

Panel Abstracts 5.1

Claude Lefort as Interpreter of Machiavellian Social Conflict

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Le Travail de l'oeuvre de Machiavel is an impressive lefortian work dedicated to the Florentine Secretary that has added and enriched the exegetic and interpretative manualistic thinking of Machiavelli. Claude Lefort was one of the central figures for the analysis of the politique, opening up new perspectives of investigation into political philosophy in France. It's in Machiavelli that he discovers a different outcome in the political articulation of the social division that establishes the symbolic place of power, as a mirror of society itself and its institution, contrary to the Marxist idea that the origin of social conflict lay in the logic resulting from capitalist rule. Social stratification and conflict are inherent in society, a division that allows the birth of the State. Thanks to the influence of Machiavelli's reading Lefort will elaborate his theory on the modern democracy as a form of society in which individuals and institutions are constantly mise à l'épreuve of indeterminacy. The Prince, in his interpretation, assumes a mediating function through which society, divided into essence, can relate to itself. This mediation should not be understood as socially embodied, because it must be considered from the symbolic point of view: The Prince is an imaginary representation that solves the intrinsic fragmentation society. It is with the lefortian mise en scenes of power, through the figure of the Prince, that society is reflected in its division and at the same time self-understood. With this assumption the power will be a configuration of the social, from which it originates, and from which division it realizes the symbolic unity of the political. It is through conflicts - necessary for the symbolic representation of political unity - that social reality is manifested as indeterminate and as real. Conflict and disunity also define the ontology of freedom, its essence, cause and resource of a free State. In this regard, it is Lefort who highlights how the conflict is not simply a problem to be repressed but also the origin of that political dynamic that allows man to live in freedom. Within the analysis of Machiavelli's works Lefort traces the assumptions of the transcendent nature of the political as a consequence of social conflict and of the irresolvable conflict as an element that leads to the reflexive recognition of society with itself. Of course, we could also find the prodromes, or at least the basis, of his theory on totalitarianism. Lefort gives us a Machiavellian deepening in an analysis stemming from the dialectical confrontation with Marxist orthodoxy, affirming the subordination of the author of the Manifesto to the perspicacity of Machiavelli that marked a point of advancement in the study of the democratic dimension of social: Machiavelli had already understood the difference between the State and civil society and their relationship with the Power as a third element that, placed at a distance between them (and therefore in the symbolic), allows to explain the evolutions between the classes.

Panel Abstracts 5.1

Claude Lefort's Interpretation of Discourses and The Prince: Conflict, power and the people

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This paper proposes a new reading of Claude Lefort's interpretation of the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli, mainly grounded on his most important work: *Le travail de l'œuvre*, published in 1972. The French philosopher is known as the promoter of one of the most influential among "conflictual" interpretations of Machiavellian work. In the latest years several studies grasped the importance of conflict within the Secretary's thought. From this perspective, though with the necessary simplifications, Machiavelli is the theorist of conflict, of politics interpreted as perpetual movement, refractory to any institutional fixation. Their works outline an alternative trajectory for modern thought, marked by conflict and division and opposed to the Hobbesian line of pact, order and unity.

Concurrently, the attention to the dynamics of conflict and its relation to the Lefortian theory of democracy has led many thinkers to see his work as a superficial interpretation, a partial reading which, likewise many others, considers only pieces of the Machiavellian work and it uses them to defend preconceived theses: in this case, the protection of democracy. *Le travail de l'œuvre* and the other articles that the French philosopher dedicated to these themes would therefore present an opportunistic reading, the meaning of which could be found only in the context of the "Cold War" during which they were born. In other words, the French philosopher would have only "used" the pages of *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* to consolidate his idea of democracy and to abandon Marxism. Many researchers have therefore read in his Machiavellian studies a temporary stage, a break in the parable of his reflection: from Marxism to democracy, from revolution to reformism.

However, as we shall demonstrate, if considered and read in its entirety and complexity, the Lefortian interpretation is hardly reducible in this reading diagram. *Le travail de l'œuvre* is not only an instrumental reading, simply aimed at giving the support of an *auctoritas* to the conflicting definition of democracy. It is rather an accurate study that analyzes, chapter by chapter, the totality of Machiavellian works – *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* – the theses and the contradictions of the Florentine's thought.

The speech will be divided into three parts. First of all, we will try to understand how the Lefort's work on Machiavelli must be understood within a broader theoretical framework, meaning the reflection on the history and the symbolic that the philosopher conducts during the Fifties. In the second part, we will analyze his complex reading of *The Prince* and *Discourses* throughout the theme of the conflict and the role of power and the people. Finally, we will draw the conclusions and we will be able to understand – especially through the concept of the people and the original division – what distinguishes Lefort's interpretation from those focusing on the idea of constituent power or from the "plebeian politics". In this way we will be able to understand the relevance and the importance of the Lefortian interpretation and open up the debate for a new overall idea of the French philosopher's thought.

Panel Abstracts 5.1

La Boétie with and against Machiavelli : Thinking conflict and desire in contemporary politics with Claude Lefort

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It often goes unnoticed that after his novel interpretation of Machiavelli, Lefort turned to La Boétie. This decision must be understood through the articulation of the ideas of conflict and desire at the core of the « Machiavellian Moment » that emerged in post-War France. Lefort read La Boétie to better his understanding of Machiavelli's ideas of desire and conflict – if not to correct them. In turn, Lefort developed his own ideas of desire and conflict, which gave way to his original theory of democracy as a fragile regime of conflict that can never eliminate the desire of unity that may lead to totalitarianism.

A french judge and a Renaissance writer, La Boétie wrote *Le Discours de la servitude volontaire* around the middle of the 16th century. The secret manuscript was first published in 1674 by the monarchomachs, eleven years after the death of its author. In the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, the unauthorized publication created a myth surrounding La Boétie, which tainted its reception.

Contrary to popular belief, La Boétie offered an underrated masterpiece of modern political philosophy. *Le Discours de la servitude volontaire* is not only a manifesto against tyranny. Published the same year as Gentillet's *Anti-Machiavel*, it was falsely associated with the french critique of Machiavelli as a teacher of evil that developed in the 16th century. La Boétie is both a disciple and a critique. The nature of the influence of Machiavelli over La Boétie appears to be very ambiguous. Lefort was the first scholar to give a complete and nuanced account of La Boétie's work through his relationship to Machiavelli.

First, La Boétie developed an original conception of desire. For Machiavelli, the conflict of desires is mainly a social and political phenomenon. The city is divided by two opposite desires : the people don't want to be dominated or oppressed by the Greats and the Greats want to dominate and oppress the people. For Lefort, La Boétie goes deeper than Machiavelli, by transferring the conflict of desires to man's psyche. Man appears divided by a desire of freedom and a desire of servitude. This division both explains tyranny and the search for freedom.

Second, contrary to Machiavelli, La Boétie failed to think the social dimension of conflict. The phenomenon of voluntary servitude being routed in man, freedom can only come from friendship between a small elite of people, a political link that appears all but utopian.

This paper will pursue two main goals. First, it will aim at clarifying the influence of Machiavelli over La Boétie by exploring their differences on how to articulate desire and conflict. Second, it will aim at combining their ideas in order to think conflict and desire in contemporary politics, drawing from the

Panel Abstracts 5.1

philosophy of Lefort and his disciples. The goal is to understand different forms of voluntary servitude that inhibits or emerge from democratic conflict – be it totalitarian, democratic or neoliberal servitude.