

EPIC OR TRAGEDY?

ON THE POSTHUMOUS LIFE OF MACHIAVELLI'S POLITICAL THOUGHT



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Introduction

Background

Arguably one of the most (in)famous books on politics ever written, Niccolò Machiavelli's short treatise *Il Principe* has drawn great controversy ever since it started to circulate in 1513. Allegedly responsible for the widespread political corruption in France, Machiavelli's book was included on the first Papal Index of 1559 and many references to his name hold a negative connotation. "Machiavellian" in the English language suggest deceitful, opportunistic, manipulative or evil behaviour, Shakespeare mentions him as the "murderous Machiavelli" and the sobriquet "Old Nick" refers to no other than the Devil himself (Berlin, 2013, p. 44). However, Machiavelli has been despised as much as he has been praised. Although ignored by the intended recipient, Machiavelli's practical advices have been followed by a great many of other historical leaders. It is said that his ideas have not only guided Catherine de Medici when she instigated the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, but that they also informed figures like Lenin, Hitler and Mao in their bloody conduct of "*mantenere lo stato*".

Next to that, his contributions to the field of political theory are hailed for being 'firsts'. Machiavelli is praised for being the first political thinker to stress the theoretical autonomy of the state, the first empirical political scientist, the first political realist, a great republican theorist or the founder of the elitist theory (Bondanella & Musa, 1979, pp. 38-39). About this multidimensionality, it is necessary to stress that the analysis presented here is limited to the study of Machiavelli within the context of International Relations (IR) theory. The scope of this project is limited to the practice of branding Machiavelli as the 'arch-realist' or the 'father' of the tradition of IR realism. In this project I shall seek to answer the question of: *why is Machiavelli considered a realist thinker, and to what extent is this an accurate characterization of his thought?*

Context of the discussion and problem statement

Amongst the many labels that stick to Machiavelli's name, none seems to be as enduring as that of the 'arch-realist'. The Florentine has also been portrayed by realist scholars as the father of their academic tradition and his ideas are often presented within the frame of political realism; concepts that are also often repeated in the mainstream discourse of IR. However, this practice of labelling historical thinkers is controversial. A substantial body of revisionist literature has amounted in which established frames around historical thinkers are challenged over the last thirty years. Originating from the academic fields of International Intellectual History and Critical Disciplinary History, special attention is paid to the way in which classical thinkers have been canonized and incorporated into the realist and liberal traditions of IR. The criticism within this body of literature often centres around the way in which IR scholars have interpreted the writings of classical thinkers. For example, Edward Keene has challenged the portrayal of Hugo Grotius as an early defender of the modern society of states in mainstream IR theory and Michael Williams has criticized the realist school for promoting

a misleading interpretation of Hobbes' philosophy (Keene, 1999, p. 157) (Williams, 1996, pp. 229-234). Though writing specifically on Grotius, Keene's critique on contemporary IR scholarship is illustrative for some general problems that result from interpreting historical thinkers from a narrow IR perspective. Firstly, according to Keene, Grotius is pictured in contemporary IR literature as defending a modern conception that he himself never held against criticism that he never heard; and secondly, such misinterpretations of Grotius' writings are not only unhelpful, they also get in the way of a proper understanding of his work (Keene, 1999, p. 157). In a similar vein to Keene's critique, I will problematize the portrayal of Machiavelli in the mainstream literature as the 'arch-realist' or the 'father' of the realist tradition. The argument presented in this project can therefore be situated within this specific body of revisionist literature.

Definitions

Before any further discussion on whether or not Machiavelli should be thought of as a realist thinker, it is necessary to establish what realism exactly entails. It should be noted at the outset, however, that realism is a highly contested concept itself. This is because realism is neither a uniform or well-established theory on international relations, nor is it neatly defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions (Donnelly, 2000, p. 06). In this project, I follow Donnelly's take on realism, which (taken all together), treats realism as a philosophical orientation or research program that emphasizes the constraints imposed on politics by individual or national egoism and international anarchy, resulting international relations being largely a realm of power and interest (Donnelly, 2000, pp. 08-09). A remark should be made on that realism is sometimes referred to as 'political realism' or 'IR-realism' in the literature. Though some these concepts might entail something different, I shall treat the 'umbrella concepts' of realism, political realism and IR realism as one and the same thing and use these terms interchangeably in this project.¹

Besides being a philosophical orientation, realism is often referred to as an academic tradition or a tradition of thought. As such, the realist tradition often takes the shape of a canon of great thinkers. However, conflicting accounts are made in the literature on where and when this tradition first started. In the mainstream rendition, the realist tradition is presented as one that can be traced back to the ancient writings of Sun Tzu in China or Thucydides in Greece and runs via a chain of historical figures (like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Carr and Morgenthau) right down to the present. Contrary to this account, I will argue in this paper that this image of this 'classical' realist tradition is a retrospectively created construct. In this project, I follow Ken Booth's account that the 'classical' realist tradition was started by "a self-defined, largely US-based, and IR-centric group whose main work was done over a thirty-year period from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s" (Booth, 2011, p. 07).

¹ For a detailed discussion on the various and sometimes contrasting ways in which realism can be described, see Jack Donnelly, (2000). *Realism and International Relations*. pp. 6-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conceptual framework

At the core of this project lie the concepts of interpretation, meaning and critique. These concepts need explanation for I will use these in order to analyse the cases.

