On the Relevance of Niccolò Machiavelli's Understanding of Time for Contemporary Politics

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Abstract: Niccolò Machiavelli's political thoughts are based on a specific understanding of time. Whoever wants to make use of his conclusions must therefore be aware of his premises in order not to run the risk of misinterpreting them. Even if the Florentine does not develop an explicit theory of time, statements about the meaning of time can be found implicitly in his entire oeuvre. In three steps, this article will present the main features of Machiavelli's understanding of time, an explanation of the significance of time in contemporary politics, and an answer to the question 'How to proceed with Machiavelli and his political thoughts?' With regard to his understanding of time, Machiavelli's political thoughts will not be presented as a guide for the challenges of contemporary politics but as a distorted reflection of a distant mirror.

Keywords: acceleration, hesitation, Machiavelli, politics, temporality, time

In comparison to the that of earlier political thinkers, Machiavelli's understanding of time shows an empty spot in a prominent place. In Machiavelli's works, nothing has remained of the great narrations of the 'after-world', such as that of Dante Alighieri. There is no *Limbo,* no *Inferno,* no *Purgatorio* and no *Paradiso.* Within Machiavelli's political thought, there is no place for the idea of an 'after-world', since he understands human action as an ongoing cycle. Outside this cycle, no promise of justice or salvation awaits man. Although Machiavelli does mention God as the guiding force

of human destiny in the twenty-fifth chapter of *The Prince* (*Il Principe*) directly after *Fortuna,* the idea of an omnipotent God has no role in his political thought, nor does the Bible in his writings. The ideal prince therefore will be judged solely on the basis of the success of his deeds on earth, not before the judgement seat of God (cf. Kainz 2009: 213; Machiavelli 1989a: XVIII, 67; Machiavelli 1989b: I.9, 217–218). History is thus to be understood as a secularised process and justice is a purely human construct, which only emerged in the course of the formation of political communities (Machiavelli 1989b: I.2, 197; Ottmann 2013: 157–158).[1]

Fortuna, a force beyond human control, has indeed an effect on man, but its effect is solely related to this world, and hence is not related to the history of salvation (Machiavelli 1989a: XXV, 89–92; Machiavelli 2003c: 745–749). Where *Fortuna*'s influence cannot unfold any power, man is then also given the opportunity to shape his destiny himself (Machiavelli 1989a: XXV, 90). Machiavelli thus suits his time, which recognises in man a second God, a creator of his own world, not just an instrument of the Almighty (Nikolaus von Kues 2002: 9; Vasari 2006: 98).[2] The empowerment of man goes hand in hand with a generally critical attitude towards Christianity, which is according to Machiavelli a religion that teaches humbleness, self-denial and contempt for worldly goods, and that pays little attention to the active man (Machiavelli 1989b: II.2, 331).[3] The teachings of Christianity are thus in contradiction to human nature. At all times, human nature is marked by the same attributes, so that man in his actions is determined by ambition and ingratitude (Machiavelli 2003a: 735; 2003b: 740–741), by constant desires and tempers (Machiavelli 1989b: I.39, 278). For Machiavelli, this continuity of human nature ensures that the events of the past and the future are comparable. Therefore, it is possible to predict the future from the past (Machiavelli 1989b: III.43, 521). Instead of a linear progression in time, instead of an eschatological conception of time, Machiavelli has cyclical understanding of time, an understanding that is expressed, for example, in the *politeíon anakýklosis* (the 'governmental cycle'), the idea that the forms of political order follow one another in a circle (Machiavelli 1989b: I.2, 197–199; Ottmann 2013: 163–164; Polybius 1961: VI.4–9, 527–534). The concept of the cycle of political communities does not allow any forms of community outside of it: it acknowledges

no New Jerusalem, no *civitas Dei,* no City of Dis. With the disempowerment of the 'after-world', what is called 'this world' becomes decisive in Machiavelli's political thought.

