210.

Republican reevaluation. Should, on the contrary, the name of Machiavelli be mentioned? But if so, how? Doing so might bring to the surface the stark differences between Rousseau and Machiavelli. The possibility of considering disunion as a form of union, in the mood of the time, certainly helps him, and possibly contributes to make him feel these inconsistencies less important than they actually appear to us.

The risk though, as I have illustrated above, is also to make more explicit the inner tensions characterising Rousseau's theory itself, between a more radically egalitarian and destructive moment, based on the critique of private property, and a more moderate constituent moment, aiming at social harmony and the common good. Rousseau consciously decides to run this risk. The tension, in this sense, does not rise from Rousseau's misunderstanding of Machiavelli. He repeatedly and consistently demonstrates a clear understanding of Machiavelli's theory of conflict and of what is at stake in it. The tension arises, in my view, from the inner dialectic of Rousseau's thought and its evolution, which is particularly clear between the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and the *Social Contract*. Machiavelli openly claimed the inextricable convergence between freedom, equality, and conflict. There is clearly no space for the latter in the *Social Contract*. Therefore, whenever Rousseau tries to articulate the nexus between freedom and equality, the question of conflicts reemerges as a problem, precisely through the presence of Machiavelli. Rousseau decides to speak his name out loud, and by doing so, he leaves us with the task of taking a stand in this political and ideological *Kampffplatz*, concerning the role of conflicts and their relationship with order, freedom, and democracy.