



Althusser. *‘Thinking the Deed to Be Accomplished’ as a New Materialist Practice of Philosophy*

Stefano Pippa

*Research fellow in Political Philosophy, Department of Human
Sciences for Education “Riccardo Massa,” University of Milano-
Bicocca, U06—Floor 04, Room 4124,
Piazza dell’Ateneo Nuovo, 1, 20126, Milan, Italy
E-mail: stefano.pippa@unimib.it*

Althusser with Machiavelli: ‘Thinking the Deed to Be Accomplished’ as a New Materialist Practice of Philosophy

Abstract

One of Louis Althusser’s most important and abiding preoccupations was, as is well-known, the construction of a definition of materialist philosophy. Such a task, which

Althusser set himself in the sixties, underwent several shifts, the most famous of which is the one from the idea of a Marxist philosophy understood as a “theory of theoretical practices” (For Marx, 1965 and Reading Capital, 1965) to the idea of philosophy as “class struggle in theory” (Lenin and Philosophy, 1971, Essays in Self-Criticism, 1976). However, this paper argues for the relevance of another and still underrated definition of materialist philosophy that can be found in Althusser, which he called in some notes from the seventies a “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*.” The paper will extract and elaborate Althusser’s redefinition of materialist philosophy through a reading of his engagement with Machiavelli and will outline its specific and original characteristics.

Keywords

Althusser, *fait à accomplir*, deed to be accomplished, materialism, philosophy, Machiavelli

An important aspect of Louis Althusser’s philosophy, which has been at the center of the “second reception” of his thought¹, is certainly constituted by what has come to be known as “aleatory materialism.” In many of his posthumously published writings, and especially those dating from the 1980s, Althusser (2006a) proposed a series of notions such as “void,” “contingency,” and “event” with the aim of displacing a rationalist understanding of materialism. These very notions form the core of many recent attempts to rethink materialism in critical theory, although these attempts do not always refer to Althusser’s posthumous work (almost never, indeed). Today, thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek or Alain Badiou, as is well-known, place great emphasis on the concepts of contingency, event, void; but the same notions (contingency, aleatory, event...) are also taken up by research, in philosophy but also in science, that is not necessarily linked to critical theory or Marxism².

My main claim in this paper is that these notions, before being developed into a more or less systematic materialist philosophy—albeit, admittedly, of an unusual type—in the eighties, entailed for Althusser a new way of *doing philosophy*, which (in Althusserian

¹ That is, the rereading of Althusser’s italicize that began after the first publication of his posthumous materials in 1993.

² For a (quite problematic in my view) recent attempt to establish a dialogue between a materialism of the event issuing from Althusser and Badiou (and Meillassoux) and complexity theory, see Coombs (2015).

scholarship and beyond) has not been fully appreciated in its potential implications. This is why I will not focus on “aleatory materialism,” that is, Althusser’s late philosophy, which mobilizes precisely such notions as “void,” “contingency,” or “clinamen” as a general philosophy for Marxism (most notably in “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” dated 1982), as an “*assiette*” for a new materialism (Bourdin 2008). Instead, after discussing briefly Althusser’s shifting definitions of philosophy in the 1960s, I will pause to consider a different definition of materialist philosophy which can be found in, or better: extracted from, Althusser’s reading of Niccolò Machiavelli in the 1970s—a definition that is distinct from other, more famous (and explicit) definitions of Marxist philosophy or materialist philosophy provided by Althusser during his lifetime.

Shifting Definitions of Philosophy

It is common practice to distinguish between different phases of Althusser’s thought following his redefinitions of philosophy. In the first moment of his intervention (*For Marx, Reading Capital*, in the first half of the 1960s), marked by the struggle against empiricism and humanism, dialectical materialism was conceived—under the aegis of Spinoza—as a “theory of theoretical practice” (Althusser 2005: 169); Marxist philosophy, thus redefined, was concerned with establishing the concepts apt to think of history and with effecting a break with ideology. The object of knowledge was to be radically distinguished from the real object (as in Spinoza), and the object of the science of history, the mode of production, was to be known via the deployment of concepts such as overdetermination, displacement and condensation, structural causality, and conjuncture. At this level, Althusser’s materialism was concerned with two “enemies.” The first was the empiricist and idealist theory of knowledge, for which the act of knowing was premised upon a subject-object relation, with knowledge being produced via the extraction of an “essence” from the object itself. By insisting that knowledge was a process of transformation of what he called “generalities,” Althusser rematerializes and socializes the production of knowledge. In this sense, knowledge itself is a material practice, a process of transformation, and not the timeless intuition of an essence; as such, it is deeply embedded in the world and is dependent upon determinate conditions of production, especially ideological conditions of production (see Elliott 2009: 75 ff.; Benton 1984: 36–51). On the other hand, Althusser redefines materialism in terms of a materialist critique of Hegelian

ontology. “Structural causality” and “overdetermination,” as well as its avatars, radically decentered the notion of the social whole, thus subtracting (at least, in Althusser’s intentions) Marxism from the pernicious influence of Hegel’s idealism. This second aspect of Althusser’s intervention is marked by the idea that materialism—and, *a fortiori*—a materialist ontology, is characterized by an irreducible plurality, which is represented in the Marxist topography as distinct levels of the social edifice, as well as by the rejection of the notion of “origin” (for Althusser, central to Hegel’s dialectics), in which resonates the old philosophical notion of *arché* (Althusser 2005: 198).

Immediately after the publication of the works in which this definition was first put forth, however, Althusser opened the phase of self-criticism. The self-criticism had not to do with the materialist ontology that one finds in the classical works (Lahtinen 2013: 116), but with the relationship between politics and philosophy, which had been overlooked in the first definition. As Gregory Elliott puts it, “Althusser’s writings from 1967 to 1974 are largely taken up with producing a new definition of Marxist philosophy and a revised account of the relations between it and historical materialism” (Elliott 2009: 178). The problems that Althusser sees in his definition of philosophy are thus summed up by G. M. Goshgarian in his introduction to the collection of Althusser’s writings *The Humanist Controversy*: “Theory became theory by virtue of a distantiating that ruled out both its internal determination by ideology and its direct intervention in ideology: a theory, by definition, had no practical relation to the ideological practices with which it broke. This put philosophy [...] at a double remove from all other practices” (Goshgarian 2003: xiii–xiv), including—and most importantly—politics. The beginning of the rectification can be found in texts such as “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy,” an article drafted in April 1967 at the request of the Soviets that was never published in the form given to it by Althusser³, as well as in the course for scientists held by Althusser and his collaborators in 1967 (and subsequently interrupted by the events of May 1968). In the “Historical Task,” Althusser advances the idea that philosophy, by thinking the conjunctural ensemble of the scientific and social practices, at the same time “intervenes” in it:

To produce knowledge of this ensemble [...] philosophy cannot just draw up a balance sheet. It cannot be a mere encyclopedia,

³ For the editorial vicissitudes of this text, see Goshgarian’s introduction in Althusser (2003: 155–59).

as certain of Engels' formulations might lead us to think, a summa of the scientific knowledges existing at a given moment [...] Philosophy has to take into consideration the fact that it, too, is included in this summa, included in the guise of an active force of intervention within this ensemble. (Althusser 2003: 213–14)

Thus, the idea of philosophy as “theory of theoretical practices,” which closely resembled the Hegelian Absolute Knowledge, is definitively abandoned. A year later, in 1968, Althusser publicly proposed a “Leninist” definition, which incorporated the ideas tested in the meantime in the course of philosophy for scientists, which ran from November 1967, and let go the idea—still present in “The Historical Task”—that philosophy produces “knowledges.” Now not only was philosophy not separated from politics, but it represented politics within the scientific domain, and vice versa. Following Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin, Althusser defined materialism and idealism as general positions in philosophy, and philosophy was conceived as a *Kampflplatz* traversed by the struggle between the idealist and materialist tendencies, which (*de facto*) reflected different class positions. The result of the self-criticism was the famous definition of philosophy as “class struggle in theory,” (Althusser 1971: 18–21; 1976: 58, 142–50) with dialectical materialism being thoroughly redefined as a practice that “states and defend theses, intervening conjuncturally in theory on behalf of revolutionary politics to protect the sciences against the intrusion of ideology; and in politics on behalf of a science—historical materialism—to defend ‘correct’ political positions” (Elliott 2009: 179)⁴. Thus, Althusser now conceives of philosophy as a practice which, unlike sciences, is “without object”; by contrast, it has “objectives” and “stakes,” which are ultimately political⁵. As

⁴ As Althusser says in “Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists”: “1. It is necessary to take seriously the fact that philosophy states theoretical propositions (‘philosophy’ is part of ‘theory’) and that it intervenes in ‘theory’—that is, in the sciences, in philosophy and in theoretical ideologies: it is this which distinguishes it from all other practices, including political practice. 2. We must restate Thesis 22: all the lines of demarcation traced by philosophy are ultimately modalities of a fundamental line: the line between the scientific and the ideological” (Althusser 2011: 105–06). See also “Lenin and Philosophy” (Althusser 1971: 61).

⁵ Althusser insists on this also in his recently published textbooks on philosophy, dating (arguably) from 1975–1978: “If philosophy does not have object (I will leave aside, from now on, the specification: in the sense in which a science does), what does it have, under the guise of this indefinite object of which it purports to utter the truth? It has objectives and stakes” (Althusser 2015: 109). The same sentence (more or less) occurs in his other textbook on philosophy (2014: 320). An in-depth analysis of these two textbooks would deserve a separate study. However, the theses

we shall see later, the idea of philosophy having “objectives” will be retrieved by Althusser in his meditation on Machiavelli, but will be given an entirely different meaning (which will mark, in fact, the distance between this definition of philosophy and the one we will extrapolate from his reading of Machiavelli).

Clearly, the difference between the first two definitions of philosophy is quite evident. It is not my concern here to discuss the problems of the first definition or the ones affecting the second; these are issues that have been widely debated. Nonetheless, it is useful to point out that there is a fundamental continuity: in both cases, the scientific domain remains the privileged field of intervention. In addition to this, dialectical materialism, however conceived, was supposed to operate in favor of the sciences, coming *after* sciences in order to defend them from ideology—a version of Hegel’s owl, as Althusser himself recognized apropos his definition of philosophy in “Lenin and Philosophy” (Althusser 1971: 41).

However, much more important for discussing the definition of materialist philosophy that—as I shall argue—we can extract from Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli, the “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished,” are Althusser’s further reflections on philosophy in the second half of the 1970s, especially in the 1976 public lecture “The Transformation of Philosophy.” In this lecture Althusser, in keeping with the idea of philosophy as “class struggle in theory,” insists on the fact that Marxism does not need a philosophy “produced as philosophy,” but a new practice of philosophy (Althusser 2011: 147). However, if compared with what Althusser said when he first elaborated his previous definition, now the emphasis is less on the intimate relation between philosophy and sciences than it is on the intimate link between philosophy and social practices, and ideology in particular. Above all—and this is crucial—in this lecture Althusser gets to define philosophy, in a very precise sense, as a discursive operation, a “dispositive” characterized by a specific way of functioning. The basic idea that we find in “The Transformation of Philosophy,” indeed, is that philosophy, as a historically given discipline and prac-

on philosophy presented therein are in continuity with the idea of philosophy as “class struggle in theory” as presented in “Lenin and Philosophy” (1971: 23–68) and “Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists” (2011: 69–165), or with the idea of a “new practice of philosophy” introduced in the 1976 lecture, “The Transformation of Philosophy” (2011: 241–65) (which I will address below). At the same time, however, they present certain anticipations of aleatory materialism (for instance, Althusser deals with Epicurus, or Derrida, or the theme of the margins...). Most importantly for my argument, they do not hint toward a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished,” which remains specific to Althusser’s reflection on Machiavelli.

tice, is a discursive operation that—far from merely interpreting the world in a detached manner—works towards the construction of a hegemony by means of the imposition of a determinate hierarchical unity, thought under the name of Truth, upon the ensemble of the social practices. Let's see how Althusser described, in a succinct but effective way, the peculiar operation of philosophy:

Philosophy appears as the science of the Whole—that is to say, of all things [...] In a few words: the production of philosophy as “philosophy” concerns all human ideas and all human practices, but always subordinating them to “philosophy,” that is to say, subordinating them to a radical “philosophical form” [...] What matters is that philosophy does not incorporate social practices under the unity of its thought in gratuitous fashion, but by removing the social practices from their own space, by subjecting this hierarchy to an internal order that constitutes its true unification. The world thought by philosophy is a unified world in so far as it is disarticulated and rearticulated—i. e., reordered—by philosophy. It is a world in which the different social practices, decomposed and recomposed, are distributed in a certain order of distinction and hierarchy, which is significant. (Althusser 2011: 245–52)

Thus, the production of philosophy as “philosophy” entails an operation of disarticulation and rearticulation which consists, ultimately, in the production of a Truth: “Philosophy believes that no one and nothing can speak on its name, and if it did not exist, the world would be bereft of its Truth,” and this Truth is “*logos*, or origin, or meaning” (Ibid.: 246). However, it is not possible to understand this operation unless it is referred to that which is external to it, in other words the stakes of class struggle: to the construction of what Gramsci called hegemony.