Interpretation – or sense making – refers to a mode of normative inquiry that seeks to reveal and illuminate normative meaning with the ultimate goal to enrich understanding (Brown&Eckersley,2018,pp.05-06). Because the interpretation of a text might differ per person, time and place, so does the view of what the text ‘means’. Quentin Skinner described three different types of meaning, all of which he considered legitimate. The first concerns what certain specific words or sentences mean in a given work. The second form of meaning refers to the disposition of the reader; namely, “what does the work means to its reader?” and finally, what does a writer mean by what he says in his work; i.e. “what are his intentions?” (Syrjämäki,2011,pp.17-18). It is important to note that *meaning* does not reside inside an object, action or utterance, but is always attributed to it. Meanings are therefore constructions, created out of an interaction between reader and text, or among reader, text and the author’s intentions (Yanow,2015,p.21). From a post-modernist perspective, the ‘meaning’ – as the product of a process of meaning-making – can reveal the preconceptions and prejudices of the reader. Viewed like this, the ‘meaning’ of a text says often more about the interpreter than about the author of the text. In an attempt to reveal such biases, post-modernist scholars often employ a different mode of normative inquiry that is analytically distinct from interpretation: the *critique*. Though the critique also seeks to reveal meaning, it does so in a way that exposes unjust, wrongful, self-serving or harmful ideas and consequently criticizes particular understandings (Brown&Eckersley,2018,p.06).

In this project I make a distinction between two types of critiques. The first type of critique is about the way in which mainstream and realist scholars have come – from a historiographical perspective – to unjust and wrongful interpretations of Machiavelli’s philosophy. To do this, I will use Skinners’ mythologies. The second type of critique is about interpretations that are self-serving. To analyse this, I draw upon Brian Schmidt’s distinction between historic and analytic traditions. I elaborate on each of these critiques in section I.

Research Design

I will answer the research question by addressing three sub-questions, each in a separate section in the project. Before I answer these sub-questions, I shall provide an elaboration on the historiographic tools of analysis in section I.

Sub-question I

The first sub-question is: *why is Machiavelli considered a realist thinker in the mainstream and realist discourses of IR?* To answer this, I must first describe *where* and *how* Machiavelli is brought into connection

with realism in IR theory. The context in which Machiavelli is referred to in IR theory is within both the mainstream discourse and within the writings of realist scholars.

For the mainstream discourse in IR, I have chosen to summarize how Machiavelli is brought into connection with the school of realism within introductory textbooks to the field of IR. Textbooks not only provide new students an overview to the field, but more importantly that they aspire to do so in general, well-balanced and neutral terms. Moreover, observing that the discipline of IR is increasingly devolving into specialized pockets of research, Carvalho et al. have argued that scholars have become increasingly reliant on textbook-knowledge of issues that are not directly related to their own areas of specialism (Carvalho, Leira, & Hobson, 2011, pp. 737-738). Textbooks are therefore “vitally important in generating, as it were, a kind of lowest common denominator that usually passes for the ‘common’ sense of the discipline” (Carvalho, Leira, & Hobson, 2011, p. 738). Agreeing with the point Carvalho et. al make, I argue that introductory textbooks are good representations of the mainstream discourse of IR. The five textbooks that I’ll use are those by Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen (2003), Richard Mansbach and Kirsten Rafferty (2008), Joshua Goldstein and Jon Pevehouse (2008), Andrew Heywood (2011) and John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (2014)². The criteria for selecting textbooks were that they were written in the English language and that they were directly available.³ With regard to the first criterion, I focused on English-language textbooks because the lingua franca of the discipline is mostly English. Regarding the second criterion, I selected textbooks those textbooks that were directly available to me. They include both those that I found in the library of the social sciences faculty of the Leiden University⁴, as well as the one that I was required to purchase myself in my first year. Two remarks should be made about the selection process. Firstly, it should be noted that the selection of textbooks is somewhat eclectic and largely outdated; with the oldest textbook being fifteen years and the newest four years old, while the core of the selection is between seven and ten years old. I recognize this limit my analysis and prevents me from drawing conclusions of the present practice of portraying Machiavelli. The second remark is that I also understand that the low quantity of cases limits the possibility of making general claims on how Machiavelli is portrayed in the mainstream literature. However, despite these two limitations, I argue that the selection is sufficient on the grounds of the availability of source material, the purpose and the scope of this project.

As for the context and the way in which Machiavelli is referred to by realist scholars, I selected cases based on two requirements. The first being that scholars must have made references to Machiavelli in their scholarship, and second, that they are textbook examples of realist thinkers. I selected E.H. Carr, John Herz, Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin because these scholars both fulfil the requirements of being textbook examples of realist thinkers and that they made references to Machiavelli in their scholarship. Because this

² The chapter on realism that is discussed in this project is not written by Baylis et. al, but by Tim Dunne and Brian Schmidt.

³ With directly available I mean those textbooks that, without having to be purchased, were immediately accessible.

⁴ When there were more than one edition of the same textbook available, I consequently selected the latest version.

selection contains both classical- and neo-realist scholars, I believe that the selection of scholars present a good representation of how realist scholars have referred to Machiavelli.