However, this world is shrinking in Machiavelli's case. It is nothing more than the mere moment. A division into past, present and future, on the other hand, does not take place in a noteworthy way. Although Machiavelli speaks of the past and the future, both are not periods of meaning for their own sake. According to Machiavelli, the past signifies the state before the moment right now. This state is significant solely because it provides instructive examples of political success or failure (Machiavelli 1989b: I.Preface, 190–191; I.10, 221. I.39, 278; III.43, 521).

Nevertheless, what happened in previous events can only partially fulfil this political and educational function. Machiavelli also notes that previous events can be completely forgotten whether through natural disasters and epidemics, or through changes in language and religion (Machiavelli 1989b: II.5, 339–341). In addition to this complete oblivion, a partial forgetting of events can occur. Machiavelli states that history is only handed down in fragments because memories of the past have been deliberately erased and concealed (Machiavelli 1989b: II.Preface, 321; II.5, 340). In consequence, no coherent history is handed down, but rather separate stories.[4] This raises the question of to what extent the stories drawn from the 'remembered before' can have an exemplary character for the present at all, since an understanding of their contexts of origin and effects is only possible to a limited extent (cf. Machiavelli 1989b: II.Preface, 321). All this increases the meaning of the present moment, since the past is only partially remembered; moreover, the past is significant not for its own sake, but only for its relevance to the mere moment.

The same applies to the future. For Machiavelli, the future is the 'after-the-mere-moment'. Like the 'before-the-mere-moment', the after is not a time for its own sake. Its relevance in Machiavelli's case arises by perpetuating the political state, which is to be established in the present moment. *The Prince* thus offers its readers advice on how to acquire a princedom, how it may be lost, and, above all, how it may be preserved (Machiavelli 1989a: II, 11–12; 2003e: 929). *Mantenere lo stato,* preserving the political state, is the core concern both of *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* (e.g.,

Machiavelli 1989a: XVIII, 67; Maissen 2010: 60–65). Therefore, the *Discourses* demonstrate the political as well as temporal superiority of a mixed government. Machiavelli criticises pure forms of government for their short lifespans. He emphasises mixed government for its stability and solidity (Machiavelli 1989b: I.2, 199). In order not to endanger the stability of the state, but also because of the uncertain course and outcome of conspiracies, Machiavelli therefore advises the reader to maintain the status quo. A brighter future is not imagined, so it is better to endure the present government (Machiavelli 1989b: III.6, 428).

In addition, the 'after-the-mere moment' is not a time in its own right, because it gains relevance from the lore of glorious deeds performed in the present moment. The primary concern here is the posthumous fame of the moment, since earlier deeds serve Machiavelli simply as examples inspiring glorious deeds in the mere moment. The posthumous fame of earlier deeds is therefore of no further concern. The power of historians and poets – 'men of letters', as Machiavelli calls them – records this glory and thereby bends time (cf. Clark 2019: 1). They select the events worthy of being handed down. They conceal some, and create distance or proximity to others (Machiavelli 1989b: II.Preface, 321). Their power is capable of creating contact between single points within time. This is the basis of Machiavelli's praise of the men of letters, who, after the founders of religions and states, after generals as well, receive the greatest fame for their actions (Machiavelli 1989b: I.10, 220). Machiavelli also sees himself as such a man of letters, which is why he denotes himself as a historian, comic and tragic writer in a letter dedicated to Francesco Guicciardini, who can create such contact between points in time (cf. Hoeges 1998: 71; 2000: 134–135; Machiavelli 2003f: 987). Contrary to what is suggested in the governmental cycle, which knows no contact, shortcuts or connections between forms of government that do not directly follow one another, Machiavelli thus understands time as punctual. Once again, it becomes obvious that Machiavelli endorses neither linear nor a real cyclical conception of time. Instead, the points in time can be intentionally connected, bypassed or separated by those who are able to crumple time, creating proximity or distance (cf. Serres and Letour 1995: 58–60). Machiavelli concludes that this crumpled time, which shows close and distant relations as the result

of tradition, is suitable for establishing strict causalities in the sense of cause and effect. Whoever knows the past can give instructions for action for the present (Machiavelli 1989b: III.43, 521). Instead, such a conception of time would be much more suitable to encourage hesitation because it emphasises possibilities and impossibilities, and it lets alternatives become apparent (cf. Landwehr 2014: 1119–1121).

