MACHIAVELLI'S POLITICS AND CRITICAL THEORY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract: This paper has four major parts. First is a discussion of the critical theory of technology offered by Andrew Feenberg in his book, *Questioning Technology*. I argue that Feenberg's theory is similar, in important respects, to the political theory of Machiavelli and that consequently, a *comparison* of the political philosophy of Machiavelli is possible. Second, I discuss the political philosophy of Machiavelli, in particular his description of the foundation of society. Third I discuss the relationship between virtue and the natural world according to Machiavelli. Fourth, I argue that this comparison reveals problems for the critical theory of Feenberg. Feenberg wants a politics and technology of liberation and Machiavelli shows that politics (and also technology) is always linked to coercion.
Key words: Coercion, Critical Theory, Feenberg, Machiavelli, Technology, Politics, Virtue.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene cuatro partes. Primero, es una discusión de la teoría crítica de la tecnología de Andrew Feenberg en su libro *Questioning Technology*. Se defiende que la teoría de Feenberg es parecida, a grandes rasgos, a la teoría política de Maquiavelo, siendo posible una *comparación* con su filosofía política. En segundo lugar, se discute, por tanto, la filosofía política de Maquiavelo, en particular su descripción de la constitución de la sociedad. Tercero, se plantea la relación entre la virtud y el mundo natural según este autor. En último lugar, se argumenta que esta comparación saca a la luz algunos problemas para la teoría crítica de Feenberg. Este autor sostiene una política y una tecnología de la liberación, mientras que Maquiavelo indica que la política (y la tecnología) está siempre ligada a la coerción.
Palabras clave: coerción, Teoría Crítica, Feenberg, Maquiavelo, tecnología, política, virtud

In this paper, I plan to discuss Feenberg's critical theory of technology and objections that can be raised to it on the basis of Machiavelli's political philosophy. This paper will proceed in four parts. In the first part, I will present Feenberg's project and make the case for Machiavelli's relevance to this project. In the second part, I will analyze Machiavelli's account of the origins of society. Here my goal will be to show the artificial nature of political life according to Machiavelli and expand on why critical theory invites a dialogue with Machiavelli. In the third part I will discuss how Machiavelli understands the role *virtù* plays in forming and preserving society and how this is intimately tied to

his account of politics as artificial. Finally, I will discuss how the necessity of coercion indicated in Machiavelli's account presents a number of problems for Feenberg's critical theory of technology, in particular his vision of a liberating or non-objectifying politics and technology.

PART ONE: Political Theory and Technology

The link between the developments of modern technology and politics has long been noted.   Around twenty years ago, G. Hottois coined the term 'technopolitics' to indicate the role that political factors play in determining which technologies are developed and their prioritization relative to other technologies.[1]   The development and deployment of technology cannot be understood in purely technical terms, but must include reference to the political factors and decisions that inform the demand for and funding of the necessary research and development.   The renewed interest of various governments in funding research into alternative energy technology in the light of the recent rise in oil prices is only one example of technopolitics at work.   This connection between technology and politics has received many thoughtful studies; in this paper I will only consider that of Andrew Feenberg.   Feenberg, a student of Herbert Marcuse, brings the Frankfurt School's method of philosophical sociology to bear on the philosophy of technology.

In turning towards history and politics for his account of technology, Feenberg's work presents an argument against both essentialism and determinism in the philosophy of technology. Essentialists, broadly speaking, hold that technology carries within certain tendencies which are inseparable from technology; on the other hand, the constructivists argue that whatever tendencies are associated with technology are socially constructed and can be avoided or defused with alternate social constructs.[2] In his most important work, *Questioning Technology*, Feenberg argues on various fronts that technology has

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[1] G. Hottois, "Technoscience: Nihilistic Power versus a new Ethical Consciousness", in Durbin P.T. (ed.), *Technology and Responsibility*, Reidel, 1987, pp. 69-84. For a more systematic presentation of the relationship between technology and politics, see L. Winner, "*Techné* and *Politeia*: the Technical Constitution of Society", in *Philosophy and Technology*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science. Paul T. Durbin & Friedrich Rapp (eds.) Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1983, pp. 97-114. For a more recent discussion of the relationship between political rights and technology see L. Winner, "Is There a Right to Shape Technology", in *Argumentos de Razón Técnica* 10, 2007, pp. 199-213 .
[2] See Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 222-225, and I. Thomson. 'What's Wrong with Being a Technological Essentialist? A Response to Feenberg', in *Inquiry* 43. 2000, pp. 429-444.

no determined essence, but instead is the "*systematic* locus for the sociocultural variables that actually diversify its historical realizations."[3]   Philosophers of technology also sometimes distinguish between instrumentalist theories of technology and substantivist theories of technology.[4] Instrumentalist theories of technology hold that technologies are neutral tools to be used for either good or ill depending on the users. Substantivist theories of technology hold that technologies determine certain ends independent of the intentions of the users. This distinction does not precisely reproduce the previously discussed essentialist/constructivist distinction; instead one could imagine a number of different permutations of their combination:

(a) Essentialist instrumentalism: This view holds that technology is *essentially* a neutral tool or instrument. Heidegger refers to this as the 'instrumental and anthropological definition of technology" and develops his 'Question concerning Technology' on the basis of a rejection of this view.[5]

(b) Essentialist substantivism: This view holds that technology is essentially oriented towards certain ends, independent of user's intentions. This view is closely associated with Heidegger's own position.[6]

(c) Constructivist instrumentalism: This view holds that technology is a social construct and is contingently constructed to have no particular ends other than that of the users; this differs from (a) by granting that this neutrality is contingent upon certain social formations rather than an essential element of technology.

