Plautianus’s Breastplate

Methodological Implications of the Study of Treason, Conspiracy, and Corruption

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> [1] *Scribere est agere*. See Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries*, Book IV, chap. 6. Compare Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, III, 6 (*I Classici del Giglio*, pp. 424-26) and Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, VI, beginning.
>
> Leo Strauss[1]

In this article, I seek to show that studying the above footnote by Leo Strauss can open helpful pathways for engaging a recurrent and difficult problem. This problem is that of the adequate description of a deed as an act of treason, conspiracy, or corruption. It is encountered both in political life and in the study of political life. It is a recurrent problem because political life offers monthly occasions of seeing these terms being invoked. These invocations also occur in the study of political life, not least for qualifying past or present deeds. It is a difficult problem because the legal categories of treason, conspiracy, and corruption that are, that have been or that will be applicable in any jurisdiction do not exhaust the effective uses of these notions. For one, these terms are often be turned back against those who consider themselves authorized to judge whether a given deed qualifies as treason, conspiracy, or corruption, and to act on this judgment. The accusers find themselves accused of the charges they leveled. This reversibility suggests that politics is irreducible to law.

In the footnote cited above, Strauss asks to his reader to “see” a chapter written by William Blackstone (1723-1780), and to “compare” a chapter written by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and

[1] Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research*, vol. 8, no 4 (1941): 488n1.

Summary

Written in the winter of 2014, this article offers a detailed study of the first note in Leo Strauss’s “Persecution and the Art of Writing.” Rereading Blackstone, Machiavelli and Descartes on treason, conspiracy and corruption allows the identification of a singular rhetorical motif, Plautianus’s breastplate, which has to do with the reversibility of this type of accusations. This has consequences for both political life and academic politics.

Résumé

Écrit à l'hiver 2014, cet article propose une étude détaillée de la première note du texte « La persécution et l’art d’écrire », de Leo Strauss. La relecture de Blackstone, Machiavel et Descartes sur la trahison, les conspirations et la corruption permet de tracer les contours d’un motif rhétorique singulier, le plastron de Plautien, qui met en lumière la réversibilité des accusations de ce type. Cela a des conséquences tant pour la vie politique que pour la politique académique.

a passage written by René Descartes (1596-1650). One gathers that to do so offers a way of understanding, or of illustrating or documenting the Latin sentence “*scribere est agere*,” to write is to do, writing is acting. This sentence seems meant to synthesize in one maxim the passage it is appended to in the text, namely the first paragraph of Strauss’s most famous text, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” later republished as the second chapter of his 1952 book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. It reads:

> In a considerable number of countries which, for about a hundred years, have enjoyed a practically complete freedom of public discussion, that freedom is now suppressed and replaced by a compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness. It may be worth our while to consider briefly the

effect of that compulsion, or persecution, on thoughts as well as actions.[2]

To append "*scribere est agere*" to this last sentence is to underline a close relationship between thoughts and actions. It is to frame the expression of thoughts in writing as a specific action. Strauss's broad argument on the relationship between persecution and the art of writing is that the "compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness," prompts certain writers to artfully conceal unorthodox thoughts from most readers by writing with and against this *doxa* in such a way that only "intelligent readers" will detect the hints that may direct them, between the lines and between texts, toward a grasp of these thoughts. For Strauss's reader, encountering the assertion that "*scribere est agere*" inscribes in a long tradition the claim that to write in such a way is to act in a very peculiar manner.

This deed of writing artfully to conceal one's thoughts while disseminating them may be called subversive, or qualified as an act of treason, conspiracy, or corruption. The potentially or actually treasonous, conspiring, or corrupting nature of a given act of writing is precisely what is to be artfully concealed through the writing itself. What is to be concealed, however, is not only the subversive nature of the thoughts expressed in writing, but also this written concealment itself, the very fact of hiding certain claims in order to circulate them. An astute reader is one who detects this double concealment—if it is there, one risk being to detect concealments where there is none.