To answer the first sub-question, I will summarize elements of the references made to Machiavelli within the textbooks and the writings of the four realists. Summarizing textbooks differs from summarizing the writings of scholars. This is because all textbooks are designed to do the same thing: to provide a general introduction to the field of IR. Although they might differ in content and approach, it is possible to compare between textbooks and to make generalized statements for how Machiavelli is rendered in the mainstream discourse. Contrary to the textbooks, which provide a general introduction to the field of IR, realists address specific topics *within* the field of IR through in-depth analysis. The theoretical arguments of realist scholars analysed in this section all address different topics and are made for different purposes. It is for this reason that generalizations are more difficult to make about the individual realist scholars. If possible, I will group recurring elements into separate categories of references to Machiavelli.

Sub-question II

I will provide a critique on the mainstream and realist interpretation of Machiavelli by answering the second sub-question of: *to what extent do the mainstream and realist interpretation represent an accurate characterization of Machiavelli's thought?* What I mean here by 'accurate' is *historical accuracy*. In this paper, I equate an historical accurate interpretation of a classical thinker with a contextualist interpretation. The reason for this is that I agree with Skinner that to come to a proper understanding of a classic text one should grasp at what the author meant to say in it. An attempt to accurately characterize the thought of a historic writer therefore involves trying to grasp the illocutionary intention of the author by analysing the historical and linguistic context in which he wrote the text (Skinner, 1969, p.46). For this reason, I will argue that characterizations of Machiavelli that are not informed by a contextualist interpretation of his writings cannot be historically accurate.

Having said that, I should make two remarks at this theoretical standpoint. The first remark is that the 'true' meaning of a text is impossible to determine because both the intentions of the writer and the context in which he wrote cannot be established with absolute certainty. Historical accuracy is therefore never absolute, but always approximated. However, I will argue that the most accurate approximation to the true meaning of a text is done through a contextualist analysis. The second remark is that I will not attempt to make a contextualist analysis of Machiavelli in this project. Instead, I use some of the historiographic insights from the contextual approach to assess the realist's and mainstream portrayal of Machiavelli. To do this, I will use Quentin Skinner's mythologies as tools to detect historiographical fallacies. In the first section I will explain the use of these tools in more detail.

Sub-question III

To answer the final sub-question, I present a recap on the question of: *why is Machiavelli considered a realist thinker?* Whereas in the first sub-question I describe the perceived similarities between Machiavelli and the realist school, I argue in this final sub-question that drawing this connection is beneficial to the realist tradition. The critique in the fourth section therefore centres around those realist interpretations of Machiavelli that are self-serving. To understand why it is beneficial for realist scholars to refer to Machiavelli I will draw upon the distinction Brian Schmidt made between historical and analytical traditions. The distinction between Schmidt's two types of tradition is useful because by differentiating between historical and analytical traditions, and by bringing these traditions into connection with the practice of canonization and tracing lineage, I can show how an interpretation of the past can serve the observer of the present.

Research outline

I divided this project up into four sections. In the first section, I elaborate on the historiographic tools of analysis that I will employ to answer the research question. The research question in turn, is divided into three sub-questions, each will be answered in a separate section. I shall analyze the realist *interpretation* of Machiavelli in the second section of this paper, whereas in the third and fourth sections I provide a *critique* on this practice. In the third section the *critique* focusses on unjust and wrongful interpretation presented within IR mainstream and realist scholarship based on a historiographical and contextual arguments. In the fourth section I provide a *critique* that is focused on the self-serving aspects of the realist interpretation from the perspective of the academic subfield of Critical Disciplinary History.

Section I

The Tools of Analysis

In this section I will elaborate on the tools of analysis that were mentioned in the conceptual framework in the introduction. In the first paragraph I expand on the tools of the historiographic critique and in the second paragraph I will expand on the tools that I will use to identify the self-serving aspects of the realist interpretation.

Historiographic critique: unjust and wrongful interpretations

A ‘proper’ interpretation of a historical text is in this project equated with a contextualist interpretation. Contextualist scholars argue the meaning of a text can be more properly understood by placing texts into their appropriate historical context (Keene, *International Political Thought: A Historical Introduction*, 2005, p.14). This ‘proper understanding’ should not be equated with notions like the ‘true’ or ‘ultimate’ meaning of a text. Skinner does not believe that such meanings exist. Though he recognizes that a text can carry different meanings on different levels, Skinner argues that a proper understanding of a historic text can only result from grasping its intended meaning. To grasp the illocutionary intention of the author, scholars should try to understand the text within its linguistic context (Skinner, 1969, p.46). An interpretation of a historical text that is shaped by what it means to its reader transcends the intended meaning of the author and therefore the context in which it was written. As such, Skinner argues that such interpretive accounts should not be classified as historical, but more appropriately as mythological (Skinner, 1969, p.07). The interpretation of texts that Skinner labels as mythologies are, from a historiographic point of view, either unjust or wrongful. To analyse such historiographical fallacies, Skinner distinguished between four categories of anachronistic mythologies: the mythologies of doctrines, coherence, prolepsis and parochialism (Skinner, 1969, pp.07-30). In this project, I employ these mythologies except the mythology of coherence.

Mythology of doctrines

The first mythology (of doctrines) refers to the tendency to find advocates of a particular theoretical position in earlier times and earlier places, or, as George Lawson puts it: “we read us in them” (Lawson, 2010, p.216). Though this mythology comes in several forms, I shall limit my analysis to those fallacies that Skinner refers to as *ideas as agents* and the *sheer anachronism*.