(d) Constructivist substantivism: This view holds that technology is a social construct, but that this construct orients technology towards certain ends that individual users have little to no control over. Any change in these tendencies presupposes a change in the society that conditions these ends.

According to Feenberg a recognition of the extent to which political factors affect the experience of technology makes the sort essentialist and determinist view of Heidegger (among others) untenable. Instead Feenberg does argues that sociopolitical factors play a formative role in the deployment and effect of

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[3] Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, op.cit., p. 201.
[4] See, Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* (trans. R.C. Crease), University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, pp. 11-12.
[5] See M. Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology", in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* Trans. W. Lovitt. New York: Harper, 1977, pp. 5.
[6] See Heidegger, "Question concerning Technology", op. cit., p. 14.

technology. As such, Feenberg embraces (d), endorsing a historical and political account of technological substantivism. However, since this 'substance' is determined by historical and political – i.e. changeable – circumstances, a change in the 'substance' of technology is possible. For Feenberg, contemporary technology is conditioned by the politics of modern capitalism, and as such, its nature is determined by capital; any change in its use will have to be part of a larger change in the structure of modern capitalism. So while Feenberg endorses many of Heidegger's particular complaints about modern technology, he maintains that these are neither essential to technology nor determined by the history of being but only the result of contingent, and reformable, social formations.[7] Feenberg's philosophy of technology is therefore a political philosophy of technology insofar as his vision of a reformed technology rests on the hope a reformed politics. So, Feenberg writes:

> The technological future is by no means predetermined. The very existence of these struggles [against technology] suggests the possibility of a change in the form of technical rationality. They prefigure a general reconstruction of modernity in which technology gathers a world to itself rather than reducing its natural, human and social environment to mere resources. The goal would be to define a better way of life, a viable ideal of abundance, and a free and independent human type, not just to obtain more goods in the prevailing socioeconomic system[8]

Feenberg argues that were capitalism to be rejected in favor of the sort of enlightened socialism endorsed by Marcuse, the negative effects of technology, in particular the treatment of others and nature as resource to be managed that Heidegger identified as an essential part the *Gestell*, could be minimized if not avoided all together. Again, it is not technology *per se* that treats people and nature as a resource, but capitalism. As such, Feenberg argues for a critical theory of technology that combines the Frankfurt School's analysis and critique of later modern culture to the issues raised by contemporary technologies. For Feenberg, if politics could be structured in a non-objectifying way, then technology could be a boon rather than a threat to the development of what he calls an "affirming lifestyle". This politics, in turn, does not claim either a trans-historical, i.e. metaphysical or religious, justification, but instead argues for its superiority on pragmatic, sociological and historical terms. In what follows I will argue that Feenberg has not thought through the implications of a historical

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[7] Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, op. cit., pp.183-187.
[8] Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, op.cit., pp. 224-225.

politics; a Machiavellian analysis agrees with Feenberg's anti-essentialist constructivism in the philosophy of technology however his thought presents a number of problems for Feenberg's claims about the possibilities of an emancipatory or democratic technology.

PART TWO: The Primacy of the Political: Numa and Romulus

Political life, prior to Machiavelli, was largely conceived of in terms of nature. The human being, Aristotle said, is a political animal.[9] This was seconded by Cicero, who argued that we are naturally sociable, a view later endorsed by Augustine of Hippo: Augustine's primary disagreement with the ancients in this respect is in his view that political life is not a source of happiness.[10] In his discourse on government, the 14th century Florentine poet Dante argued that the superiority of monarchy could be demonstrated from first principles. This demonstration rested on a philosophical account of human nature.[11] So for Dante human beings are by nature political so that politics is, in that sense, natural. Of course, in the Middle Ages certain theologians argued for the supremacy of papal power to that of the emperor, but this debate was not over whether or not political life was natural, but what the natural order of that life was. The details of these medieval debates are less important for us than the underlying agreement between the disputants: political life rested on principles deducible from either philosophy or theology. The structure of political life was ordained either by God, nature or both. Against this long standing agreement, Machiavelli asserts the primacy of political reality over that of philosophical theories or religious belief:

> But since it is my intention to write a useful thing for him who understands, it seemed to me more profitable to go behind to the effectual truth of the thing, than to imaginations thereof. And many have imagined republics and principates that have never been seen or known to be in truth; because there is such a difference between how one lives and how

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[9] Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1253a1-5.

[10] See Harding, *Augustine and Roman Virtue*, London, Continuum, 2008, pp. 130-131. Although Augustine suggests that hierarchical political life is due to the fall, he believes that communal life is natural to human beings.

[11] Dante, *Monarchy* (trans. P. Shaw.) in *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996, I.ii.4-8.

one ought to live that he who lets go that which is done for that which ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation[12]

The combined rejection of imagined republics and 'how one ought to live' serves to reject both philosophy and theology as grounding for politics. Both the theoretical city and the heavenly city are rejected in favor of the earthly or actual city. It is worth noting two further points about Machiavelli's interest in '*la verità effetuale della cosa.*' First, the phrase is in the singular; the turn towards the effectual truth is a turn towards the singular and particular and away from the universal.[13]   Second, Machiavelli's interest in *la verità effetuale* shows an interest in truth only insofar as it is useful for some end; against the classical vision of *scientia* as a contemplation of the highest truths, Machiavelli will want to focus on the practical uses of knowledge, the joining together of knowledge and power, which is, in a manner of speaking, technopolitics.