The present is the lynchpin in Machiavelli's understanding of time. From the perspective that prevails in this conception, the evaluation of before as well as of the after takes place from the present moment. As mentioned above, the present shrinks to the timespan of the current moment. The present does not consist of a month, a week or a day, but of the fleeting moment of the current situation. According to Machiavelli, it is necessary to become active in this moment. Waiting, deliberating or hesitating is not an option. For within the framework of action claimed against *Fortuna*'s impact, the opportunity must be seized. The opportunity, *Occasione,* presented as a twin sister or daughter of *Fortuna* in Machiavelli's poems, is alone able to keep itself always on top of those wheels that *Fortuna* turns (Hoeges 2006: 138; Machiavelli 2003c: 747; Pitkin 1999: 147).[5] Activism becomes a commandment. He who waits, deliberates or hesitates takes the risk that the turning wheel of *Fortuna* pulls him into the downfall. Hesitation is therefore not an option. Machiavelli concludes that one must be bold. In this way, *Fortuna* could be won over (1989a: XXV, 92). Hesitation would express uncertainty in the process of decision-making. Uncertainty, however, is unacceptable for Machiavelli, because it is important to meet *Fortuna* manfully and to win her over (Machiavelli 1989a: XXV, 92). Likewise, deliberating to choose between alternatives is rarely acceptable, because doing so let's *Occasione* pass by unused. Finally, it is not an option to wait and see. This would mean leaving one's own decisions to others and thus handing them over to *Fortuna.*

This commandment to activism applies to man, because his ambitions for fame and fortune do not make him content with what he already possesses, and he is driven to act in the moment instead of being passive and waiting for the mercy of his destiny (Machiavelli 1989a: XXV, 90–91; 1989b: I.1, 193–194). This equally applies to political forms of order. They are forced by the necessity to be

active and cannot remain inactive. To protect themselves from the expansion efforts of their competitors, they must conquer before they themselves are conquered (Berger Waldenegg 2000: 22–24; Machiavelli 2003d: 919; 1989a: III, 18; 1989b: I.1, 194; I.6, 209–211, II.19, 379).

To conclude, Machiavelli's premises lead him to an understanding of time that is focussed on the present, or more precisely on the mere moment, which allows neither an 'after-world', nor a past and a future as significant times. At the same time, a permanent change of the present situation can be observed due to the continuous movement of the wheels of *Fortuna*. This makes Machiavelli's understanding of the present contingent, possibly even chaotic. After all, it also permanently changes the basis of the evaluation of the before and the after.

The Significance of Time in Contemporary Politics

On the basis of this understanding of time, Machiavelli's political lessons seem perfectly suited to the challenges of contemporary politics. Because of the effects of acceleration processes of modernity, contemporary societies are shaped by circumstances comparable to those described in Machiavelli's understanding of time. The loss of the significance of the 'after-world', the dissolution of the temporal tripartite division of past, present and future, and a focus on the current moment are characteristic of the diagnostics of the accelerated present.

For a long time, it seemed that politics could avoid acceleration and increase its resilience to acceleration processes. Political systems were able to save time by establishing a manuscript culture, representative bodies or the transition to the territorial state, as immediate decisions amongst those present became obsolete (Münkler 2018: 86–91). But a side effect of technical progress and social change was an increase in the density of political events to be managed simultaneously or in shorter succession (Rosa 2013: 14–16, 26–29; Safranski 2018: 40, 107; Virilio 2011: 32). Induced by such accelerating processes, even distant events move into the near field of vision. In this instantaneousness of a multitude of events, the tripartite division of past, present and future dissolves

(Safranski 2018: 79; Virilio 1993: 56; 2011: 22, 32, 76). What remains is the orientation towards the present moment and the distinction it makes between before, simultaneous and afterwards, an orientation that is reinforced by the loss of promises of salvation in the after-world during the course of secularisation processes. Without the promise of salvation in the hereafter, this world and the politics it pursues have to fulfil the expectation of a better being (Han 2015: 36; Jörke 2019: 34–35; Safranski 2018: 112–113, 144).