The first fallacy occurs when a researcher sets out an ideal type of a doctrine, and then treats this idea as an agent of its own. The doctrine – a fully matured and conceptualized idea – is then retrospectively traced throughout history to assess its development within its various ‘incarnations’. Skinner argues that in this way the reification of doctrines can lead to the “historical absurdity” in which the researcher has the tendency to

search for approximations to the ideal type he himself had set out, resulting in a non-historic account in which the ideas of an earlier writer are said to be an “anticipation” of a later doctrine (Skinner,1969,p.11).

The other form of the mythology of doctrine that Skinner describes is the *sheer anachronism*. The sheer anachronism refers to a mistake in which a researcher ‘discovers’ a view into the writings of a classic author because he recognizes a similarity in terminology on a topic to which classic author could in principle not have meant to contribute to (Skinner,1969,pp.07-08). In addition to this historiographic fallacy, a reader can also too readily *read* a doctrine *in* to the writings of a classic author which he or she might in principle have meant to state but had no intention to convey (Skinner,1969,p.09). This form of sheer anachronism occurs when the reader tries to reconstruct from vague hints the author’s implied intention for writing (Skinner,1969,p.10).

Mythology of prolepsis

The third mythology Skinner identified is the mythology of prolepsis, which refers to the mistake made by researchers to overstate the retrospective significance of a historical work (or action) beyond to what it meant to the agent himself (Skinner,1969,p.22). Skinner defines this mythology as “the conflation of the necessary asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given statement or other action, and the meaning of that action itself” (Skinner,1969,p.23).

Mythology of parochialisms

The mythology of parochialism entails the problem that occurs when an observer of the past misdescribes either *the sense* or *the intended reference* of a given work (Skinner,1969,p.24). Skinner describes several types of parochialisms, but the one I focus on in this project is the form of conceptual parochialism that he describes as when an observer (unconsciously) misuses his vantage point when describing the *sense* of a given work (Skinner,1969,p.27). This parochialism occurs when the observer employs the concepts and theories that are available to him, and project these onto the writings of a past writer who had no disposal over the same analytical toolkit.

Post-modernist critique: self-serving interpretations

To provide a critique on the self-serving aspects of the realist interpretation of Machiavelli draw on Brian Schmidt’s distinction between historical and analytical distinctions.

Historic and analytic traditions

Tradition, in a conventional sense, might refer to “an indefinite series of repetitions of an action, which on each occasion is performed on the assumption that it has been performed before “ (Jeffery,2005,p.62).

However, the term tradition is not as uniform as it may appear. Brian Schmidt made a distinction between historical and analytical traditions. For Schmidt, a *historical tradition* refers to a pre-constituted and self-constituted pattern of conventional practice through which ideas are conveyed within a recognizably established and specified discursive framework (Schmidt,B.C.,1998,p.25). Schmidt names Marxism as an example of a historical tradition, as it incorporates both an element of continuity, as well as an element of innovation within a fairly well-defined realm of discourse (Schmidt,B.C.,1998,p.25). An analytic tradition, however, refers to a retrospectively created intellectual construction determined by present criteria and concerns, meaning that a scholar may stipulate certain ideas, themes, genres or texts as functionally similar (Schmidt,B.C.,1998,p.25). The difference between these two types of traditions is important, because a confusion between the two is not without consequences. Schmidt points out that the analytic tradition is easily confused for being a historical one. The result is that the individuals and academic practices that have *actually* contributed to the development and current identity of a tradition are cast aside for a more epic rendition, indeed, an idealized version of the past in the form of a continuous tradition stretching from ancient times to the present (Schmidt,B.,2002,p.09). This continuous tradition often takes the form of a canon of ‘great’ thinkers or texts.

Section II

The (Mainstream and Realist) Discourses on Machiavelli

In this section I will answer the question *where* and *how* Machiavelli is brought into connection with realism by summarizing how Machiavelli is rendered within these five introductory textbooks and the writings of four prominent realists: E.H. Carr, John Herz, Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin. With this information I can explain in the sub-conclusion *why* Machiavelli is considered a realist thinker in these cases.

I found three recurring elements that are present in all or most of the five textbooks and I will summarize my findings based on these elements. The first recurring element I found in the realist writings, is that all four realists have recognized elements of realist theory into the writings of Machiavelli. The second recurring element I found, is that Machiavelli's writings are used to explain some of the basic tenets of realism. The final recurring element I found is that both the realists and textbooks brought Machiavelli in connection with a realist tradition.

Machiavelli in the realist discourse

All four realists recognize in Machiavelli's writings different characteristics of realist theory. These characteristics are that ethics are a function of politics in the writings of Carr, the 'ultra-realistic' principles of pure 'egoist' power politics in Herz, the concept of realpolitik in Waltz and finally, the practical side of realist theory in Gilpin. Moreover, all realists trace these characteristics back to the writings of historical figures, either implicitly (in the writings of Herz and Waltz) or explicitly (in Carr and Gilpin) and connect Machiavelli to the realist tradition. To keep a clear structure, I summarize the realist scholars each individually.

E.H. Carr

In his seminal *The Twenty Years' Crisis* E.H. Carr states that "Machiavelli is the first important political realist" and that "Machiavelli's starting-point is a revolt against the utopianism of current political thought" (Carr,1941,p.81). In addition, Carr recognizes "three essential tenets implicit in Machiavelli's doctrine [as] the foundation-stones of the realist philosophy" (Carr,1941,p.82). These are: "(...) history is a sequence of cause and effect, (...)", "(...), theory does not create practice, but practice theory." and "(...), politics are not a function of ethics, but ethics of politics." (Carr,1941,p.82). Carr pits these 'tenets' explicitly against the ideas held by the 'utopians'. Regarding the last tenet, Carr states: "the realist view that no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states can be traced from Machiavelli through Spinoza and Hobbes to Hegel" (Carr,1941,p.194).