As part of this turn towards *la verità effetuale* Machiavelli's thought is developed on the basis of 'long experience of modern things and the continuous readings of ancient things.'[14]   These ancient things are, above all else, ancient historians in particular Titus Livy. Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* presents itself as a study of the origins and development of the Roman Republic with an eye towards the presentation of 'new modes and orders.' As such, it is both antiquarian and forward looking at the same time, and because of this, one has to pay careful attention to Machiavelli's use of Livy. We can note the similarity between Machiavelli's approach and that of critical theory: both look to history, rather than metaphysics, for an understanding of political possibilities. Feenberg's mentor and inspiration, Herbert Marcuse describes his methodology as historicist one, where "a specific historical practice is measured against its own historical alternatives"[15] – giving a distant and faint echo of Machiavelli's more forceful pronunciation. In his own right, Feenberg understands his critical theory of technology as an attempt to introduce the concrete elements of technology – we might say '*la verità effetuale*' –into the philosophy of technology via a historicized, as opposed to metaphysical, account of the essence

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[12] Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Trans. L. P. de Alvarez), Chicago: Waveland Press, 1989, XV (49-50). The arabic numbers in parenthesis refer to the pagination in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*. M. Bonfantini (ed.) *La Letteratura Italiana: Storia e Testi 29*, Milan, Riccardo Ricciardi, 1954.

[13] See L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (Trans. G. Elliott), New York: Verso, 1999, pp. 15-17.

[14] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, epistle dedicatory 3.

[15] See, Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1991, xlii. Unlike Machiavelli, neither Marcuse nor Feenberg spend much time discussing historical events in their particularity, excepting May 1968.

of technology.[16]   Moreover, both Machiavelli and critical theory are oriented towards the production of practical political effects: in the case of Feenberg and Marcuse it is the overcoming of late modern capitalism, for Machiavelli it is the liberation of Italy from the foreign invaders.[17]   These points are worth emphasizing, since it shows that the application of Machiavelli to critical theory is not unwarranted, but invited by its own methodological claims. As we shall see, Machiavelli understands the significance of this preference for history and the concrete more clearly than Feenberg and critical theory.

Since Machiavelli's historical turn is a return, above all, to Livy, a brief excursus on Livy is called for. His history is, above all, a didactic one. In writing his history of Rome, particularly in his history of the early days of the city, Livy is concerned with giving his reader noble examples to imitate and base examples to avoid.[18]   Whence Livy's concern with the heroes of Rome; but at the same time, the *real* heroes of *Ab Urbe Condita* are not the great Romans, but the virtues they embody; as P.G. Walsh puts it:

> Due observance of the gods (*pietas*), and readiness to uphold treaties and promises solemnly made (*fides*); harmonious collaboration in the body politic (*concordia*), with due deference to authority, both military and civic (*disciplina*); the application of foresight (*prudentia*) and reason (*ratio*) in politics and in war, and the exercise of mercy (*clementia*) when appropriate; at an individual level, the maintenance of chastity (*pudicitia*) and of courage (*virtus*), the need to comport oneself in accordance with one's status (*dignitas*) and with the requisite seriousness (*gravitas*) and to espouse a simple way of life without luxury (*frugalitas*). These abstract qualities, clothed in the accidental garb of the leaders of each generation, are the true and enduring heroes of the *Ab Urbe Condita*.[19]

In the same way, Machiavelli will use his commentary on Livy's history to make more general philosophical points through a discussion of particular events and

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[16] Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, op.cit., p. 201.

[17] See Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, op.cit., p. 224 and Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, op. cit., pp. 247-257; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, op. cit., XXVI, pp. 83-86; it is noteworthy that all three texts conclude with a call to action. On Machivelli's desire to liberate Italy, see Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, op. cit., 16.

[18] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, in R.M. Oglivie (ed.) S*criptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca* Oxoniensis. Oxford: Clarendon, 1974, I.preface.10. Henceforth *AUC*. See the discussion in P.G. Walsh, "Livy's Preface and the Distortion of History" (in *The American Journal of Philology* 76.4. 1955, pp. 369-83); according to Walsh, Livy's moralizing aims necessitated certain 'distortions' in his accounts of historical events and use of source material, bending facts and reports to fit his didactic goals. The same could be said of Machiavelli's use of Livy.

[19] P.G. Walsh, *Livy: His Historical Aims and Methods*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1961, pp. 66.

characters described in Livy's history. Machiavelli uses Livy's history as a mixture of sounding board, authority, interlocutor and teacher; to paraphrase Marcuse, Livy provides Machiavelli with a historical alternative against which to measure modern political practices. Because of the complexities of Livy's own text, and Machiavelli's relationship to it, it is helpful when studying his *Discourse on Livy* to have the texts of Livy himself on hand so that comparisons can be made between Machiavelli's discussion of certain events in Roman history, and the original Livian account of those events. In what follows I will discuss Machiavelli's presentation of the foundation of Roman religion and contrast it with the Livian account. I will begin with a summary of Livy's account.

Numa is credited by Livy with establishing Roman religious rites and priesthoods;[20] Livy tells us that Numa's invention of religious priesthoods and rites made him the 'second founder of Rome.' It is the religion of Numa which, to a certain extent, tamed the warlike spirit of the early Romans with the admixture of *pietas*:

> Fearing that without external dangers and cares which fear of enemies and military discipline provide, luxuriant idleness might occupy their souls, he reckoned the thing to lead the multitudes and efficiently civilize the rude was to fill them with fear of the gods.[21]

The sole goal of Numa's religion is to preserve the people in their military virtue during those times – rare in the history of Rome – when there is nobody to fight.[22] In this case Numa's religion is invented for purely political or social reasons: as a preservative of virtue. The people should fear something, either an external enemy or vengeful and powerful gods; at the same time, Numa's religion also offers the possibility of 'divinization' for great Roman heroes such as Romulus.[23] Livy's account of Numa suggests that Roman religion is designed to provide the symbols and ideas which will promote the virtues of *romanitas*. Roman religion's function is essentially a *symbolic* one insofar as it is to provide the symbols which will mold the hearts and minds of the Romans in such a way that, even in the absence of enemies, civic virtue is preserved.

