Machiavelli and Interpretation

POLI 561
Fall 2014
422 FERRIER
M 11:35-14:25

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Description

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) is one of the most controversial and idiosyncratic thinkers in the tradition of European political theory. His political and historical works emerged during the tumultuous Italian crises of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, which Machiavelli observed not only from the vantage point of a writer and historian but also as secretary and ambassador in the Florentine chancery. His texts have given rise to widely divergent interpretations: he is viewed by some as the first political scientist, a theorist of the modern state and one of the founder of political modernity, and he is regarded by others as a medieval mind, ensconced in cosmological mythology and nostalgic attachments to ancient Rome. Some regard him as a dispassionate and objective political realist while others view him as a fervent Italian patriot; some see him as a theorist of the absolutist state or even an adviser to tyrants; for others he was an advocate of republican freedom, participatory government, equality, revolutionary politics, and democracy.

How can a body of work give rise to such disparate and incompatible interpretations? In this seminar, we will address this question via an in-depth study of Machiavelli’s major political works and the main strands of interpretation. In our assessment of the various interpretive traditions, we will pay special attention to the methods deployed as well as to the historical, philosophical, and literary presuppositions behind each. By juxtaposing historical, philosophical, and interpretive methods through which texts and ideas are confronted and understood, we will be able to raise fundamental conceptual and methodological questions about political theory and the history of political thought qua modes of inquiry.

Prerequisites & Restrictions

This is an advanced seminar open to graduate students, final year honours students, and other advanced undergraduates with the permission of the instructor. Students must have taken at least one upper-level course in political theory or political philosophy.

Required Texts

The following books are available for purchase from The Word Bookstore, 469 Milton Street (cash or cheque only). They will also be on reserve in the Humanities & Social Sciences Library.


All other readings (starred *) will be available on myCourses.
Students are encouraged to read texts in the original languages. Contact me for bibliographic information.

**Assignments and Grades**

Written assignments for this course will consist of (i) weekly short reflection papers; (ii) a seminar paper proposal; and (iii) a 15-20 pp. seminar paper due at the end of the semester.

Further instructions for both paper outlines and papers will be made available later in the course.

All assignments are due on the dates indicated in the syllabus. They are to be submitted in hard copy at the beginning of class. Late papers will be docked one third of a letter grade (5 percentage points) for every day late, including weekends. Extensions are available only for serious and documented reasons, and they must be requested ahead of time. No extensions will be granted on (or after) an assignment’s due date. Do not send assignments via email unless otherwise instructed.

Your written work will be graded on originality, reasoning and argument, organization, clarity of exposition, and style. Essays will be graded out of 100; a detailed grading rubric will be posted on myCourses.

Final grades are calculated according to the following schedule. Students must receive a passing grade (D) in each of the following four grade categories to receive a passing grade for the course.

- Reflection papers: 20%
- Paper proposal: 10%
- Seminar paper: 50%
- Class participation: 20%

**Classroom Policies**

As this is a seminar, **attendance** is critical. Students with three or more absences should not expect a passing grade.

You are responsible for having read the assigned texts prior to the class meeting. Prepare for class by taking notes and by thinking about questions, ideas, or problems that arise in your reading. Be sure to bring books and hard copy printouts of readings to class.

McGill University values **academic integrity**. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. Please note that I take plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty seriously, and your work will be reviewed for potential plagiarism issues by means of text-matching software.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant-e a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

**Research** shows that students who take notes by hand significantly outperform students who take notes on **mobile computing devices** (even when the devices are offline and used exclusively for note-taking). For your own educational benefit, While laptops and tablets are not prohibited in this class, I strongly urge you to leave them at home or stowed away in your bags. Needless to say, any use of electronic equipment may only be used for note-taking. Any other use (including e-mail, web surfing, games, chat, messaging, and so on) is distracting and disruptive to fellow students and is not permitted during class time.
As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities (514)398-6009.

Class Schedule

Sep 8  Introduction: Interpretation, Textualism and Contextualism
Leo Strauss, What Is Political Philosophy? pp. 9-77 *
Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, pp. 22-37 *
Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” *
Hayden White, The Content of the Form, pp. 26-82 *
Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision, pp. 3-26 *

Sep 15  The Prince
Letter to Vettori
Recommended: Corrado Vivanti, Niccolò Machiavelli: An Intellectual Biography

Sep 22  The Prince [cont.]
The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca *
Mandragola *
Hans Baron “Machiavelli: The Republican Citizen and the Author of ‘the Prince’.” *
Quentin Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, pp. 113-138 *
Mary Dietz, “Trapping The Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception” *
Recommended: Erasmus, The Education of a Christian Prince

Sep 29  Discourses on Livy, book I: preface, chapters 1-15
Livy, The Early History of Rome, books I-II *
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Of The Social Contract, II.7-8; III.10 *
Recommended: Polybius, Histories, book VI

Oct 6   Discourses on Livy, book I: chapters 16-45
Politics and the Public:
Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli” *
Felix Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, pp. 3-200 *
John Najemy, “Society, Class, and State in the Discourses on Livy” *

Oct 13  Thanksgiving - No Class

Oct 20  Discourses on Livy, book II
Republican Liberty (“Cambridge School”):
J.G.A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment, pp. 1-9; 66-80; 156-218 *
Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli on virtù and the Maintenance of Liberty” *
Quentin Skinner, “The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty” *
Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli’s Discorsi and the Pre-Humanist Origins of Republican Ideas” *

Oct 27  Discourses on Livy, book III
Straussian Textualism:
Leo Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, pp. 9-53; 174-299 *
Harvey Mansfield, “Machiavelli’s Virtue” *
Recommended: Paul Rahe, “Situating Machiavelli” *
Nov 3   The Democratic Machiavelli
       Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision, pp. 175-213 *
       Claude Lefort, Machiavelli in the Making, pp. 220-279 *
       John McCormick, Machiavellian Democracy, pp. vii-138 *
       Recommended: Miguel Vatter, Between Form and Event

Nov 10  Marxist interpretations
       Antonio Gramsci, Selections From the Prison Notebooks, pp. 125-185; 219-223; 242-253*
       Louis Althusser, Machiavelli and Us, pp. 3-52; 81-103 *
       Recommended: Antonio Negri, Insurgencies, pp. 37-97

Nov 17  Machiavelli and Gender
       Hanna Pitkin, Fortune Is a Woman, pp. 138-160; 285-327 *
       Wendy Brown, Manhood and Politics, pp. 71-123 *
       Arlene Saxonhouse, “Niccolò Machiavelli: Women as Men, Men as Women, and the
       Ambiguity of Sex” *
       Jane S. Jaquette, “Rethinking Machiavelli: Feminism and Citizenship” *
       Paper proposals due

Nov 24  Violence, Militarism and Empire
       Mikael Hörnqvist, Machiavelli and Empire, pp. 38-112 *
       Mark Hulliung, Citizen Machiavelli, pp. 219-257 *
       Wayne A. Rebhorn, Foxes and Lions, pp. 86-134 *

Dec 1   Machiavelli’s Rhetoric
       Maurizio Viroli, Machiavelli, pp. 73-113 *
       Victoria Kahn, “Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s Prince” *
       Nancy Struiver, Theory as Practice, pp. 147-181 *
       Wayne Rebhorn, Foxes and Lions: Machiavelli’s Confidence Men, pp. 188-227 *
       Virginia Cox, “Rhetoric and Ethics in Machiavelli” *

Dec 4 [I] Review
       Seminar papers due in class
Machiavelli’s Key Sources and Interlocutors


Secondary Literature