John Herz

The classical realist John Herz is known for defining the concept of the security dilemma on which he elaborates in his book *Political Realism and Political Idealism*. In this book, Herz states that political realism has at all times insisted that the nature of politics is fundamentally determined by the struggle for power and the power positions among individuals and groups within the various political units. Herz then states that in modern times this view has been propounded by both Hobbes and Machiavelli, though the latter “emphasized more its role in the ‘foreign’ relations of the then rising modern state (...)” (Herz, 1964, pp. 24-25).

In the context of explaining the concept of ‘balance of power policy’, Herz provides us with a historical narrative on the evolution of balance of power systems. After having quoted from Thucydides’ *Melian Dialogue*, Herz informs us that: “Machiavelli, it is true, expressed the same ‘ultra-realistic’ principles of pure ‘egoist’ power politics that had characterized Greek foreign policy” (Herz, 1964, pp. 209-210).

Kenneth Waltz

Kenneth Waltz is often referred to as the father of neo- or structural realism. In his analysis of the causes of war, he examines relevancy of the assumptions of historical figures like St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Kant and Rousseau (Waltz, 2001, p. 02). According to Waltz, Thucydides’ relevancy to the understanding of the causes of war is that he foreshadowed the concept of balance of power, whereas Machiavelli stands out as a clear exponent to the concept of *realpolitik* (Waltz, 2001, p. 216). Elsewhere, Waltz states: “From Machiavelli through Meinecke and Morgenthau, the elements of the approach [realpolitik] and the reasoning remains constant. Machiavelli stands so clearly as the exponent of Realpolitik that one easily slips into thinking that he developed the closely associated idea of balance of power as well. Although he did not, his conviction that politics can be explained in its own terms established the grounds on which balance-of-power theory can be built” (Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1979, p. 117).

Robert Gilpin

The political economist Robert Gilpin’s main contribution to the realist tradition are his ideas on the concept of *hegemonic stability*. Like Waltz, Gilpin is often associated with the school of neo-realism. In an article called *The richness of the tradition of political realism*, Gilpin argues that the ‘venerable’ realist tradition is an old one; indeed, much older than the writings of the classical realists Morgenthau and Herz (Gilpin, 1984, pp. 92-293). For Gilpin, it is difficult to conceive how “the three great realist writers” Thucydides, Machiavelli and Carr can be denied inclusion to this tradition (Gilpin, 1984, p. 291). At the end of his article, Gilpin places the ‘new’ realists (thusly also himself) directly in line with these classical forebears, because they continue a tradition of ‘advice to princes’ (Gilpin, 1984, p. 303). This direct reference to *The Prince* illuminates a practical dimension of the realist school; namely, that it instead of for the sake of “abstract

theorizing”, realists study and theorize about international politics in part to add to the list of “do’s and don’ts” (Gilpin, 1984, p. 303).

Machiavelli and realism in textbooks

I identified two recurring elements in the five textbooks under review. These elements are that Machiavelli’s writings are used to explain some of the basic tenets of realism and that Machiavelli is brought into connection with the realist tradition.

Machiavelli and the basic tenets of realism

The first recurring element is that in all five textbooks Machiavelli’s writings are used to explain some of the basic tenets of realism. For example, in the textbooks of Heywood and Baylis et. al, Machiavelli is brought into connection with the (classical) realist’s pessimistic view on the human nature and that political life is always characterized by inevitable strife (Heywood, 2011, p. 55) (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014, pp. 103-104). In the textbook of Goldstein and Pevehouse, Machiavelli is mentioned for his advice to concentrate on expedient actions to stay in power, including the manipulation of the public and military alliances (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008, p. 44). Other realist principles like the state’s preoccupation with survival, the importance of state interests and the dominance of interests over morality in state affairs were read into Machiavelli in the textbooks of both Mansbach and Rafferty and Jackson and Sørensen, (Mansbach & Rafferty, 2008, p. 60) (Jackson & Sørensen, 2003, pp. 72-73).

Machiavelli and the realist tradition

The second recurring element is that Machiavelli is mentioned in every textbook in connection to a realist tradition. In most textbooks it is stated that the realists have worked within a long tradition (of thought), which can be traced back to either the writings of Sun Tzu, Thucydides and later writers like Machiavelli and Hobbes (Heywood, 2011, p. 55) (Mansbach & Rafferty, 2008, p. 19) (Jackson & Sørensen, 2003, p. 70) (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014, p. 103).

Sub-conclusion section II

Machiavelli’s writings are connected to several important aspects of the realist philosophy and tradition in the textbooks and writings of the four realist scholars. Textbooks summarize writings of realist scholars, and these realist scholars recognize *similarities* between modern realist theory and the writings of Machiavelli. I conclude that the reason *why* Machiavelli is considered a realist thinker, is because the realists themselves have read some of the theoretical assumptions of realism into the work of Machiavelli. As such, Machiavelli was

canonized either implicitly (in the writings of Herz and Waltz) or explicitly (in Carr and Gilpin) into the academic tradition of realism.