However, the above paragraph needs to be supplemented since as it stands it is not an entirely accurate description of Livy's account because it

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[20] See Livy, *AUC*, I.18.1-I.21.6 for a discussion of Numa's reign and religious innovations.
[21] Livy, *AUC*, I.19.4-5.
[22] See Livy, *AUC*, I.19.3.
[23] See Livy, *AUC*, I.16.5-8.

suggests that there was no religion in Rome prior to the ascension of Numa to the throne. This is not the case: although Numa codified, organized and encouraged Roman religion, Livy does not suggest that Rome was irreligious prior to Numa. Instead, we find various occasions in his account of the reign of Romulus and the foundation of Rome where religious beliefs and practices are present. For example, Romulus and Remus consult auguries when initially building the city[24]; Romulus kills Remus to defend the sanctity of the city walls,[25] the Sabines are invited to Rome as a part of a religious festival[26], and when Romulus dies the senate claims he had ascended to the gods. [27] Perhaps most importantly, Livy tells us that it was only *after* attending to the worship of the gods that Romulus gathered the multitude (*multitudine*) to give them his laws. And, Livy emphasizes, that it is this law giving that truly united this multitude into one body (*unius corpus*).[28] Roman religion cannot be said to begin simply with the advent of Numa, but instead Livy tells us that the very foundation of Rome was, at least in part, religious. To be sure, Numa's reign was characterized by a devotion to religious matters that outstripped that of Romulus, but it would be going too far to suggest that the political founding of Rome was an entirely secular affair.

However, this is precisely what Machiavelli's discussion of Romulus and Numa in the *Discourses on Livy* suggests. Machiavelli presents the Rome of Romulus as devoted to military affairs entirely and that of Numa as devoted to religion. Rome, prior to Numa, is irreligious; its foundation rests on neither the gods nor nature, but on the force of Romulus. This raises an important question for Machiavelli, as he wonders who is more deserving of praise: his Romulus who ignores religion to focus on the development of martial virtue or Numa, whose devotion to religion earned Rome the respect of her neighbors.[29] While at first seeming to suggest that Numa is more deserving of praise, Machiavelli concludes by arguing that Romulus is superior insofar as Romulus' martial virtue can stand without religion, but it would be impossible for Numa to introduce religion without the foundations laid by the strength of Romulus. In chapter eleven of the first book of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli seems to argue that Numa's religion is more fundamental insofar as it introduced good orders into

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[24] Livy, *AUC*, I.6.4.

[25] Livy, *AUC*, I.7.2-3.

[26] Livy, *AUC*, I.9.6-8.

[27] Livy, *AUC*, I.161-8.

[28] Livy, *AUC*, I.8.15.

[29] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Trans. H. Mansfield and N. Tarcov), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, I.11, pp. 122-123.

the city, and where there are good orders, one can easily introduce good arms. However, in chapter nineteen he takes this back, saying that Numa's Rome was precarious and under the sway of fortune; elsewhere, in *The Prince* he asserts that good arms are the foundation of good laws. Romulus' Rome, on the other hand was more reliant on its own virtue. Numa, on the other hand, relied on the virtue of Romulus rather than his own: it was the strength of Romulus' rule that allowed Numa to cultivate religion and peace. If Tullus, the third king, was not closer to Romulus than to Numa, Machiavelli continues, Rome would have been crushed by her neighbors. [30]

Numa's dependency on the prior accomplishments of Romulus show that religion, for Machiavelli, is something secondary: what is primary is the political, understood as the ability to project force in this world without recourse to the next. [31] In his *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli has Cosimo Medici assert that one does not hold power (*stato*) with *pater nosters*. [32] The world of politics is fundamentally the world of Romulus; the morality and theology espoused by various religions only exists in the space carved out by Romulus. Indeed, religion is a product of the city, rather than vice-versa; he who would act politically must love his city more than his soul. This famous phrase, which Machiavelli uses in his account of the War of the Eight Saints in his *Florentine Histories* and adopts for himself in his letter to Francisco Vettori of April 1527[33] as well as the juxtaposition of Romulus and Numa in *The Discourses,* can be elucidated with reference to two important points Machiavelli makes in *The Prince*. First, that all those who rely on belief as a opposed to force, i.e. unarmed prophets, come to

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[30] Machiavelli, *Discourses,* op. cit., I.11, p. 123 and I.19, pp. 143.

[31] Althusser's comments are particularly apt: "He [Machiavelli] categorically does not confront religion with the question of its origin and religious credentials. He considers it from an exclusively political, factual point of view, as an instrument, alongside the army, for the foundation, constitution and duration of the state. He treats it as an existing reality defined by its political function" (Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, op cit., p. 90). However, he may not be entirely correct. While Machiavelli does treat of religion in the manner described by Althusser, a compelling case has been made that he offers a more philosophically sophisticated account the origins of religion. To treat religion as merely a political tool, one must believe that it is not what it claims to be – divinely instituted. The case has been made that Machiavelli subtly argues for this position as well. For this case, the evaluation of which goes far beyond this paper, see L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* , Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 174-208; and H. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of The Discourses on Livy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979, pp. 181-189 *et passim*.

[32] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* (Trans. L. Banfield & H. Mansfield), Princeton, Princeton UP, 1988, VII.6, p. 883.

[33] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, III.7, p. 690; and Machiavelli, *The Letters of Machiavelli* (Trans. A. Gilbert), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961, #225, p. 1136.

ruin and second that good laws presuppose good arms.[34] The two claims restate the argument contained in his account of Numa: the priority of good arms to good laws signifies the priority of force to morality and reason, the weakness of the unarmed prophet is the weakness of Numa. Although Numa did not come to ruin, as we saw earlier, he would have had the reputation of Romulus not protected him.