The task which it is assigned and delegated by the class struggle in general, and more directly by the ideological class struggle, is that of contributing to the unification of the ideologies within a dominant ideology and of guaranteeing this dominant ideology as Truth. How does it contribute? [...] It produces a whole apparatus of categories which serve to think and position the different social practices [...] It produces a general problematic, that is: a manner of posing, and hence resolving, the problems which may arise. In short, philosophy produces theoretical schemas, theoretical figures that serve as mediators for surmounting contradictions and

as links for reconnecting the different elements of ideology [...] It is something that is on the side of ideologies, a kind of theoretical laboratory in which the fundamentally political problem of ideological hegemony—i. e. of the constitution of the dominant ideology—is experimentally perfected in the abstract. (Althusser 2011: 259–60)

Thus, philosophy is a laboratory of ideology and is affected by (better: *it has as its own condition* ⁶) the effects of class struggle. What seems to me to be important here is the idea that philosophy is conceived of as a “dispositive,” or “operation” (a term that I borrow, albeit giving it a slightly different sense, from Pierre Macherey [1998: 28–41], but that Althusser himself uses sometimes *en passant*) that operates on a given raw material, which is the *ensemble* of conjuncturally given practices, producing specific effects. Based on the way in which Althusser characterizes it here ⁷, philosophy appears as a *discursive device that operates on the accomplished fact* (that is, on what is given at a certain moment), elaborating it by means of philosophical categories that confer “unity and orientation” to the intertwining of social practices. But the noteworthy aspect of this lecture is that Althusser remarks that *materialism too* can be “produced” as a system, hence as a system of truths-values-prescriptions that subjects practices to its own discourse, functioning exactly as a “philosophy,” that is, as a system of guarantees intended to orient the development of social practices themselves. In this context, Althusser’s emphasis is on the relation between philosophy and the State: Althusser wants to stress that Marx (as well as others such as Engels—whose inclusion is arguably quite problematic—or Mao Zedong and Antonio Gramsci) never produced a philosophy “as a philosophy” due to their suspicion towards the State and the complicity of systematic philosophy with the “glorification of the existing state of affairs”

⁶ This is perhaps better highlighted in Althusser’s 1967 notes on philosophy: “Plato: beginning of philosophy, as a new discipline, which inaugurates a history of philosophy [...] To account for this beginning of a new discipline is, to begin with (at the point where our reflection is), and therefore still in a very descriptive fashion, to put this beginning in relation with two other events (historical facts) which are its presupposition or condition [...] philosophy cannot be understood, as historical fact and new specific domain (with a history of its own) but in function of this double determination, this double condition: 1. Facts of the history of science (*‘coupures’*); 2. Facts of the politico-ideological history of class struggle (socio-political ‘revolutions’ and their effects: ideological ‘revolutions’)” (Althusser 1995: 318–19). It is worth noting that Badiou, for whom politics is one of the conditions of philosophy, was involved in this collective exchange of notes.

⁷ See also Althusser (2014: 329–37, 350–52).

(Althusser 2011: 147)⁸. The essential of materialism, therefore, is neither to be looked for in a specific arrangement of the couple spirit/matter (as Althusser himself had long argued, if implicitly⁹), nor does it consist in devising a system of concepts that would represent the “true” materialism¹⁰. Rather, so Althusser argues, it consists in a more fundamental opposition: the one between system/not-system, which ultimately means that materialism can only exist as a “new practice of philosophy” understood as a quasi-deconstructionist form of theoretical intervention (Ibid.: 264). The task that Althusser attributes to a materialist practice of philosophy in this conference is in fact the quite anarchic (and ultimately rather vague, to be sure) task of “liberating practices” (Ibid.: 265), freeing them from the *imperium* of the “philosophico-ideological dispositive” and from the State.

Toward a ‘Philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*’¹¹

The reflections on materialist philosophy that we have just seen represent the official Althusserian discourse over the 1960s and

⁸ Goshgarian (2006) has insisted on the link between the “new practice of philosophy” and the non-state in his introduction to Althusser (2006a). It seems to me, however, that his immediate identification of such a “new practice of philosophy” and “aleatory materialism” is too quick. I argue in Pippa (2019a) that in the 1976 lecture we can find indications of an asymmetrical rupture with the couplet idealism/materialism, which *paves the way* for “aleatory materialism,” but is not already “aleatory materialism” as such. The point of this paper, however, is that this “new practice of philosophy” can also be fruitfully linked to Althusser’s coeval reflections on Machiavelli’s dispositive, a point that I did not develop in my previous work. Ultimately, we could say that Althusser’s attempt to define philosophy in this public lecture is quite “unstable,” i. e., a “compromise formation” between different perspectives: the idea of a new practice of philosophy and a (non) philosophy such as “aleatory materialism.”

⁹ A few years later, Lecourt (1981: 213) will voice the same concerns in a work that could be considered as crucial in Althusser’s reflections on aleatory materialism: “Notwithstanding the amendments that we [i. e., the ‘Althusserians’] attempted of the schema of the struggle in philosophy, we continued to accept as such [...] the very notions of materialism and idealism [...]. How not to remark that the conception of materialism as ‘primacy of matter over thought’ presents itself as a unifying doctrine of the diverse ideological regions [...] such a definition encapsulates the image of a materialist philosophy that would be, after all, the symmetrical answer to idealism under its different forms.” Lecourt’s work is one of the very few referenced in Althusser’s “Underground Current.”

¹⁰ This is exactly what scientific materialism, neo-Deleuzian materialism or someone like Johnston, Badiou and Žižek are trying to do today, each in their own peculiar way.

¹¹ I will translate this as “deed to be accomplished”—which is more appropriate in English than “fact to be accomplished,” I am told—Althusser’s expression “*fait à accomplir*.” Sometimes I will use the French in order to render more evident that this expression is a reversal of the “accomplished fact,” in French “*fait accompli*.”