Each writer in the unusual triad formed by Blackstone, Machiavelli and Descartes makes claims on this issue of the adequate characterization of an act of writing as a treasonous, conspiring, or corrupting deed. They do so in different ways, and I believe the intention of Strauss's footnote is to alert his reader to these different approaches. Putting to the test Strauss's own approach to attend to what Blackstone, Machiavelli and Descartes wrote may help to reframe discussions of treason, conspiracy, and corruption by showing some of the complexities involved in determining the adequate uses of these terms. This reframing can be relevant in

[2] Ibid., 488. See also Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 22. Both versions are identical.

relation to Strauss himself, who faced such charges as some considered his work conspiratorial or corrupting. It is perhaps because he approached the issue of the applicability of these terms, and even used some of them to qualify the deeds of certain writers, that they can be turned against him.[3] These are not words that can be conjured without consequences. Therein lies their interest, but the best "method" for studying them remains a matter of debate.

Scribere est agere

The curious reader of Strauss's footnote will quickly discover that it has to do with treason, conspiracy, and corruption. One only needs to remark the title of the referenced texts. "Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries*, Book IV, chap. 6." refers to the chapter titled "Of High Treason" in the book titled "Of Public Wrongs" in the English jurist and judge's lengthy *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books*, first published between 1765 and 1769.[4] "Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, III, 6 (*I Classici del Giglio*, pp. 424-26)" refers to the chapter (and especially to three pages within it) titled "Of conspiracies" in the third and last book of the Florentine secretary's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, written around 1517.[5] The association of "Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, VI, beginning" with one or many

[3] See, for example, Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 1969 [1958]), 168-171.

[4] Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books, with Notes selected from the editions of Archbold, Christian, Coleridge, Chitty, Stewart, Kerr, and others, Barron Field's Analysis, and Additional Notes, and a Life of the Author, by George Sharswood*, vol. II: Books III & IV (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1893).

[5] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli in Four Volumes*, vol. II, trans. Christian E. Detmold (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1882), 89-431, and especially 337-339. Strauss is referring to a 1938 Italian edition of Machiavelli's writings published in Florence by the Salani publishing house in the *I Classici del Gilio* collection under the title *Il Principe. I discorsi soppra la prima deca de Tito Livia e gli opuscoli in prosa*. See Ada Gigli Marchetti, *Libri buonni e a buon prezzo. La edizioni Salani (1862-1968)* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2011), 401 (#5894).

of the three notions at issue is less evident. For one, the six parts of the *Discours* are untitled.[6] Moreover, this famous text by the French mathematician and philosopher is not reputed to be political. The precise limits of the passage Strauss has in mind are also unclear, as the end of the "beginning" is undetermined. Nevertheless, reading, or rereading Part VI of the *Discours* after the passages that Strauss refers to in Blackstone and Machiavelli, and after Strauss's own "Persecution and the Art of Writing"—applying to Strauss his claim that "Machiavelli expects his reader less to have read Livy and other writers than to read them in conjunction with the *Discourses* after he has read the *Discourses* once or more than once"[7]—, can make visible how Descartes publicizes his fear of being accused of conspiracy, and his project of a counter-conspiracy or long-range corruption.

Among the three texts mentioned by Strauss, the sentence "*scribere est agere*" only appears in Blackstone's chapter on high treason. This chapter presents, in order, a short discussion of this "public wrong," seven "old" species of high treason, three classes of "new treasons," and a short discussion of the punishment of this crime. Blackstone's text exemplifies a legal or juristic approach of the uses of the term "treason." It is primarily concerned with historical conventions that determine what counts as treason.

