



Machiavelli and Contemporary Politics

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Plenary Session II Abstracts

Democracy and Conflict: A Machiavellian Perspective

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ABSTRACT TBA

Plenary Session II Abstracts

Machiavelli and Modern Democracy

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We live in desperate times, in rich and poor democracies. As a result, ordinary citizens are often left with a false choice between government by technocrats or government by populists, which occludes other real possibilities. Using Machiavelli as my main spur (and spear), especially his embrace of conflict and the institutional empowerment of common people as the guard of liberty in free republics, in this paper I draw some of these out, defending a feasible, radical democratic politics. Under current representative democratic conditions, ordinary citizens are substantively and procedurally disconnected from the main sites of economic and political representation in two ways. First, periodic elections, representative democracy's central legitimizing and decision-making feature, fail to bring into sharp enough focus the existing needs, interests and judgements necessary for adequate determination of who should rule. Second, there exist few real means of holding representatives accountable in ways that both empower representatives to judge independently and enable citizens to critique and veto judgements and establish laws. I therefore put forward and defend a set of institutional proposals – first outlined in my *Freedom is Power: Liberty Through Political Representation* (CUP 2014) – that focus on resolving these two main problems. These are means of reforming our polities to overcome debilitating domination: stubborn and worsening inequality within and between states; institutional stasis in the face of various forms of populism; the effects of oligarchies across the globe, in particular, the chasm between ordinary citizens and their representatives, and its deleterious effects on political judgement by rulers and ruled.

Plenary Session II Abstracts

Analysing State Violence: A Machiavellian Frame

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The dominant framework for theorizing state violence in contemporary social theory and philosophy is legal positivism. Legal positivism offers a normative taxonomy that distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate violence depending on whether or not that violence is lawful. (There are many critics of legal positivism, above all Just War theory, which is beholden to a natural law framework. In his "Critique of Violence" Walter Benjamin carefully untangled the aporetic knots in which legal positivism ties itself. Yet even though this essay is well-known and enjoyed a renaissance in the wake of its resuscitation by Jacques Derrida in "Force of Law," contemporary normative debates still largely take place within these well-established patterns.)

There are a number of presuppositions to these debates, for example that violence is a 'last resort' or 'ultima ratio' of politics, that violence is tantamount to enforcement (hence the euphemization of police violence as 'law enforcement'), that violence is a product of nature and hence inescapable, and that violence effectively imposes a will by coercing an actor to perform or to desist from a certain act. In recent decades, political and legal philosophers have gone so far to effectively identify the force of the law with a threat, i.e. a speech act.

Drawing on my recent book (*Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence*, Cambridge 2018) my paper calls these presuppositions into question and argues that the model of coercion—based largely on Weber and Clausewitz—that undergirds these analyses of violence is highly specific and therefore limited. Coercion does not exhaust the diversity of forms of violence that states use to enforce law, order, and to control populations. A Machiavellian analysis brings into view the spectacular, sensory, graphic, dramatic, and iconic dimensions of violence that are disavowed by normative analyses that explicitly or implicitly figure state violence as coercion.