1970s. However, my thesis is that in his sustained confrontation with Machiavelli during the seventies, Althusser broaches a new definition of materialist philosophy that, in the end, he does not get to formulate in a fully explicit manner. In effect, this means that Althusser finds in Machiavelli the possibility to go beyond the ideas expressed in his explicit and public discourse about the status and structure of materialist philosophy and about a “new practice of philosophy” based on the concept of “class struggle in theory.” An indication of this can already be found in a brief passage from the 1976 lecture mentioned above. When criticizing the idea that materialism can constitute itself as a “philosophy” (i. e., as a system of truths, principles, etc.: ultimately, of guarantees) as it was the case during the Enlightenment or also during the “Diamat” period, he adds:

Rather than the eighteenth-century materialists [...] perhaps those who ought to interest us are the ones who only half succeeded (or hardly succeeded) in imparting to their opposition (to the idealist dominant philosophy) the form of a philosophy produced as “philosophy.” For my part I would closely investigate the cases of Epicurus and Machiavelli, to cite only them. (Althusser 2011: 261)

What is announced, but not developed, here is what I elsewhere interpreted as an “asymmetrical rupture” between idealism and materialism (Pippa 2019a). This “asymmetrical rupture” would eventually lead Althusser to consider Epicurus as the forefather of a materialist philosophy that does not constitute itself as an inverted mirror image of idealism, escaping the reach of the “principle of reason.”¹² But I would like to propose another possible interpretation of this passage, which concerns specifically Machiavelli’s position, and—even more specifically—what I would define as the “formal” side of Althusser’s interpretation of the Florentine. Now, we know today that Machiavelli exerted upon Althusser, since his first encounter with him, an immediate appeal and fascination: the fasci-

¹² This is obviously the line of thought developed by Althusser in “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” (2006a). It must be noted that in the same years as this lecture was delivered (1975–1976), Althusser was working on these themes and focused on Epicurus, as the publication of two new posthumous and previously unknown books revealed (Althusser 2014 and 2015). However, he does not elaborate the idea of a subterranean current of materialism yet. On Epicurus, see especially Althusser (2014: 60–62).

nation of the beginning from nothing (Althusser 1998: 224–25)¹³. The only evidence of such a fascination, which during Althusser’s life remained unknown to his readers (but of course not to his students [see Terray 1996]), is the 1977 public lecture titled “Machiavelli’s Solitude” (Althusser 1999: 116–30). The relationship with Machiavelli, moreover, will last until the very end of Althusser’s theoretical activity, as attested by the notes and short texts on Machiavelli that he wrote until 1986 (some of which are still unpublished). Notwithstanding this continuity, it seems necessary to me to draw a line of demarcation within Althusser’s long engagement with Machiavelli. In the 1970s, in particular in the same years as he writes the passages I have cited above, Althusser is particularly interested in what he defines as Machiavelli’s “dispositive,” that is, the way in which Machiavelli thinks, his style of thought or the formal aspect of his thought, if we may say so: which is for him above all a specific way of establishing the relationship between thought and its object (see Althusser 1999: 14), as the first part of *Machiavelli and Us* unequivocally shows¹⁴. By contrast, in the 1980s Althusser will focus on the elaboration of an “underground current” of materialism that was to serve as a “philosophy for Marxism” (Althusser 2006: 259), which would then include Machiavelli as one of its “moments.” Certainly, the attention and fascination for Machiavelli did not cease, on the contrary; however, Althusser’s focus was no longer on the “dispositive” of thought to be found in the Florentine, but on the concepts that could be used to outline a subterranean and anti-rationalist materialism capable of serving as an *assiette* for Marxism, and whose central theoretical figures will be, along with the “void,” the Epicurean notion of “clinamen,” the swerve. I cannot deal at length here with the complex genesis of aleatory materialism and the reasons that would lead Althusser to conceive it as a “philosophy,” however paradoxical—this, of course, would be the subject matter for another

¹³ On this, see the seminal work by Matheron (1997), as well as Althusser’s first course on Machiavelli in 1962 (in Althusser 2006b)

¹⁴ This text originates in Althusser’s lectures on Machiavelli in 1972, available at the IMEC archives (Caen, France). As noted by Negri (1993), who worked on Althusser’s manuscripts of the lectures and book before anything was published, the bulk of the corrections to the first version of the manuscript that Althusser made in 1976 concerned the first part of the book, which focuses on Machiavelli’s dispositive. Althusser continued to revise the manuscript of *Machiavelli and Us* in the following years; in the 1980s, he replaced the occurrences of “dialectic” with “aleatory,” leaving unaltered the structure of the book. See Elliott’s (1999) introduction to Althusser for more details on these late corrections. Althusser’s investigation of Machiavelli’s “dispositive” is peculiar to his reading in the seventies; it is not to be found in his 1962 lectures on the Florentine.

paper. But it is not without interest, for the argument I am trying to develop, to note that Althusser's thought seems to move *from* the study of Machiavelli's dispositive in the 1970s *to* his "philosophy," which would later be prolonged in a counter-history of materialism. This is what this unpublished note, arguably written at the end of the seventies, seems to suggest:

Following an old idea of [my] youth, which is not really mine as I derived it from my reading of Marx, and which I found once expressed more or less in Gramsci, I told myself that an author as unique as Machiavelli could not support, or entail a philosophy [...] But these two chapters [Althusser is in all probability referring here to chapters 2 and 3 of *Machiavelli and Us*] remain at the level of the theoretical dispositive [...] the philosophical [*le philosophique*] which is there showed is not all the philosophical there is in Machiavelli. But only a first layer, that one should lift in order to see further? (Althusser 1979?)

We see here a movement of thought similar to the one commanding Althusser's study of Marx in the 1960s: the extraction of a philosophy (recall the title of Althusser's introduction to *Reading Capital*: "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy"). It is therefore understandable that Althusser would be led to establish the name of Epicurus at the center of aleatory materialism, given the influence that Lucretius had on Machiavelli, who, as we know, copied for himself the entire *De Rerum Natura*. I do not intend to suggest here a simple genealogy of aleatory materialism, whose genesis is certainly complex and overdetermined, as recent studies have shown (Morfino 2013a; Morfino forthcoming; Montag 2013; Bourdin 2008; Pinzolo 2012), and whose origins stretch back several decades, given that Althusser's interest in contingency runs throughout his entire work (Pippa 2016; 2019a). However, it is a matter of distinguishing—that which is rarely the case in secondary literature (see for instance Lahtinen 2009, to my knowledge the most thorough study on Althusser and Machiavelli to date)—between Althusser's interpretation in the seventies and aleatory materialism, in which Machiavelli is an "episode" of a "current," however important.