These two principles assert the historical priority of politics to religion, or more precisely, the priority of politics understood in terms of the ability to compel obedience to religion. Romulus' greatness, in Machiavelli's *Discourse*, is found in his ability to compel obedience. The killing of Remus stands out, for Machiavelli, as the greatest example of this ability and the impious lengths one must go to in order to obtain or exercise this ability. In his discussion of the killing of Remus, the auguries mentioned by Livy are ignored, instead Machiavelli uses it as an opportunity to discuss the importance of being alone, *un solo*, when founding or re-organizing a regime.[35] While Livy describes Romulus as attending to the rites of the gods prior to giving law to the Romans, Machiavelli focuses on Remus' death as the founding act. Founding, according to Machiavelli, requires violence. As we shall see shortly, violence is called for because it is not natural for human beings to live peacefully together. The religious elements of the founding of Rome by Romulus are systematically stripped from Machiavelli's re-telling of it. They only reappear as something secondary, added Numa, not at all essential to the virtue of the Romans which is derived mainly from Romulus' good arms. Indeed, although Machiavelli will praise the Romans for their use of religion, this praise is not praise of piety per se, but of the clever political use of the piety of others. When he first broaches the topic, Machiavelli remarks that the religion founded by Numa served to 'make easier whatever enterprise the Senate or the great men of Rome might plan to make.'[36] So religion may profitably be used to arouse an army, or keep order in the city. But one should note here that this is a political religion whose aims and goals are derived not from the will of the gods but from the will of the political leadership:

> Among the other auspices they had in their armies certain orders of augers whom they called chicken-men; and whenever they were ordered to do battle with the enemy, they wished the chicken-men to take their auspices. If the chickens ate, they engaged in combat with a good augury, if they did

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[34] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, op.cit, VI, p. 20 and XII, p. 39.

[35] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, op. cit. I.9, pp. 116-118.

[36] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, op. cit. I.11, pp. 122.

> not eat, they abstained from the fight. Nonetheless, when reason showed
> them a thing they ought to do – notwithstanding that the auspices had been
> adverse – they did it in any mode. But they turned it around with means
> and modes so aptly that it did not appear that they had done it with disdain
> for religion.[37]

So, for Machiavelli religion is not an *ur-phenomenon* founding capable of founding political life; instead it is an epiphenomenon of politics. As such, for Machiavelli there is no trans-historical foundation or essence of politics in the religious or theological sense. We have discussed Machiavelli's treatment of religion and politics at length for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the broad contours of his political theory especially regarding the importance of coercion or violence. Second, it prepares the way for our treatment of Machiavelli's account of philosophy. Taken together, his treatment of philosophy and religion discredit the two major sources of trans-historical justification for political life. Turning to his *Florentine Histories*, we can find Machiavelli reflecting on the relationship between philosophy and political life.

There, in book V, Machiavelli observes that "letters come after arms and that, in provinces and cities, captains arise before philosophers."[38] Philosophy is the product of the leisure time provided by the security and stability of good arms. Moreover, philosophy is a threat to civic *virtù* insofar as it offers an honorable leisure that distracts men from the affairs of the city, Machiavelli writes: "For as good and well ordered armies give birth to victories and victories to quiet, the strength of well-armed spirits cannot be corrupted by a more honorable leisure than that of letters, nor can leisure enter into well-instituted cities with a great and more dangerous deceit than this one."[39] Philosophy is corruptive for two reasons. First, it teaches error insofar as it focuses on 'imagined republics' rather than *la verità effetuale* and attempts to draw normative standards and evaluate politics on the basis of a fantasy. Second, it suggests that the philosophical activity is more noble and worthy than that of the captain or founder, embracing the role of unarmed prophet. Since the unarmed prophet always comes to ruin, a city populated by philosophers too will suffer.   With this in mind, he praises the foresight of Cato for the expulsion of the philosophers Diogenes and Carneades from Rome. In the same passages Machiavelli argues that philosophers only truly become wise when they have

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[37] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.14, pp. 131-132; see the discussion in John Najemy "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60.4, 1999, pp. 659-681.

[38] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, V.1, p.773.

[39] Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, V.1, p. 773.

been ruined and forced to acknowledge the importance of the security and stability provided by *la verità effetuale*.

The above discussion of religion and philosophy shows that Machiavelli sees politics as (a) separate from religion or philosophy and (b) prior to and more fundamental than religion or philosophy. Rather than evaluate regimes by a standard derived from a philosophical account of nature or theology, these are secondary phenomena created and managed by the regime. Instead, Machiavelli sees the various regimes and societies primarily in historical or sociological terms. In this he has much in common with critical theory. However, Machiavelli realizes that the turn towards history is also a turn towards violence: since political life lack religious or natural foundations, it must rely on the ability of a founder to bind people together; this ability, among other things, is denoted by the term *virtù*. The centrality of *virtù* will raise a number of problems for Feenberg.

