

PHL 522: Machiavelli/Lefort
Spring Quarter 2012
Professor Birmingham

Office: 2352 Clifton, Suite 150.18
Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:00-4:00 and by appointment
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Course Description: In the opening sentence of his essay, “A note on Machiavelli,” Merleau-Ponty asks, “How could he have been understood?” The “he” is Machiavelli and Merleau-Ponty goes on in the essay to suggests that the question has not been answered and Machiavelli retains his capacity to startle, captivate, and embarrass (especially philosophers). Althusser in *Machiavelli and Us* cites and agrees with Merleau-Ponty, claiming that “Machiavelli confronts philosophy with a singular, and singularly difficult, question: that of his comprehension.” Lefort too argues that Machiavelli’s thought is characterized by an enigma that is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp; at the same time, this enigma animates Lefort’s political thought. Assuming that we too will be startled, captivated and embarrassed, this seminar will attempt to comprehend Machiavelli’s thought by reading it alongside and through Claude Lefort’s interrogation of this thought in his seminal work, *Le Travail de l’oeuvre Machiavel*, (*Machiavelli in the Making*). The course will focus on several central issues that emerge for both Machiavelli and Lefort: political foundation and duration, sovereignty, revolution, history and “effectual truth”, contingency (*fortuna*) and political agency (*virtu*), class struggle, the multitude, power and the role of violence, and the status of governing and making war.

Required Texts:

Niccolo Machiavelli *The Art of War*
The Prince
Discourses on Livy

Claude Lefort *Le Travail de l’oeuvre Machiavel*— (*Machiavelli in the Making*,
translated by Michael Smith)
“Machiavelli and the *Verita Effectuale*” in *Writing: The Political Test*

Louis Althusser “Machiavelli’s Solitude,” included in *Machiavelli and Us*

Recommended:

Louis Althusser: *Machiavelli and Us*
Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings; The Prison Notebooks*
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “A note on Machiavelli,” in *Signs*
Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*
Isaiah Berlin, “The Question of Machiavelli” in *Against the Current*

Requirements

Each student will be responsible for a class presentation. In addition to discussing the assigned text, the presentation should try to show the ways in which the text under discussion agrees and disagrees with Lefort’s reading of Machiavelli. (James’s presentation will of course be on an

article by Lefort; thus, I am hoping that his presentation will explicate the ways in which the article illuminates Lefort's reading of the *Discourses*.) The presentation should be between about 3 typed single-spaced pages; it **may not** exceed 4 pages. Students are responsible for making copies of the presentation prior to the class meeting. Students are required to hand in a polished presentation at the end of the seminar. The final grade will be based on the polished presentation as well as seminar participation.

Course Outline

March 29 Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Parts 1 and 2

April 5 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Dedication and Chapters 1-8
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Part 3, Chapters 1-2

April 12 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapters 9-19
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Chapter 3-4

April 19 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapters 20-24
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Chapters 4-5
Merleau-Ponty, "The Question of Machiavelli" **David Reese**
Bernie Flynn will be attending our seminar

April 26 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book One, Chapters 1-26
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Part 4, Chapter 6
Lefort, "Machiavelli and the *Verita Effectuale*" **James Murphy**

May 3 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book One, Chapters 27-48
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Part 4, Chapter 7
Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* **Maria Salvador**

May 10 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book One, Chapters 49-60
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Part 4, Chapter 8
Gramsci, *The Modern Prince* **Gil Morejon**

May 17 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book Two,
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Marking*, Part 4, Chapters 8-9
Althusser, "Machiavelli's Solitude" in *Machiavelli and Us* **Selin Islekel**

May 24 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book Three, Chapters 1-25
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Chapter 10
Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* **Owen Glyn-Williams**

May 30 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book Three, Chapters 26-49
Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, Chapter 10 continued
Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* **David Bleeden**