It seems to me that this is crucial, because it is in his study of Machiavelli's "dispositive"—and therefore in his study of the Florentine in the 1970s, in texts such as *Machiavelli and Us*, in the '72 course on Machiavelli and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as the various unpublished notes related to these—that one can read Althusser's

attempt to outline a definition of philosophy as “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished” that goes beyond the definitions of philosophy elaborated in his public discourse. Whilst in *Machiavelli and Us*, a text that was almost ready for publication, Althusser is cautious, and only suggests that in Machiavelli one can find a “vacillation” of the traditional status of theory because the universality of theory is undermined by the point of view of political practice (which stands at the center of *The Prince*) (Elliott 1999: xviii), in some other notes from the same years he is more explicit and radical. Indeed, Althusser establishes a neat opposition between Machiavelli’s thought and the philosophy of natural law, which represents to him an exemplary form of a “philosophy of the accomplished fact”—that is, as we have seen earlier, a philosophy that takes upon itself the task of grounding the given state of affairs in certain “truths,” thus establishing for itself, as the site of its operations, the factual coordinates of the existing state of affairs¹⁵. Consider for instance the following passage:

It is clear that between Machiavelli and the theorists of natural law, despite their dealing with the same historical referent, absolute monarchy, no philosophical relationship can exist. Not only because the philosophy of the *fait à accomplir* and the beginning clashes with the philosophy of the accomplished fact and of the origin, but also and above all because the first philosophy is not a philosophy at all, because Machiavelli never gave it the slightest philosophical form, systematic or even embryonic. (Althusser, n.d.a)

What is being outlined here are the traits of a philosophy that is *not* a philosophy, a thinking that is *not* philosophical. If we refer to what we said earlier about the “philosophical dispositive” in the previous section, the opposition is stark. On the one hand, there is philosophy, its discourse, its *logos*, which thinks in the accomplished fact the totality of practices in order to subject them to a

¹⁵ This opposition emerges neatly in the lecture “Machiavelli’s Solitude” (1999: 121). But perhaps the essential pages are in the 1972 *Cours sur Rousseau*, where Althusser attempts to show how Rousseau occupies a position of internal exclusion with respect to the paradigm of the philosophy of natural law (= a philosophy of the accomplished fact) and should therefore be read as someone who, in the wake of Machiavelli, tries to think the *fait à accomplir* (although in a semi-utopian way and not as a materialist, like Machiavelli). The study of the “dispositive” of classical political philosophy can be also found in Althusser’s lectures on Hobbes and Locke now collected in Althusser (2006b).

Truth-Guarantee that serves the constitution of a specific hegemony. Materialism itself can be conceived in this way, as a philosophical “system”; materialist philosophy, in this line of thought, works for the oppressed towards the construction of a counter-hegemony, which could become dominant itself, thus ending up reproducing indefinitely the philosophy-State complicity¹⁶. In the 1976 lecture, Althusser opposed to this a new practice of philosophy, the only one truly materialist, and the only one to really match the demands that Marxism places on philosophy itself. On the other hand, however, Althusser now proposes a “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*” that is practised by Machiavelli but is not, indeed, a “philosophy”—which seems “*hors philosophie*” (“What is the philosophical form of his thought? It seems *hors philosophie*,” writes Althusser [n. d.a]) because it is radically different. Is there not here an implicit equivalence, which Althusser does not seem to get to think fully, between a “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*,” which stands against the “philosophical dispositive” of philosophy “produced as philosophy,” and the idea of a “new practice of philosophy”? However, I do not wish to suggest that in Machiavelli Althusser finds the *same* idea of a new practice of philosophy as the one he found in Marx, Mao or, above all, Lenin (Althusser 2011: 262). Rather, the opposite is true: this practice of philosophy possesses something unique, which confers to it the status of an *original and unprecedented* practice of philosophy.

In what specific sense, then, would Machiavelli’s dispositive be unique? Clearly, what interests Althusser is not that Machiavelli founds the autonomy of politics, or that he breaks with the moral and Christian thinking about politics, leaving behind the “imagination” of it (this would be the standard view of Machiavelli as a realist and so on), even if these are certainly important aspects for Althusser. What is central to Althusser’s reading is—as the above passage already indicates—that Machiavelli thinks, in the absolutely singular dimension of the *deed to be accomplished*, the historical rupture, the *radical beginning* of a foundation. Better: he thinks them *as coincident*, as one and the same thing. It is these two concepts (that I shall call “categories”) that are crucial both for clarifying

¹⁶ On this point, note that for Althusser “State” and “state of affairs” (= accomplished fact) are strictly related, given that the State has the function of securing the reproduction of the relations of production and power, in other words the conservation of a certain given state of affairs. This point of view is the same that one can find in Badiou, for instance, who develops its implications at a ontologico-political level in meditations 8 and 9 of *Being and Event* (2013)

Machiavelli's *extraneousness* to philosophy and his potential *importance* for a "new practice of philosophy." In a dense page from a recently discovered 1972 course on Rousseau, Althusser insists precisely on this:

Machiavelli's thought, for specific political reasons, had to set itself this unprecedented and radical theoretical task of thinking the conditions of possibility of existence of what did not exist yet, i. e. of thinking the radical beginning [...]. On the one hand, Machiavelli must think the *fait à accomplir*, must think in the *fait à accomplir*, in the element of the *fait à accomplir*, in the question of the *fait à accomplir*. And on the other, and this is ultimately the same thing, Machiavelli must think the beginning as such, in the element of the beginning, in the element of the question of beginning, etc. Here are the two decisive terms: *fait à accomplir* and beginning. Should we say that these two words are concepts? I leave this question on hold, and I say: let's suppose that they are two concepts anyway, these two words match each other and define that which one can call both the object and the form of Machiavelli's thinking, his peculiar form of thinking [...]. Is not astonishing that classical philosophy, dominant or dominated, considered Machiavelli as a stranger to philosophy, as an outsider? In fact, if we turn to this philosophy, has this philosophy ever thought on the basis of the couple [*dans le couple*] *fait à accomplir* and beginning? Has this philosophy ever attempted to think the *fait à accomplir* and the beginning? (Althusser 2012: 47–48, author's own translation)

What ought to retain our attention in these passages is not so much the opposition established by Althusser between Machiavelli and the theorists of natural law¹⁷, nor is it the specific question of the absolute state, but the formal contraposition that comes to fore here. If we consider the fact that Althusser works on these questions in the same years as he reflects on the "philosophical dispositive," we can advance the thesis that Machiavelli provides Althusser with a model of a "practice of philosophy" of which two negative determinations can be now specified: first, it does not assume the "philosophy" form, since it does not think the totality of practices and does not aim to provide any interpretation of the

¹⁷ Althusser had insisted on this opposition as early as 1962. See Althusser (2006b: 198–99).