Political science reflects acceleration processes in several interrelated research fields, which will be outlined in broad strokes: in addition to fundamental analyses of the time structures of political orders (Riescher 1994: 12), the impact of acceleration processes on state territories due to globalisation is examined by political science (Brown 2010: 7–8, 114, 119; Jörke 2019: 10–19; Münkler 2018: 117–118). Aside from that issue, there is the debate about whether politics is forced to make decisions in a shorter amount of time (Korte 2012: 21–22; Urry 2000: 126–130; Virilio 1993: 7–14; 2015: 114). A side effect of acceleration is the strengthening of the executive branch at the expense of the legislative branch. When necessity urges haste, parliaments lag behind and only nod at decisions (Rosa 2005: 394–396, 407–410; 2016: 376).

Politics is more concerned with managing situations than with controlling structures (Rosanvallon 2018: 64). Hence policies are to be guided by a logic of constraint that shows decisions to be without alternative (Séville 2017: 15–16; Weidenhaus 2015: 230). Acceleration processes are therefore also found to be (partly) responsible for crisis phenomena in democracy: (a) the flood of information associated primarily with the Internet does not result in an empowerment of citizens, but in social discord through incompatible epistemologies (Mounk 2018: 171–172; Przeworski 2019: 119; Runciman 2018: 156–161; Sunstein 2017: 59–60); (b) confidence in the promise of (inter-generational) material progress is declining (Jörke 2019: 14; Leroy 2020: 16–17; Przeworski 2019: 106–107; Rorty 1999: 246–249); (c) both of the aforementioned points ultimately favour populism, for whose emergence acceleration processes are essential (Jörke and Selk 2017: 42, 92, 107–108; Müller 2016: 32–34).

Political consulting (Höffe 2009: 34; Mai 1999: 662–663) or the reduction of the time required for democratic decision-making

processes (cf. Laux 2011: 237; Müller-Salo and Westphal 2018: 29–36; Münkler 2018: 118–119; Rüb 2011: 23–24) is intended to gain time and strengthen the sustainability of politics. Further research on the timing of political decisions and their rhythms is also associated with this idea (Riedl 2019: 2; Schmitter and Santiso 1998: 70–71). In addition, the need for an understanding of politics that recognises opportunities in time instead of thinking in terms of there being no alternatives has been noted (Neupert-Doppler 2020: 12–15). The kairotic knots of our time and our historical narrative ought to be perceived once again (Taylor 2007: 54). This is to counter the narrowing of time, which results in our losing the possibility of thinking about an open future (Manow 2020: 7–8).

The possibility of thinking about political alternatives, to execute not only negative sovereignty (understood as judgement about the past), but positive sovereignty (understood as shaping the future) is currently missing in our politics (Rosanvallon 2018: 114–115). Positive sovereignty requires hesitation. Sovereign is the one who knows how to hesitate (Vogl 2014: 73–74). Hesitation is able to disempower acceleration. What is gained with hesitation is power over time, instead of just exercising power on, by or in time.

Is a policy oriented towards Niccolò Machiavelli a possible answer to the challenges of contemporary politics? No, the opposite is the case. Machiavelli's political thought, which is characterised by an instantaneous time, a directionless movement that threatens to lead to a raging standstill (Virilio 2015), is not to be consulted. Machiavelli's advice leads to further acceleration and deepens the scarcity of time. Time scarcity is usually a poor advisor. Alternative courses of action are not recognised or only recognised too late. The current *Qualità de' tempi* does not demand an increase in political tempo; on the contrary, it demands hesitation.