PART THREE: The Artificial State: *Virtù* and *Fortuna*

Virtù is the central piece of Machiavelli's politics. According to the first chapter of *The Prince*, all princes come to power either through virtue or fortune; in the *Discourses on Livy* he is consistently concerned with analyzing the rise and fall of Roman civic virtue. The third book of the *Discourses*, however, focuses mainly on the virtue of individual captains, or princes, pointing the reader of *the Discourses* towards *The Prince*.[40] As *The Prince* continues, we arrive at the distinction, mentioned above, between the armed prophet and the unarmed prophet. The armed prophet, according to Machiavelli, is characterized by the ability to make people obey who no longer believe in you, i.e. the ability to force obedience. It is worth mentioning that Machiavelli includes Romulus in his list of armed prophets.[41] The unarmed prophet, on the other hand, lacks this ability – he or she is instead at the mercy of the crowd who only obey so long as they are inclined to do so. According to Machiavelli, unarmed prophets always come to ruin. More importantly for our purposes, the unarmed prophet relies on *fortuna* for his or her success, while the armed prophet relies on *virtù*.[42] This

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[40] The precise relationship between these two texts is notoriously controversial and I will not say much about it in this context. For our purposes it suffices to note similar arguments in each book and that each book claims to teach everything Machiavelli knows: see the respective Epistles Dedicatory to *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*.
[41] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI, p. 20.
[42] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI, p. 20.

establishes a close connection between *virtù* and force; this is expanded upon by his reference to the virtuous cruelty of Hannibal and Agathocles.[43] This virtuous cruelty is sudden, devastating and quickly over; it accomplishes its goals in a minimum amount of time, allowing the prince to spend most of his time on other things. Hannibal was able to control his polyglot army in difficult circumstances because of 'cruelty and infinite other virtues'; Agothocles was able to rise to power through his cruel execution of the leading citizens of Syracuse. In both cases, as in other cases of cruelty praised by Machiavelli, the cruelty is not used for its own sake, but for the sake of establishing or retaining order. The example of Cesare Borgia is particularly apt here: his governor was ordered both to kill threats to the stability of the Romagna and to establish law courts.[44] It is not meaningless cruelty that Machiavelli endorses but cruelty that binds a people together. Here we should recall Romulus' murder of Remus, which Machiavelli justified by appealing to the need for a founder of new modes and orders to be alone. Machiavelli's defense of cruelty follows from his turn towards history which bracketed philosophical or theological arguments for the naturalness of political life. Political life has to be manufactured because it is neither natural nor ordained by God: cruelty, or more generally force, is necessary to found and preserve regimes. Machiavelli's defense of Remus' murderer as part of the founding of Rome should be understood as the companion to his defense of grizzly killings to reform and preserve the state:

> Notable among such executions, before the taking of Rome by the French, were the death of Maelius the grain dealer, after the taking of Rome it was the death of Manlius Capitolinus, the death of the son of Manlius Torquatus, the execution of Papirius Cursor against his master of the cavalrymen Fabius, and the accusation of the Scipios. Because they were excessive and notable, such things made men draw back to the mark whenever one of them arose, and when they became more rare, they also began to give more space to men to corrupt themselves and to behave with greater danger and more tumult.[45]

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[43] See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VIII, p. 31 and XVII, p. 55, as well as *Discourses* III, 21-22, p. 368-375.

[44] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VII, p. 24-25 and XVII, p. 53 ; see too the discussion in M. Viroli, *Machiavelli*, New York, Oxford UP, 1998, pp. 53-56.

[45] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.1, p. 311.

The killing of his son by Manlius Torquatus is later cited by Machiavelli as an example of how one person's virtue can restore order and discipline in the people.[46]

Machiavellian *virtù*, then, includes a judicious use of cruelty and force. It is characteristic of virtue to ensure obedience through well used cruelty, as the case of Hannibal, as well as Torquatus, are used to illustrate in book III of the *Discourses*. In a like manner, in *The Prince*, the armed prophet is distinguished from the unarmed prophet on precisely this score, the ability to force others to obey. Not surprisingly then, Machiavelli characterizes the armed prophet as one who relies on virtue and the unarmed prophet as relying on fortune in their respective rises to power. However, so far virtue has only been presented as the ability to force other human beings to obey; in the penultimate chapter of the *The Prince* however, Machiavelli expands on this, associating virtue not simply with the conquest of other people, but with the conquest of fortune. Machiavelli goes on to illustrate this idea with two rather graphic examples. The first involves the controlling of floods as typically *virtuouso* action; the second describes fortune as a woman who must be beat if she is to obey. Fortune is something that can be mastered, at least to a degree, if one is audacious enough to beat her – in other words, the conquest of fortune is characterized by the same sort of *virtù* that characterized the armed prophet. This second example links the previous presentation of virtue as commanding the obedience of other people to the presentation in this chapter of virtue as commanding the obedience of fortune: the judicious use of cruelty can be directed towards nature as much as other people. The first example describes the damning and redirecting of rivers as an instance of the virtuous person who prudently plans ahead and prevents nature *sive* fortune from wrecking havoc on his life and plans:

> And I liken her [fortune] to one of those violent rivers which, when they become angry, flood the plain, destroy trees and buildings, remove the earth from one place and deposit it in another; everyone flees their advance, everybody surrenders to their impetus, unable to oppose it in any way. And although these things are so, it does not follow that men, when there are quiet times, cannot therefore make provisions with defense and embankments in such a mode that, rising later, either they will go through a canal, or their impetus would not be so licentious or harmful[47]

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[46] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.19, pp. 366-367.
[47] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXV, p. 80.

 This is perhaps the most suggestive of Machiavelli's images for *virtù*; the application of political *virtù* to the control of floods might arguable be seen as a manifesto for a certain kind of technopolitics. Interestingly in his 'Question Concerning Technology' Martin Heidegger uses the image of a hydro-electric dam on the Rhine River to illustrate the technological revealing of the world as a resource.[48]   This is a point we will return to later, but we can already point to a connection between the political control of other people and the technological control of nature in Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*: it is the task of *virtù* to command both other people and the natural world.