accomplished fact in terms of Truths that would work towards the establishment of a hegemony; second, it is not limited to the idea of “class struggle in theory” or to the idea of “liberating the practices” either, since we can perhaps talk of “liberation” in this context only if we attribute to it a much more radical sense, that is, the sense of a “historical rupture,” a radical beginning, the name of which for Althusser was obviously “revolution” in a communist sense. Surely, Machiavelli operates in the space of theory, his practice being a theoretical practice, and his theoretical intervention is an intervention within and in a conjuncture, which is premised on a *pris de parti* (Machiavelli’s “essere popolare,” as Althusser remarks [1999: 24]). From this point of view, there is clearly a continuity with the idea of philosophy as “class struggle in theory.” But it is evident that the differences are greater than the similarities. In this sense, Althusser’s reflections on Machiavelli’s dispositive should be considered as the attempt to delineate the “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*” as a practice of philosophy that thinks based on two categories: “*fait à accomplir*” and “beginning,” which is not at all the case for his other definitions of philosophy. But should it be considered as a “philosophy,” after all, even in the sense of a practice of philosophy that is foreign to the “philosophy dispositive”? I would say so, even against Althusser himself, who in *Machiavelli and Us* retreats to the less compromising (with respect to his own public definitions of philosophy) expression “vacillation of theory” (Althusser 1999: 20). It is indeed a matter of philosophy, I argue, even by Althusserian standards. For Althusser, indeed, in his post-theoreticist phase, philosophy (as we have seen in the previous section) is a mode of rational thinking that exists between science and politics, being determined by both. Is it not the same in (Althusser’s) Machiavelli? As Althusser argues, Machiavelli employs theoretical propositions but arranges them around the *political* objective (the *fait à accomplir*), which thus determines its dispositive (Althusser 1999: 17)¹⁸. Therefore, the result is a discourse that coordinates politics and theoretical propositions, and this discourse is, in itself, a philosophical intervention. However, this should not obscure the radically new element: Machiavelli’s dispositive cannot

¹⁸ The fundamental difference between the idea of philosophy as class struggle in theory and a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished” lies precisely in the order of determination. In the latter, the political determination operates in reverse: it is not the existing politics that determines the philosophical intervention, but it is the politics to be accomplished that determines the modality of the philosophical intervention.

be assimilated to the “philosophical dispositive” *because it thinks beyond the boundaries of the accomplished fact*, performing the task of thinking the rupture with the accomplished fact itself—this is why Machiavelli is a philosopher that seems to be *hors philosophie*, in the same way the “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*” is.

So, it is on the basis of the categories of “*fait à accomplir*” and “beginning” that Machiavelli’s “solitude” and uniqueness can be explained for Althusser. But at this point we need to move forward and ask a more precise question. What are, indeed, the *specific* operations of a philosophy based on such categories? How does it “work,” in the concrete thickness of history? Effectively, the analyses produced by Althusser in *Machiavelli and Us*, as well as in other notes from the 1970s, aim to specify the determinate and concrete mode of functioning of such an unprecedented dispositive. In this sense, they can be taken not only as analyses of Machiavelli, but also and more radically as the attempt to mark off the *positive determinations* of a “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*” thought in the wake of Machiavelli. With this in mind, I think that if we want to circumscribe the distinctness of the “philosophy of the *fait à accomplir*,” we must direct our attention to two key aspects that emerge from Althusser’s treatment of Machiavelli in *Machiavelli and Us* (and here I will of course leave aside many other aspects of Althusser’s reading).

The Positive Determinations of a ‘Philosophy of the Deed to be Accomplished’

The first determination is related to the fact that Machiavelli thinks “the conditions of possibility of the existence of what did not yet exist” as a singular “deed to be accomplished”—in Machiavelli’s text, the unification of Italy out of the political fragmentation of the time under a new prince. Regarding this point, Althusser stresses that Machiavelli’s theoretical analyses (especially in *The Prince*) entail what I would interpret, in Hegelian terms, as an entirely new “attitude of the thought towards objectivity.”¹⁹ In fact, the object of Machiavel-

¹⁹ Which is quite different from the “materialist” attitude of thought towards objectivity recently advocated by Žižek in *The Absolute Recoil* (2014), where he proposes a new “dialectical materialism” grounded on the ontological principle of “absolute recoil.” For Žižek, “dialectical materialism is the only true inheritor of what Hegel designates as the speculative attitude of thought towards objectivity. All other forms of materialism, including Althusser’s ‘materialism of the encounter,’ scientific materialism and neo-Deleuzian New-Materialism, fail in this goal” (Žižek 2014: 4). The idea of a materialist philosophy of the *fait à accomplir* that I propose here goes clearly in a different (non-Hegelian) direction.

li's thought is the *absence* of object itself, as the objective exists only in the future, as something that must be attained. But the topological (outside the boundaries/coordinates of the *fait accompli*) and temporal (a *fait* that must be attained in the future) dislocation does not produce what it usually does, that is, a flight forward toward a utopia. Whereas the mark of utopia is radical separation (and Thomas More's island is an obvious example here), this displacement of the object into the future as an objective produces instead a (non-dialectical) recoil onto the present, triggering a different, and materialistic, consideration of the present itself²⁰. In Machiavelli, argues Althusser, the historical conjuncture under consideration is not a simple object of thought (as it would be in a purely "scientific," disinterested consideration), nor is it the "mere summary of its elements, or enumeration of diverse circumstances, but *their contradictory system* which poses the political problem and indicates [*désigne*] its historical solution, *ipso facto* rendering it a political objective, a practical task" (Althusser 1999: 19). So, as Gramsci had already pointed out, the historical elements of a specific conjuncture "are assessed as a relation of force" (Ibid.), a texture of intermingled forces that appear as such only when traversed by the perspective of the "deed to be accomplished."²¹ From this, we can derive what we may call the first determination of this new type of philosophy, which is perhaps better described in terms of "operation": at a first level, what is peculiar to a philosophy of the deed to be accomplished is a materialistic analysis of the conjuncture in terms of relations of forces.

I said, "at a first level," because there is another aspect that must be considered, one that is just as relevant as this, if not, ultimately,

²⁰ Here we find an idea that Althusser had already elaborated in his post-1965 redefinition of philosophy, i. e., the idea that philosophy is objectless because (unlike sciences) it has "objectives" and "stakes." Yet, now the idea of the absence of "object" acquires an entirely different meaning, because it is not linked, as it was, to the thesis of "class struggle in theory" between two tendencies, idealism and materialism, nor is it related to the demarcation between science and ideology. Rather, the key opposition is with a "scientific" knowledge of the conjuncture.