The question of whether politics in general, and democracy in particular, can and should be accelerated in order to keep pace with general acceleration must be answered in the negative. If the praise of speed remained dominant, politics would also remain shaped by a risk factor that would be increasingly difficult to calculate. Past and future would become blurred in the course of acceleration (Virilio 2011: 21, 36), so that there would be a maximum amount of unpredictability in reacting to a given situation if causes and effects could not be adequately surveyed.

At the same time, acceleration contains an apolitical essence. Acceleration deprives politics of the basis of its existence: (collectively binding) decision-making (Luhmann 2000: 83–84). Without hesitation, there can be no decision because there is no choice between alternatives. In the supposed certainty of the lack of alternatives of doing, all acting consists only in the hectic hunt for the next opportunity (Han 2015: 103–104; Vogl 2014: 42–44). A resolution would become an end in itself of politics. This would obscure the fact that political resolutions are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to an end. For example, a law that does nothing or does not do what it is supposed to do is not to be welcomed because it was passed (quickly). The capacity for political action exists not only in its execution, but also in its absence (cf. Aristotle 2005: 1046b, 223–224). Consequently, every (political) decision must be based on the possibility of a non-decision (Agamben 2013: 84, 318–325; Vogl 2014: 37–39). Those who act without hesitation act without alternative, driven by the affects, impressions and influences of the moment. Hesitation is therefore not a characteristic remote from politics, but a basic pre-requisite of politics. Only in hesitation is the possibility of thinking about alternatives granted, the uncertain is clarified and it becomes possible to speak of justice and responsibility (Derrida 2019: 120–121).

Hesitation is to separate from the reproach of waste or even the loss of valuable time. Time cannot be lost: it is merely spent with other things than expected. Hesitation brings past and future back into consciousness. Only in this way does politics gain historicity and detach itself from a sequence of events, as is prevalent in an understanding of history such as that of Machiavelli (cf. Weidenhaus 2015: 32). While Machiavelli's understanding of time allows only the perspective of the actual state from which all further events are put into relation, hesitation allows past and future to be recognised again as times with their own meanings. Moreover, the destructive form of (political) hesitation, which sets the tone in common parlance, must be systematically distinguished from the action- and future-oriented form of hesitation. In this form, hesitation can become an expression of participation in and concern for the common good, as it aims to ensure that politics not only manages circumstances but shapes the future (Mühlfried 2019: 28–33; Rosanvallon 2018: 14–17, 64). Hesitation is not primarily intended

to accept the world as it is. It is not conservative in and of itself but holds the potential to counter the dictate of a supposed lack of alternatives and to reveal alternative paths to the future, which can be worth working towards. Hesitation is also significant for social cohesion: Without hesitation, trust is not possible, since hesitation reveals one's own or others' errors, makes false statements recognisable and exposes lies. Trust that is granted only in the rush of the moment is blind trust and without hesitation turns into its opposite – mistrust or the demand for transparency that is close to it (Han 2012: 78–79). Related to this idea is the fact that procrastination cannot be understood as a solely rationally motivated process. Given the unease about the question of whether man should do everything he is capable of (Ottmann 2005: 14), considering also the unintended consequences and side effects of human actions (Beck et al. 2001: 54), the question of responsibility becomes essential. The dissolution of traditional value judgements as a result of the uncertain handling of modern technology (Jonas 2003: 7; Marquard 1986: 82; Rosa 2013: 99–100), for example, confronts people with the need to hesitate in order not to act negligently and to cope with the complexity of a modernity that is no longer rationally comprehensible to them (Seebaβ 1994: 245–246).

Hesitation is characterised by (1) an inherent willingness to decide; (2) potential progressiveness, since it offers a weighing and judging of alternatives; (3) a chance for past and future to be recognised; (4) its contribution to social cohesion; and (5) its offering of a response to acceleration-induced experiences of alienation through its rational and emotional form.