Section III

On the unjust and wrongful interpretations of Machiavelli

In the previous section I concluded that Machiavelli is considered a realist thinker because the realist themselves have read some of the theoretical assumptions of realism into the work of Machiavelli. As such, Machiavelli ended up as a canonical figure in the realist tradition. We have seen in the textbooks and writings of realist under review that this understanding of Machiavelli is embraced in both the realist and mainstream discourses of IR. In this section I will present a historiographic critique on the cases of the previous section. The purpose of this effort is to answer the question of: *to what extent do the mainstream and realist interpretation represent an accurate characterization of Machiavelli's thought?*

By connecting the reoccurring elements that were described in the previous section to one of Skinner's mythologies I will illustrate why the realist and mainstream understanding of Machiavelli is so overwhelmingly inaccurate. This method could be applied for the textbooks that used Machiavelli to explain some of the basic assumptions of realism and the recurring element in which both realist scholars and textbooks connect Machiavelli to the realist tradition. However, this method could not be applied for the realist scholars individually, for they all wrote for different reasons on different topics. Therefore, different myths could be identified between the discourses of the scholars. For this reason, I have treated them individually.

Realist scholars: Machiavelli and recognized similarities with realist theory

Carr

One of the tenets that Carr recognizes implicit in Machiavelli's 'doctrine' as a foundation-stone of realist philosophy is the realist view is that ethics are a function of politics (Carr, 1941, p.82). This realist 'foundation-stone' Carr retrospectively discovers into the writings of Machiavelli because he recognizes a similarity in terminology that is 'implicit' in Machiavelli's writings and explicit in his own realist doctrine.

Though Machiavelli might have held such a view on ethics, Carr sees this as a clear proclamation of one of the foundation-stones of realism. However, Machiavelli's writings were not meant to be placed in a context of modern day realism. As such, his writings have transcended the historical context in which they were written, making Carr's 'discovery' an example of a mythology of doctrines, or more specifically it is a *sheer anachronism*.

Herz

As we have read in the previous section, Herz states that Machiavelli expressed 'ultra-realist' principles of pure 'egoist' power politics in his writings (Herz, 1964, pp.209-210). Herz, just like Carr, recognizes his own realist doctrine into the writings of Machiavelli. Mythology of doctrine is twofold here. Firstly, a *sheer*

anachronism can be recognized because, though Herz' 'ultra-realist' principles may have been implicit in Machiavelli's work, he did not codify them as such. These principles were in fact not neatly defined in the concept of 'egoist power politics' long after Machiavelli's death. Secondly, an *idea as agent* can be recognized because Herz draws a historical similarity between the Machiavelli's views and Greek foreign policy, which he exemplified by quoting from Thucydides' *Melian Dialogue*. As such, Herz creates a continuous historic narrative in which this realist principle can be traced to its various incarnations in time and place.

Waltz

Waltz states that Machiavelli stands out as a clear exponent of the concept of *realpolitik* (Waltz,2001,p.216). However, the concept of *realpolitik* was first coined by Ludwig von Rochau in 1853, meaning that the concept did not exist within the analytical toolkit that was at Machiavelli's disposal (Haslam,2002,p.168). As such, a concept that modern realist perceive as an essential element to their philosophical orientation is *projected into* the philosophy of Machiavelli. This makes Waltz' account an example of a mythology of parochialism, in which the sense of Machiavelli's writings is framed to fit within a concept that Machiavelli in principle could have had no knowledge of. An account of Machiavelli that frames him as an exponent of *realpolitik* cannot be historically accurate, therefore being branded a mythology.

Gilpin

In his article, Gilpin makes an obvious, but indirect reference to Machiavelli's *The Prince* when he states that realists continue a tradition of 'advice to princes'. Here Gilpin highlights the practical dimension of realist theory, namely, that realists "(...) study international practice and theorize about it in part to add to the list of 'do's and don'ts'." (Gilpin,1984,p.303). However, did Machiavelli 'theorize' for the purpose to add to a list of 'do's and don'ts'? Though Machiavelli's book was written as an *advice to princes*, his intentions might not have been to add to a princely list of 'do's and don'ts'. It is widely believed that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* instead to impress and to fall in grace with the new rulers of Florence after the restoration of the Medici family. In an alternative reading, Machiavelli could as well have written in such a provocative manner to attract attention from the new rulers. Therefore, Gilpin projects an intention for Machiavelli to write, which he very well might not have had. The myth here is therefore a prolepsis because the significance of Machiavelli's work is overstated beyond what it meant to the author himself.

Textbooks: realism explained through Machiavelli's thought

All the textbook that were analysed we see that Machiavelli is used to explain some tenets of realism. In the textbooks we read how Machiavelli is connected to the realist assumptions on human nature and political life (Heywood and Baylis et. al), to the argument for political expediency (Goldstein and Pevehouse), or to the importance of survival, state-interests and amoral statecraft (Jackson & Sørensen and Mansbach & Rafferty).

In these five interpretations we can identify the mythology of doctrines. The reason for this is that the textbooks authors interpret Machiavelli as an early advocate of what we nowadays know as realism. This in turn results in what Skinner called a *sheer anachronism*, because the authors *read* theoretical statements *into* Machiavelli's writings on the sole basis of the similarity in terminology with modern realist writings on topics he could not have meant to contribute to.

Realist and textbooks: Machiavelli connected to the realist tradition

Machiavelli is brought into connection with the realist tradition in all the five textbooks and the discourses of all four scholars. In addition, all the realists under analysis have referred either explicitly (Carr and Gilpin) or implicitly (Herz and Waltz) to Machiavelli as if he was a realist himself.