        If we return to the first book of *Discourses* we find Machiavelli's most sustained treatment of nature. Here he is concerned primarily with the choice of locations for cities. Machiavelli considers the advantages and disadvantages of fertile grounds and less hospitable places insofar as the development of civic virtue is concerned. One should note that this is not a worry found in Livy: when Livy considers the geography of Rome, he is only concerned to identify which were the first hills to be settled.[49]   Machiavelli worries that settling in fertile areas will free people from the necessity of working hard to support their lives and that of their families, enabling them to live a life of leisure (*ozio*) rather than virtue. In these areas the population does not have to work hard and cultivate the sort of political structures needed for a city to thrive because the fertility of the area will remove the need for such structures.   We should note here that Machiavelli assumes the one will not cultivate virtue without compulsion – people are not good, but instead, as he constantly re-iterates, most people are bad, interested only in material goods, not virtue for its own sake. As he says in *The Prince*: "For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, hypocrites and dissemblers, evaders of danger, lovers of gain"[50] On the other hand, settling in an infertile and inhospitable location will force the people to cultivate such structures, but at the same time the lesser quality of the land will not be able to support a flourishing population and leave the city weak and insecure.   Neither horn of this dilemma then is particularly suited to the cultivation of political life. The world is not constructed in a way hospitable to politics. Machiavelli's solution to this problem is to choose the fertile grounds but to create an artificial necessity to make up for the lack of natural necessity: in other words, since the people are not forced by the land to work hard, the leader or founder should force the people to work hard:

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[48] Heidegger, "Question concerning technology", pp. 16.
[49] Livy, *AUC*, I.6.4.
[50] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XVII, p. 54.

> Those [founders] should be imitated who have inhabited very agreeable and fertile countries, apt to produce men who are idle and unfit for any virtuous exercise, and who have had the wisdom to prevent the harms that the agreeableness of the country would have caused through idleness by imposing the necessity to exercise on those who had to be soldiers[51]

This artificial necessity overcomes the fertility of the land to create a situation where the people live *as if* they had to work hard to sustain their lives when in fact they do not. This artificial necessity is the result of the *virtù* of the founder – such as Romulus – who overcomes the limitations of the natural environment to create the ideal political environment, i.e. one where the exercise of virtue demanded by artificial necessity despite the lack of natural necessity in the land. When considering the virtue of the founder, we should recall the afore discussed account of Romulus and the 'natural and ordinary necessity' that a new prince must hurt those he rules over.[52]

  If we juxtapose the discussions in *The Prince* with that of the *Discourse* we see that the principle task of virtue is to forcefully, if not cruelly, remake the world to meet our goals and desires, inclusive of the creation of artificial necessities when natural necessities are lacking. Virtue is not living in accordance with nature, as the ancients thought, but instead it is remaking nature so that it is in accordance with one's plans. Indeed, in both examples, nature presents us with a problem to be solved: the raging river or the deleterious effects of a too easy life. The task of *virtù* is to solve the problems presented to us by nature: nature appears in Machiavelli as an enemy which must be conquered. If that image seems too strong, one might instead say that nature appears as a resource which must be controlled. Whether one prefers the stronger or the weaker image, we are far from the ancient or medieval view of nature as something be imitated or admired as God's creation and much closer to Heidegger's account of the technological *Gestell*. For the same reason, we are far from the view of virtue as living in accordance with nature or the natural law; Machiavellian *virtù* asserts itself against nature through the creation of the artificial. In particular, political life and virtue are no longer understood as natural, but as the first technologies. Machiavelli rejects the view that there is a pre-established order which it is the task of humanity to adapt themselves too and that happiness is to be found in such an adaptation. Instead, Machiavelli argues that human flourishing is found only by overcoming the natural, reshaping it to fit one's goals and objectives. In short, Machiavelli denies that

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[51] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.1, p. 93.
[52] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, III, p. 6.

nature is normative; instead, nature is a material to be worked over by virtuous people in pursuit of certain goals. Machiavelli conceives of this working over of nature primarily in terms of *virtù*, rather than *poesis*. We can note that the taming of nature is accomplished primarily through the artificial: either one constructs devices for controlling the rivers, or one constructs laws to counter act the effects of fertile land. Virtue manifests itself in the artificial, which is to say, the technological. Moreover, the first task of virtue vis-à-vis nature, the first artificial thing which must be created is society itself. It is not natural for human beings to live together in peace: this peace, as we have seen is precarious and only acquired or preserved through the application of *virtù*.

PART FOUR: A Machiavellian Extension and Critique of Feenberg

In the second and third parts of this paper, I argued that for Machiavelli politics is divorced from, and primary to, religious belief or philosophical doctrine. The primacy of the political upon further analysis was discovered to be a primacy of *virtù*. In turn, the primacy of virtue was shown to be a technological primacy, i.e. that virtue ultimately consists in remaking the world to suit our plans in a manner not entirely unlike Heidegger's *Gestell*. Earlier we saw that Feenberg has argued that many of Heidegger's complaints about technology are misplaced: the problem is not technology *per se* but the economic and political structures that employ and deploy those technologies.[53] A change in those structures might solve many of the problems critics of technology associate with technology. A change is possible, according to Feenberg, because there is neither natural nor metaphysical-religious necessity undergirding the present political system. In this, he is in agreement with Machiavelli, but does not go as far in thinking through the implications of this position as Machiavelli did.