²¹ Althusser seems to be thinking of the following passage from Gramsci's notes on Machiavelli: "But Machiavelli is not merely a scientist: he is a partisan, a man of powerful passions, an active politician, who wishes to create a new balance of forces and therefore cannot help concerning himself with what 'ought to be' (not of course in a moralistic sense). [...] He bases himself on effective reality, but what is this effective reality? Is it something static and immobile, or is it not rather a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium? [...] What 'ought to be' is therefore concrete; indeed, it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics" (Gramsci 1971: 172).

more fundamental. For Althusser, it is on the basis of such analysis that a specific “form” is proposed by Machiavelli as a solution to the historical impasse: “The whole question then becomes: in what form are all the positive forces currently available to be rallied, in order to achieve the political objective [...]? Machiavelli gives this form a name: the Prince” (Althusser 1999: 19). It is here that we touch upon the other aspect of the “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished.” What is really crucial in Althusser’s analysis is that Machiavelli thinks the “deed to be accomplished” as requiring an *absolute novelty*, that is, the appearance of something completely new—an unpredictable “event” that is not already prefigured in the conjuncture or in the situation: Italy will be unified by a *new prince*²². This is the reason why the concept of “beginning” is so important. In Machiavelli’s text, notes Althusser:

the problem of *The Prince* is [...] the problem of beginning [*commencement*]. The question that has forever haunted philosophy, and always will—with what should one begin?—Machiavelli replies quite non-philosophically, but with theses not lacking in philosophical resonance: one should begin with the beginning. The beginning is ultimately nothing [*rien*]. [...] Not nothingness [*néant*], but the void [*vide*]. (Althusser 1999: 67–68)

Let us note that here the opposition to the operation of “philosophy” becomes blatant: whilst “philosophy” constantly attempts to suture or mend the dominant hegemonic texture of the present so as to prevent any rupture, to forestall any break, a materialist philosophy thought in the wake of Machiavelli does just the opposite: it mobilizes “fragments of theory” (Althusser 1999: 17) to analyse the conjuncture in order to think the *fait à accomplir* as a rupture, as a break in the order of being. But in what sense does Machiavelli start from the “void”? First, because he both asserts the necessity of a Prince and rules out all the existing princes—this prince will have to start from nothing, but is himself a “void” because his name is unknown; simply, he does not exist. This is, for Althusser, Machiavelli’s specific *prise de parti* within his historical conjuncture, in

²² For Althusser’s insistence on the theme of “novelty,” see Althusser (1999: 55–56, 73). It is clear that Althusser deliberately distances himself from the interpretations that insist on chapter XXVI of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli appeals to Lorenzo, who certainly is not a new prince (as does for instance the famous interpretation by Martelli [1982], to which Althusser’s is totally opposed). On this point, Althusser distances himself from Gramsci as well.

the sense that he rejects all existing princes (Althusser 1999: 76). Second, because the “beginning” will be the result of a contingent encounter between this new prince and a “propitious conjuncture”: there is no teleology commanding the emergence of a new prince, or the progressive transformation of the “people” into a full “subject.” This is the reason, argues Althusser, why Machiavelli refrains from assigning a name to him and to locate geographically the place from which he will start (Ibid.). This refusal is for Althusser the recognition of the absolute limits of thinking that any coherent materialism should respect, as this unpublished note clarifies:

The refusal to close the gap [*écart*] in thought is the recognition of the necessary role of concrete and unpredictable invention of history, the recognition that solely the history of political practice can resolve this “contradiction,” close this gap. (Althusser, n.d.b)

As such, the “refusal to close the gap” represents for Althusser a solution to the question of the relation between theory and practice, since it is a requirement that limits the pretenses of theory, recognizing the existence of an irretrievable outside of thought (as Althusser never tired of saying). This can be better expressed by saying that for Althusser there is a primacy of encounter over form (Morfino 2013b: 170)²³: although the “form” of the solution is put forth, it will only be actualized after, *and because of*, a contingent encounter.

Now, it is this radical separation between “form” and “content” (i. e., that which will “fill out” the empty form, the determinate prince) that brings to the fore the specific contribution of philosophy, understood as materialist philosophy of the deed to be accomplished, to the occurrence of a “beginning”—that is, ultimately, to the transformation of the world. The question here is: What does Machiavelli’s dispositive do, specifically, for Althusser? Ultimately, the answer is that it analyses the conjuncture as a relation of forces and derives from such an analysis a *necessary* (for obviously partisan political goals) *but empty form*. The “form”—a new prince, starting from nothing—is proposed by Machiavelli as the only pos-

²³ Morfino persuasively argues that this is a central thesis in Machiavelli’s “philosophy” itself. In what seems to me to be an Althusserian gesture, Morfino uses the quotation marks to signal the paradoxical nature of Machiavelli’s thought, whose inclusion in the philosophical tradition is possible only through the recognition of his internal exclusion.

sible solution to the impasse of the Italian conjuncture, and as a solution that is a “void”—there is no empirical referent for such an empty form in the existing “elements” of the conjuncture: in order to achieve the goal, there is only *that* solution, that is, *that* void. Surely, the positing of the empty form (the void) is not *already* the historical solution. But the whole question here is that the materialist primacy of the encounter over the form does not mean that there is no need to posit a “form” at all. Althusser insists that the “emptiness” of the “form” is the result of a materialist commitment to the outside of thought, and the consequence of Machiavelli’s political position with respect to the actually existing princes of the time. However, to grasp the specific determination of the operation of a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished” we need to reverse the perspective: yes, the “gap” needs to be left open, yet it *must* be posited, its necessity *must* be affirmed and its form *must* be specified (in Machiavelli, the very precise form is a prince, who will have to do certain things rather than others and act in a certain way, in order to attain the political objective). Therefore, on these bases we can say that the second key determination of a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished” is *the active designation of a void, a non-existent, a determinate absence that supplements the existing given* (the givenness of the given which Althusser refers to as *fait accompli*, accomplished fact), the positing of a new “empty form,” which is *necessary* in order for the transformation of the present conjuncture to take place. As is evident, *this* “void” is not a concept of an ontological theory, of a metaphysics of being (this is then quite different from Badiou, for instance, but also from what Althusser will say years later in some other texts)²⁴. It is always a specific void, that is, what I shall call a *determinate void*, related to a singular conjuncture and to its materialist analysis (it considers the relation of forces and so on). In this sense, a materialist philosophy of the deed to be accomplished, understood as a practice of philosophy, is not interested in a thesis on the nature of being (its incompleteness/inconsistency [Badiou], or its ontological potency/power, and so forth—one can think of Negri’s [1999] reading of Machiavelli here); it is concerned with the singular conjuncture and with a singular analysis of the conjuncture,

²⁴ Nevertheless, Montag has argued that, in later writings such as “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” Althusser does move in a direction that seems similar to Badiou (in this respect): the “void” of the later texts, for Montag, would be precisely an ontological void (Montag 2014: 179), a sort of “principle of hope” (Ibid.: 185) that guarantees that the “break” is always possible.

which opens it up towards a possible “deed to be accomplished” through the conceptualization—which is also a prescription of a task—of a determinate void²⁵.