The very connection made between Machiavelli and the realist tradition, however, represents an inaccurate characterization of Machiavelli's thought because the ideal type of realism – fully matured and conceptualized – is retrospectively chased throughout history to its various incarnations in the writings of historical figures like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes or Rousseau. Here the idea of realism – or a realist idea as an agent of its own – seems to have progressively developed, each historic figure contributing his share to the overall end-product of IR-realism. Because these historic figures are all brought into connection with realism they enter the canon of the realist tradition. Such an historic narrative represents a wrongful, teleological account of the history of the realist tradition. This is because Machiavelli could in principle not have meant to contribute to a tradition that was created more than 400 years after his death. As such, Machiavelli's writings transcend their historical context and therefore this historiographic fallacy is to be characterized as a myth of doctrine, or more specifically, as a myth of ideas as agents.

Sub-conclusion section III

In this section I found that the meaning ascribed to Machiavelli's writings have transcended the context in which they were written. In the first paragraph, I found that all realist accounts were fraught with either the mythology of doctrines (both the sheer anachronism or the idea as agent) or the mythology of parochialism. In the second paragraph I identified the mythology of doctrine (sheer anachronism) in all of the textbooks' accounts in which Machiavelli is used to explain the tenets of realism. In the final paragraph found that in the discourses of all four realists and in all five textbooks connections are made between Machiavelli and the realist tradition. In this connection I identified a mythology of doctrines (idea as agent).

I therefore conclude that the three reoccurring elements found in the writings of the four realist scholars and five textbooks represent, from a historiographic perspective, a complete inaccurate characterization of Machiavelli's thought. The reason for this is that the realist understanding of Machiavelli represents a clear example of the second type of meaning that Skinner has described. The meaning ascribed to the writings of Machiavelli results from the interpretive framework of the reader, which approaches the text (consciously or

unconsciously) asking him- or herself the question: “what does the text I am reading mean to me?”. However, an historically accurate understanding of Machiavelli can only result from a contextualist interpretive framework that can account for the question of: “what were the author’s intentions for writing the text?”.

Section IV

The realists' self-serving interpretation of Machiavelli

The critique presented in this section forms a recap on the question of: *why is Machiavelli considered a realist thinker?* Here the analysis centres around those realist interpretations of Machiavelli that are self-serving, or in other words, *why it is beneficial for realist scholars to refer to Machiavelli?* To answer this question, I will bring the distinction between historical and analytical traditions into connection with the practice of canonization and tracing lineage.

The self-serving elements in the realist interpretation

The realist tradition is often presented as a 'long and established tradition' of thought (Heywood, 2011, p. 55). As we have seen in the previous sections, such accounts are often accompanied with a list of names that often include Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. The realist tradition is thusly presented in the form of a canon of 'great' thinkers, all of which contributing to the development of the realist thought. The tale of a canon of great thinkers is therefore presented to us as a historic tradition. This narrative, however, embodies a grave misrepresentation of facts because the realist tradition emerged as a semi-coherent scholarly tradition in the 1940's and 1950's, when scholars like Carr and Morgenthau formulated and codified its principles. The 'historical' tradition is in fact a retrospectively created construct; or in other words, an analytical tradition. According to Schmidt, the confusion between a historical and an analytical tradition results an epic account in which a continuous tradition stretches from ancient times to the present (Schmidt, B., 2002, p. 09). As the product of such a confusion, we read in both in the mainstream and realist discourses an epic tale of a realist tradition, which evolved through a continuous and time-transcending dialectic between the 'classical' realists. In this idealized version of the past the actual history of the realist tradition is mythologized. The self-serving effects of such a mythic account are twofold: it not only helps to shape the identity of the group that claims to partake in that very tradition, but references to – in fact the appropriations and manipulations of – the ideas of classic thinkers also help to confer legitimacy upon the output of the contemporary members that tradition. Tracing lineage is an old and proven concept and its benefits are clear: for centuries, emperors and kings have legitimized their position by tracing their family origins to legendary figures or the 'founding fathers' of the communities over which they preside. A claim to legitimacy – for both existence and output – is easily made when it corresponds to a reference that one stands at the endpoint of a 'great tradition' of great thinkers.

From a postmodernist perspective, we can argue why Gilpin's statement that the realist tradition is much older than the writings of Carr and Morgenthau has a self-serving edge to it (Gilpin, 1984, pp. 292-293). As – to put it into Carr's words – "the first important political realist", Machiavelli is conjured up as an early ambassador of the realist philosophy. Presented as a genius, the crude caricature of Machiavelli partakes with

the other heroes of the realist tradition in a historic parade, each making their own contribution to the realist philosophy. This tale develops like a self-serving teleology, for those that tell this great epic are in fact the proud intellectual heirs of this – what Gilpin calls – “venerable tradition” (Gilpin, 1984, p. 293).

Reflection on the incorporation of Machiavelli into the realist tradition

Any notion made to the “quintessential” figures of realism – be it Thucydides, Machiavelli or Hobbes – is in fact reaffirming in nature because the very reference to these historical figures in a canonical context inevitably leads to the reconfirmation of their place in it. As such, these historic figures are trapped within the realist interpretive frame, which gets further and firmer entrenched every time it is reproduced and reaffirmed in the works of scholars and in introductory textbooks. The problem here is that the process of meaning making gets bogged down, leaving us with a static, monochrome portrait of Machiavelli’s philosophy. Within his realist frame Machiavelli is instantly reduced to a set of formulas, which emphasize realist ideas like the priority of power over ethics, amoral state interaction, *raison d’état* and of course, ends justifying the means (Walker, 1993, p. 34). In this intellectual reductionist rendition, no room is left for other readings of Machiavelli. His ideas on republics and principalities, on virtuous princely behaviour and on what constitutes necessity are all cast aside to fit him nicely into a preconceived realist frame.