How to Proceed with Machiavelli

Considerations of applying Machiavelli to the challenges of contemporary politics tend to miss the temporal foundations of both Machiavelli's political thought and contemporary politics. Instead, they focus on specific aspects of the Florentine's thought by means of which contemporary political problems are to be addressed.

The proposal of J. P. McCormick's 'Machiavellian democracy' (McCormick 2001, 2011) model, for instance, provides a reform of democratic institutions (primarily for the circumstances of the

political system of the United States of America) by installing an additional element into the political system: a People's Tribunate inspired by Machiavelli and his reading of the institutions of the ancient Roman republic. Such a tribunate model of popular government intends to address two deficiencies of modern democracy: that politics is dominated by wealthy citizens and that the existing electoral model of popular government is not trusted to keep political elites accountable (McCormick 2011: 12, 171). Therefore, a People's Tribunate of fifty-one non-wealthy citizens should be established, which should 'wield powers reminiscent of those entrusted to the Roman tribunes for one-year non-renewable terms' (McCormick 2011: 183). These tribunes should be provided with the power to veto legislation, call a national referendum or, besides further competences, initiate impeachment proceedings (McCormick 2011: 184–185). The implementation of this Machiavellian proposal is meant to increase the mechanisms of elite control and encourage more direct popular participation (McCormick 2001: 297) not only by adding institutional features taken from Machiavelli's works, but also by an important lesson on political culture taken from them: 'The people should despise and mistrust the elites' (McCormick 2001: 311). 'Ferocious populism' (McCormick 2001: 297) in a Machiavellian manner is designed to ensure the liberty of citizens and to grant the longevity of a political system (McCormick 2011: 187–188).

Besides questions with the model itself, the issue with this and other attempts to apply Niccolò Machiavelli to the challenges of contemporary politics occurs in the assumption that we can use Machiavelli's conclusions without considering the premises from which they derive. Considering Machiavelli's conception of time as well as the significance of time in contemporary politics, the attempt to strengthen the longevity of a modern political system by means of Machiavelli seems paradoxical. As we have seen, Machiavelli's understanding of time urges action in the mere moment instead of offering a long-term political perspective. 'Machiavellian democracy' reflects this temporal approach to politics. This model is therefore not 'at its heart a plea to take modern democracy back to the future' (O'Leary 2011: 141). In fact, Machiavellian democracy exemplifies temporal motions striving in different directions. First, by trying to strengthen the longevity of a political system a

reference to the future is to be established. The reference back to Machiavelli made for this purpose, though, does not allow a reference to the future, since the future is not a time in its own right in the Florentine's thinking. The emphasis on longevity is further associated with an alignment with the current political status quo. As with Machiavelli, the once-established political order of the present is to be preserved and continued on. Adapting to handle the challenges posed by future problems cannot be thought about with Machiavelli, because once you have reached the top of the wheels of *Fortuna,* every change could only make the political situation worse. Consequently, it is questionable whether Machiavelli's political thought 'provides an engine for reform' (O'Leary 2011: 152), because the political perspective of a proposal aligned with Machiavelli is one that hinges upon the mere moment.

Arguing with Machiavelli to strengthen the political participation of the people and the people's control of the elite (Green 2016: 5, 109; McCormick 2011: 297) is made considerably more difficult by the temporal reduction to the mere moment that is a result of Machiavelli's understanding of time. 'Ferocious populism' as an effect of Machiavelli's lesson that 'the people should despise and mistrust the elites' (McCormick 2001: 297, 311) or – as another proposal suggests – teaching people 'how not to be good' (Green 2016: 109; and in this issue) in a Machiavellian manner pays too little attention to the temporal flaws within these approaches: as it is driven by emotions, ferocious populism is less 'part of the brilliance of Machiavellian Democracy' (O'Leary 2011: 151), as it has been called, than a weak spot. Ferocious political actions are usually not characterised by sustainability, because they result from present circumstances and thus lack a view of the future. Machiavelli himself points to this problem when he notes that the people are fickle, they are deceived by appearances and lean sometimes one way and sometimes another (cf. Machiavelli 1989a: XVIII, 67). In addition, Machiavelli wrote in his poem *On Ingratitude*:

> Never does Ingratitude perish; never is she destroyed; a thousand times she rises up, if once she dies, because her father and her mother are immortal. As I said, she triumphs in the heart of every ruler, but takes more delight in the heart of the populace when it is master. The populace by her three arrows [not returning benefits, forgetting received favours and making a man never remember a favour] is wounded more

severely, because always where little is known, more is suspected. (Machiavelli 2003b: 741)

Therefore, the application of Niccolò Machiavelli's political thought to contemporary political issues cannot follow the pattern of positive sovereignty (cf. Rosanvallon 2018: 114–115). If it is not advisable to introduce Machiavelli's conclusions into contemporary politics without considering his temporal premises, the question of how to proceed with Machiavelli arises.

At first glance, Niccolò Machiavelli seems to have integrated elements of hesitation into his political thought, so that one can argue with Machiavelli against Machiavelli and oppose the above-presented decisionist Machiavelli with a hesitant Machiavelli. His cyclical approach to history, his plea to act according to the *Qualità de' tempi,* the praise for Fabius Maximus Cunctator and his self-conception as an advisor who offers the politicians alternative courses of action could lead to the conclusion that Machiavelli can continue to be consulted as a valuable advisor on political issues. On closer examination, however, contrary patterns of argumentation are discernible.

Machiavelli's depiction of political consulting is only conditionally supportive of hesitation. Political consulting, systems of forecasting and early crisis detection provide only a limited counterweight to acceleration and the density of political events it brings along. They remain bound to the logic of acceleration and improve the certainty of decisions only in asymmetrical information relations. Symmetrical relations, on the other hand, follow the principle of an accelerating race. Instead of reacting to factual events with more time, decisions are made in advance of events that may remain mere phantoms, which in turn may influence the execution of the phantom event that has not yet occurred. A multiplication of contingencies within the political process is the consequence (*locus classicus* is Aristotle 1974: 18b–19b, 102–105; Beck et al. 2001: 54).

At first glance, Machiavelli's understanding of history contains a hesitant element because it takes pressure off of the decision-makers. If circumstances return, one can learn from history and decisions can be repeated. Nevertheless, political forms of order can make only limited use of the advantages of Machiavelli's circular

understanding of history, since they will usually have gone through the cycle of governments only once before perishing (Machiavelli 1989b: I.2, 199). In this respect, political decisions remain unique and tied to their specific present. It is impossible to meet political events in equanimity if we have to seize the opportunity to forestall our rivals driven by ambition and necessity as well, as Machiavelli noted.

To release oneself from obligation, to react to the circumstances and to recognise the at least temporary importance of hesitant action for politics one could consider Machiavelli's argument that action be taken in accordance with the *Qualità de' tempi.* The *Qualità de' tempi,* the particular circumstance of the time, can suggest that one should not act boldly but hesitantly. Machiavelli's laudatory remarks about Fabius Maximus Cunctator, whose tactic of avoiding a pitched battle with Hannibal over and over again defeated the Carthaginian general in the end, is an example (Machiavelli 1989b: III.9, 452–453). However, a fundamental acceptance of hesitation cannot be derived from this example. On the one hand, Machiavelli points out that Fabius hesitates solely because it was his nature, not his free choice (Machiavelli 1989b: III.9, 452). On the other hand, Machiavelli also notes that people are hardly free to behave differently than according to the standards of their time, and that there is little promise of success for a behaviour that goes against the standards of one's time (cf. Machiavelli 1989a: XV, 57–58). Machiavelli's understanding of time is described above. His teachings are written from a time and for a time of political activism. Thus, there is no room for hesitation in Machiavelli's political thought. Action in the present moment already occupies this space, which is why Machiavelli opens the door to the penetration of acceleration and its phenomena.