These aspects form what I consider to be the key determinations—which are not actually separate from one another but form two sides of the same coin—of a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished.” There is, however, another aspect that is emphasized in Althusser’s reflections on Machiavelli. For him, this “philosophy” is not materialist only because of its own inscription within the conjuncture assessed as a relation of forces, and for its positing a void in the form of a supplement; it is so also because the specific arrangement of the philosophical discourse around a “determinate void” produces material effects. As Althusser remarked in a recently published text (available in French as *Écrits sur l’histoire* [2018a]), Machiavelli’s texts are similar to some of Marx’s and Freud’s writings in that they designate another “space” that goes beyond them, into the real world (Althusser 2018a: 261). Overall, this is quite an important but still underexplored aspect of Althusser’s reflection on the way in which philosophy, or more widely discursive practices, can have real effects, produce material consequences. There is probably no need to stress that Althusser is very far from thinking that ideas are omnipotent, yet he is also very far from denying that discourses can have real effects. Indeed, to paraphrase the words of one of his harshest critics, it is only when we realize that “words are merely words, and spectacles merely spectacles” that we can understand how “words and images, stories and performances,” and we should add philosophical discourses, “can change something of the world we live in” (Rancière 2009: 23). One can even say that Althusser’s reflections on materialism have as one of their central concern the understanding of the possible effects of a text on the reader, of a performance on the spectator, or more in general of discourses on the subject. If we turn to his essay on the *Piccolo Teatro* (Althusser 2005: 129–51), for instance, we see that Althusser was chiefly interested in the way in which the internal structure of a play produced

²⁵ One can measure the distance of this definition of philosophy from the one Althusser proposed in “Lenin and Philosophy” by comparing the idea of philosophy as an “active designation of a void, a determinate absence” with what Althusser said in the 1968 lecture: there, Althusser said that philosophy could also be thought of as the “emptiness of a distance taken” (“vide d’une distance prise” in the French edition) (Althusser 1971: 62). It must also be remarked that if it is true that Althusser had already proposed the idea that philosophy is objectless, but has objectives and stakes (in the already mentioned course for scientists and in the lecture on Lenin), he did not associate these notions with the “void.”

a critique of the ideological consciousness of the spectator. As I have suggested elsewhere (Pippa 2019a: 129–35), we can say—using the terminology of Althusser’s later essays—that in that essay he was trying to capture the de-interpellating effects of a materialist theatre, the breaking of the mirror of ideological recognition. In the above-mentioned *Écrits sur l’histoire*, Althusser argues that Marx’s theory is internally unbalanced, because it assigns to itself a specific place within the topography it sets out, thus thinking its own outside. This has the immediate effect, according to Althusser, of “inducing” in the reader “a disposition towards practice,” an “appeal to practice” which he describes as an “interpellation” (Althusser 2018: 263–64)²⁶. Nowhere does Althusser get as close to fully conceptualize this “interpellation” as in his *Machiavelli and Us*. What are, indeed, the specific effects produced by *The Prince*? In what sense can it be said that it produces such effects? Obviously, Althusser is aware that Gramsci had drawn attention to the fact that *The Prince* needs to be understood as a manifesto, and therefore as a “political act.” Yet it is not in this sense that it produces effects, or at least not primarily for this. It is chiefly because of what I called the “determinate void” through which it supplements the existing given. For Althusser, in fact, this empty place prescribed by *The Prince* is meaningful only through its “possible or requisite subject,” that is, via the operation of *interpellation* that the positing of an empty place entails (Althusser 1999: 32). In this sense, by supplementing the conjuncture with a void that prescribes a political task, we can say that a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished” is a prescription/designation of a new place that it invites us to occupy via an interpellation that is eminently political, inasmuch as it constitutes “an appeal to practice,” an appeal to continue the text in “the real world,” so as to “complete” it²⁷. It is important to stress, however, that such an interpellation is not another determination of this prac-

²⁶ Here is what Althusser says about Marx’s *Capital*: “the play of the topography becomes [...] an interpellation, an appeal to practice. The internal dispositive of theory, being unbalanced [*désequilibré*], induces a disposition towards practice which continues theory with other means. [...] In other words, Marxist theory is haunted, in its very theoretical dispositive, by a certain relation to practice, which is at once an existing practice and a practice to transform: politics” (Althusser 2018: 264). It is noteworthy that Althusser uses the word interpellation here, in a context where he focuses on the theoretical dispositive of Marx’s writings: the parallel with his reflections on Machiavelli on this point is evident.

²⁷ I have discussed in more detail this point in Pippa (2019b), where I have proposed the concept of “political interpellation” to account for the specific type of interpellation that can be extracted from Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli.

tice of philosophy, but its effect, the effect of a unique dispositive that, in the wake of Machiavelli, apprehends “reality” politically, in order to transform it.

In a later text on Machiavelli, perhaps one of the last ones ever written by Althusser, he returns to consider what we can “learn from Machiavelli” today. The argument is quite bleak, and the tone is pervaded by a distinct bitterness:

So, what can we still learn today, from this strange utopist that Machiavelli was? A lot of things, and almost nothing [...] Can Machiavelli be useful to us today in politics? We know that Gramsci thought so, believing that the Communist Party should be the “New Prince” of modern times. What a utopia! [...] Now, it must be recognized, Machiavelli’s old dream, coeval to the great monarchies of Spain and France, and even Lenin’s dream, “Marxism is the primacy of politics,” or Gramsci’s (build the Communist Party as a modern prince), this old dream has completely disappeared from reality [...] From this point of view, and in spite of Gramsci’s childish hopes, it is clear that Machiavelli is absolutely of no avail to us. (Althusser 1993: 111–18, author’s own translation)

Against these words, I think that the “Machiavellian” idea of a “philosophy of the deed to be accomplished”—with its peculiar operations that think of the *fait à accomplir* as beginning and rupture, positing a specific, determinate void based on a materialist analysis of the present conjuncture as a relation of forces—should be defended as precisely the materialist practice of philosophy that we need in order to counter the other, endless practice of philosophy (which Lenin called “rumination”) that works silently, days and nights, in favor of the *fait accompli*.

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