Sub-conclusion section IV

By tracing their origin to Machiavelli, realist scholars create a non-historic narrative in which they stand at the end-point of a long and established tradition of thought. By tracing lineage to the ‘classical’ thinkers of the past, legitimacy is conferred on the academic output of the realists of today. In the process, the realists have not only created a myth about themselves, but they also reduced Machiavelli’s rich and wide-ranging political ideas to a single set of principles in the process. The promotion of a particular (realist) reading of Machiavelli’s work, therefore not only distorts our understanding of Machiavelli’s political thought, it also mythologizes the actual history of the realist tradition.

Conclusion and Reflection

Reflection

In this paper, I addressed the question of ‘*why is Machiavelli considered a realist thinker, and to what extent is this an accurate characterization of this thought?*’ I concluded in section II that the reason why Machiavelli is considered a realist thinker, is because the realists themselves have read some of the theoretical assumptions of realism into the work of Machiavelli. As such, Machiavelli was canonized into the tradition of realism. In addition, in both the realist and mainstream discourses, Machiavelli’s writings are used to explain some of the tenets of realism. We have seen in section III that Machiavelli is placed outside of the historical context in which he operated. The meaning ascribed to his work transcends the authors’ intentions, and therefore are not historical, but mythical accounts. In addition, I conclude in section IV that the promotion of a particular (realist) reading of Machiavelli’s work, therefore not only distorts our understanding of Machiavelli’s political thought, it also mythologizes the actual history of the realist tradition. Before I will elaborate on this in my conclusion, I want to discuss several limitations and strengths.

A strong point of the research presented in this project is the method of historiographic analysis. By applying Skinner’s mythologies on the statements, comparisons and arguments made in the textbooks and realist writings, one can analyse whether or not utterances are historically accurate. As we have seen in the third section of this project, most of the statements made by the realist scholars and textbook authors are, from a Skinnerian contextualist point of view, not historiographic, but mythological accounts.

The historiographic fallacies I found in both the mainstream and realist literature under review were so recurrent, that I am led to believe that the discourses on historic figures within the field of IR are largely lacking an historiographical foundation. This idea is supported by the findings of revisionist scholarship done on comparable cases.

Though the results of my analysis are suggestive, the external validity of my findings remains uncertain. The reason for this is that the textbooks I used to analyse the mainstream discourse were largely outdated. As such, I cannot generalize my findings to the current way in which Machiavelli is characterized in the mainstream discourses of IR. Based on my findings from the textbooks, I cannot exclude the possibility that the revisionist account, for example as propounded by scholars like Keene, has been adopted in more recent textbooks. Moreover, most of the four realist scholars I selected have themselves become ‘classical’ thinkers within the field of IR. All the reviewed literature dates back to the 1980s or before. As such I cannot draw conclusions on the way in which contemporary realist scholars approach the writings of Machiavelli or other ‘classical’ thinkers.

An interesting question that follows from my conclusion is: if the textbook approach to the thought of historical figures is from a historiographic stand-point erroneous, what then would constitute a more fruitful approach? Another question is, if accounts to past thinkers easily risk of being mythological instead of

historical, how then should we approach the thought of historic figures? And, how or to what extent can the thought of past thinkers be applied to a modern-day context? The answers to such questions would be, given the findings of this and similar research, very interesting for the way in which social scientist overall should approach the thinkers of the past. The answer to this question remains unclear to me, and therefore begs for further research.

Conclusion

The afterlife of Machiavelli is as interesting as his life on earth. Carried forth through the ages in classics like *the Prince* and *the Discourses on Levi*, Machiavelli's ideas are – perhaps in altered form – as alive today as they were when they were penned down. However, should the tale of the posthumous life of his thought be characterized as an epic or a tragedy? In the literary genre of the epic, the story centres around the deeds of a historic hero, told in connection with their significance to a certain community. The crux here, is that they are – to a considerable degree – believed for they are told with a claim of being objective and true. In the tragedy, on the other hand, the story is understood by the audience as fictitious. The hero here, fights a futile battle with his inevitable, indeed, his necessary destiny. With his tragic fate set at the outset, his story develops like a teleology. In the realist reading of Machiavelli, the hero has established a grand tradition of thought, to which the contemporary members – the realists themselves – are the proud heirs. The story has a self-serving purpose: the backward-looking trace for a legendary ancestor not only helps to shape the group's identity, but it also confers legitimacy to both its members' current position and their output. Moreover, the epic story is believed by the community. In a critical reading, however, Machiavelli is trapped within the realist frame, tragically preventing other and more fruitful readings of his thought. Here the audience is aware of the fictitious character of the tale; they understand that the fate of the hero is predetermined. Told as a tragedy, we sympathize with Machiavelli as he receives his lifelong sentence: to partake together with his fellow condemned, all dressed up like caricatures of themselves, in a surreal parade that glorifies and reaffirms the grand tradition of political realism. And like that, until this very day, the life story of Machiavelli's thought has tragically taken the shape of an epic within the mainstream discourse in which he remains the quintessential hero of the realist tradition.

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