Politics based on Niccolò Machiavelli's thought cannot avoid aligning itself with his understanding of time. Instead of choosing between alternatives, such politics can only react to the current situation. One of the consequences of such accelerated politics is that it creates space for lies and encourages the abandonment of truthfulness. This is because lies, as well as less drastic forms of untruth, like fake news for instance, are dependent on time. Where communication can unfold unhindered, they find an audience (Jaster and Lanius 2019: 8–9). The faster statements follow each other,

the less possibility there is to check them. Lies thrive when they cannot be verified. Those who therefore set the pace of politics can also determine or at least co-determine the degree of truthfulness in politics. The fact that Machiavelli combines successful politics with the art of imitation and fraud is of little help against this background (Jaster and Lanius 2019: 22–23; Machiavelli 1989a: XVIII, 66–67).

Acceleration also threatens politics with a lack of trust, or at least politics becomes a place of blind trust – because trust takes time to develop. In accelerated politics, citizens run the risk of placing their trust in politicians who only give the impression of truthfulness. This impression becomes reality or as equally true as reality (cf. Jaster and Lanius 2019: 17; Machiavelli 1989a: XVIII, 66). Living together in a political community, however, presupposes that there is something true that one can orient oneself around. When it becomes uncertain whether our counterparts, when they speak with us, speak truthfully or falsely, then this precondition begins to erode (Eco 2019: 109). Blind trust is therefore beneficial to acceleration, as no one is forced to think for themselves, no one has to give reasons again and no one makes use of the deliberative process. Thus, although not necessarily mistrust, the absence of trust is conducive to politics, since it allows critical attitudes and the questioning of circumstances becomes possible. It is therefore necessary to justify and explain again what was previously taken for granted. Mistrust can be considered as a source of truthfulness (Mühlfried 2019: 12).

Finally, to be aware of the risks of political action, an understanding of time is necessary that recognises the past and the future through hesitation. This is because risk society teaches that our past actions can have effects not only on our present but also on our future and that therefore both the past and the future must be recognised as independent times. Machiavelli's understanding of time, as the basis of his political thought, however, blocks the view of these effects. Niccolò Machiavelli therefore provides less an indication of how to overcome the challenges of contemporary politics than a valuable alternative draft from a distant point of view for what approaches to the challenges of contemporary politics should be considered as misguided.[6] Otherwise, the view of past and future will be lost, and our perspective would become one of dwarves on the shoulders of dwarves.

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Notes

1. Deviating from this, Machiavelli mentions the Christian doctrine of creation within his poem on ambition (2003a: 736).
2. In contrast, classical medieval authors, such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, argue that man merely implements the idea given to him by God but is not the creator of his own ideas (cf. Schmid 2020: 309).
3. Different interpretations of Machiavelli's understanding of religion can be found. Sebastian de Grazia emphasises that Machiavelli adhered to Christianity as the true religion (1989: 89). Vickie Sullivan does not want Machiavelli to be understood as either a Christian or a pagan (1993: 260). Convincing, however, is the interpretation according to which Machiavelli considers religion to be a political instrument used to educate the people to civic obedience (Hulliung 1983: 63; Ottmann 2006: 3; Preus 1979: 176). Consequently, the Florentine is considered not to be interested in religious truth (Skinner 2004: 96).
4. Consequently, or even just by accident, Machiavelli calls his great historical work of Florence *Istorie Fiorentine* – 'stories' and not 'histories' of Florence.
5. In terms of the history of ideas, this is a one-sided reading of the favourable opportunity by Machiavelli. In the ancient tradition, the opportunity, the *Kairós,* does not stand for seizing any opportunity, but the good in the right time for it (Neupert-Doppler 2020: 30, 89). Machiavelli's contemporary Erasmus, as well as Francis Bacon, for instance, also provides a different view (Bacon 1985: 69–70; Bietenholz 1966: 22–23).
6. Machiavelli is therefore not to be used to respond directly to challenges to contemporary politics. Machiavelli is to be read in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who interprets *The Prince* as a book of the republicans that instructs the people about the machinations of kings (2006: III.6, 78).

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