Our reading of Machiavelli suggests that political regimes are not natural, but artificial and the foundation of these regimes partakes of neither natural nor supernatural motivation, as the relationship between Romulus and Numa shows, but instead cruelty and violence. Connected to the artificial construction of politics is the centrality of virtue. As we saw above, the task of *virtù* is, among other things, the conquest of nature and other human beings. Since living together is not natural for human beings, they must be forced to do

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[53] I will not enter into the details of Feenberg's reading of Heidegger. For Feenberg's reading and critique of Heidegger, see *Questioning Technology*, pp.183-199; for a critical discussion of that issue, see, I. Thompson, "From the Question Concerning Technology to the Quest for a Democratic Technology: Heidegger, Marcuse, Feenberg", in *Inquiry* 43:2, 2000, pp. 203-216.

so by a *virtuouso* such as Romulus who, with good arms, will force them to abide by his good laws. Machiavelli shows that when politics is divorced from nature, there is no reason to suppose that people will live together voluntarily or peacefully: the foundation of the state can only be good arms. Moreover, if political life is not natural, then there is no 'natural' or best regime. Machiavelli's discussion of tyrannical and republican modes of government provide a particularly vivid example of the application of this insight. The choice between tyranny and republics is largely one of pragmatics for Machiavelli: his preference for republics is not based on the claim that republics are more just or better at defending the rights of citizens. A republic is no more natural or just than a tyranny insofar as they both precede and create the moral standards by which they are judged. The preference for republics lies only in their greater stability and security, i.e. in the pragmatic benefits a republic confers. In the same way, we find Feenberg's mentor, Marcuse, basing his endorsement of an alternate society on ultimately pragmatic grounds: "The established ways of organizing society is measured against other possible ways, which are held to offer better chances of alleviating man's struggle for existence." [54]

Returning to Feenberg, his anti-essentialist views about technology merely apply a broader anti-essentialist account of politics derived from Marcuse: political life can be restructured and improved for pragmatic benefits because there is no natural political order. If the current political order produces negative consequences in its use of technology, an alternate order could be constructed that will produce positive outcomes. The malleability of politics suggests that Feenberg accepts, although perhaps without meaning to, the Machiavellian divorce between nature and politics. However, Feenberg – and Marcuse as well – seem rather naïve when their thought is juxtaposed to that of Machiavelli; while Machiavelli would agree with Feenberg that the positive or negative effects of technology can be managed by altering regimes, the Machiavellian argument would go further to argue that the lack of philosophical or theological foundations for politics implies the necessity of *virtù* in forcing people to accept this or that regime – even a republic. This means that there will always be coercion. Since there will always be coercion, Feenberg's ideal of a technological regime where people are 'free and independent' is impossible: if society if artificial – which the constructivist argument seems to presuppose – then one cannot assume that it is held together either by natural impulse or metaphysical principles. Instead, it is created through the application of virtue to

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[54] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, op. cit., xlii.

the people. Of course, Feenberg could, and probably would argue that his vision of a reformed modernity need not be coercive but is instead emancipatory.[55] But Machiavelli would argue that this leaves him in the camp of the unarmed prophet, for history shows that if Feenberg is not willing to coerce, someone else will be. This is the lesson Machiavelli draws from the fate of his former superior Soderini, who lost power to the Medici because he was unwilling to use extraordinary (i.e. coercive and violent) means to preserve it.[56] This is not to embrace the 'dystopian' view of technology Feenberg attributes to Heidegger, Ellul and others, but to point out the dark side of the philosopher's desire for emancipation or liberation insofar as it comes after the desire for security has been satisfied, and that security rests on *virtù*.[57] An entirely emancipated politics would be a politics without *virtù* and come to ruin since people, in general, are not good and must be forced to be good. If technological liberation were possible such that all people were capable of 'free and independent lives' it would return us to the dilemma of the fertile land where people have no reason to live together.

Feenberg argues persuasively that technology's meaning and effect can be altered by altering the society in which technology is used. Machiavelli shows that while technology is a social construct, the possibilities of altering the social structures that conditions its usage are quite slim. The domineering and

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[55] See Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, op. cit., pp. 224-225; Feenberg's optimism is criticized by Tyler Veak in "Whose Technology? Whose Modernity? Questioning Feenberg's Questioning Technology", in *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 25.2, 2000, pp. 226-237. According to Veak, Feenberg misreads and overplays the success of the environmentalist movement, which he adduces as evidence for the possibility of a political transformation of technology. Feenberg's response to Veak can be found in the same issue. For another account of technological liberation see Manuel Fernández del Riesgo "¿Ciberdemocracia, Utopía o Posible Realidad?", in *Argumentos de Razón Técnica* 10, 2007, pp. 239-249. According to him, it is imperative that citizens living in our globalized and technological society take control of these technologies such that they can become a means of liberation and create new social reality and political institutions. Machiavelli would point out the creation of new institutions, or the reform of old ones, is never entirely libratory but always includes some coercive measures.

[56] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.30, pp. 337-338. Of Soderini, Machiavelli writes: "He did not know that one cannot wait for the time, goodness is not enough, fortune varies and malignity does not find a gift that appeases it." The remarks of Paul Virilio on sociology, a discipline close to the heart of critical theory seem appropriate here: "People often tell me: you reason in a political way, like the Ancients. It's true. I don't believe in sociology. It's a mask. Sociology was invented in order to forget politics. For me, all that is social, sociology, doesn't interest me. I prefer politics and war." (Paul Virilio, *Pure War* (rev. edition, trans. Mark Polizzotti, Postscript translated by Brian O'Keeffe), New York, Semiotext(e), 1997, p. 17.

[57] For Feenberg's discussion of 'Left Dystopianism' see *Questioning Technology*, pp. 4-10; for his critique of Heidegger's dystopianism, pp. 183-187.

controlling aspects of technology are symptoms of the fundamental constitution of political life. Since Machiavelli is a philosopher without a metaphysics,[58] his claim is not that technology is metaphysically determined to function in this way, but that the political and social formation of technology goes much deeper than Feenberg realizes. Feenberg's critical theory partakes of this vision but is unable or unwilling to note the Machiavellian corollaries to this principle. It is not late modern global capitalism that directs technology towards objectifying and controlling forms, but the historical constitution of politics divorced from nature and metaphysics.

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[58] See too Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xliii: "It [critical theory] is opposed to all metaphysics by virtue of the rigorously historical character of the transcendence." I am especially indebted to Michael R. Kelly of the Department of Philosophy at Boston College for helpful comments on this paper.