Legally, high treason is one of the offences affecting "the royal person, his crown, or dignity" through a breach of the duty of allegiance that binds every subject to a sovereign "in return for that protection which is afforded him."[8] As "the highest civil crime, which (considered as a member of the community) any man can possibly commit, it ought therefore to be most precisely ascertained. For if the crime of high treason be indeterminate, this alone (says the president Montesquieu) is sufficient to make any government degenerate into arbitrary power."[9] In England, according to Blackstone, there once

[6] René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Chicoutimi: Les Classiques des sciences sociales, 2002).

[7] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 121-122.

[8] Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 74. The page numbers refer to the original ones, within brackets in the 1893 edition that I use.

[9] Ibid., 75. See also Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, in *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu in Four Volumes*, vol. I (London: T. Evans, 1777), 250-256.

was much latitude "left in the breast of the judges to determine what was treason, or not so," and there resulted a "multitude of constructive treasons."[10] This growing multitude was put into order by a statute of Edward III (1312-1377) encompassing seven species of high treason: 1) "When a man doth compass or imagine the death of our lord the king, of our lady his queen, or of their eldest son and heir"; 2) "If a man do violate the king's companion, or the king's eldest daughter unmarried, or the wife of the king's eldest son and heir"; 3) "If a man do levy war against our lord the king, in his realm"; 4) "If a man be adherent to the king's enemies, in his realm, giving to them aid and comfort in the realm or elsewhere"; 5) "If a man counterfeits the king's great or privy seal"; 6) "If a man counterfeit the king's money, and if a man bring false money into the realm counterfeit to the money of England, knowing the money to be false, to merchandise and make payment withal"; and 7) "If a man slay the chancellor, treasurer, or the king's justices of the one bench or the other, justices in eyre, or justices of assize, and all other justices assigned to hear and determine, being in their places doing their offices."[11] These can be described as "old" since "between the reign of Henry the Fourth and Queen Mary, and particularly in the bloody reign of Henry the Eight, the spirit of inventing new and strange treasons was revived."[12] These "new treasons" are classified "under three heads. 1. Such as relate to papists. 2. Such as relate to falsifying the coin or other royal signatures. 3. Such as are created for the security of the Protestant succession in the house of Hanover."[13] Blackstone's writing suggests that constructing new treasons is imprudent. In time, "the zeal of our legislators to stop the progress of some highly pernicious practices has occasioned them a little to depart from this it's primitive idea," namely of treason as "grossly counteracting that allegiance which is due from the subject by either birth or residence."[14] The closing discussion of punishment is quite short. It mostly insists on how it is and should be "very solemn and terrible." One of the risks involved in

[10] Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 76.

[11] Ibid., 76-84.

[12] Ibid., 86.

[13] Ibid., 87.

[14] Ibid., 92.

multiplying species of treason is precisely that it "takes off from that horror which ought to attend the very mention of the crime of high treason, and makes it more familiar to the subject."[15] Blackstone, who became a judge after publishing his *Commentaries*, recommends restraint.

The sentence "*scribere est agere*" is used as Blackstone writes about the first "old" species of treason, and considers what counts as imagining or compassing the death of one's sovereign. The jurist writes that imagining and compassing are synonyms, and that compassing signifies "the purpose or design of the mind or will, and not, as in common speech, the carrying such design to effect."[16] However, as "an act of the mind, it cannot possibly fall under any judicial cognizance, unless it be demonstrated by some open, or *overt* act."[17] An act of mind "is the substantive treason," but overt acts "are the means by which the act of mind becomes capable of proof, and is proved."[18] Blackstone writes that Plutarch recounts the tyrant Dionysus "executed a subject, barely for dreaming that he killed him; which was held of sufficient proof, that he had thought thereof in his waking hours. But such is not the temper of the English law," writes Blackstone: "it is necessary that there appear an open or *overt* act of a more full and explicit nature, to convict the traitor upon."[19] This distinction between thought and overt acts makes it clear to the reader that one can think and write about treason without committing treason.

These considerations still bring Blackstone to ask "How far mere *words*, spoken by an individual, and not relative to any treasonable act or design then in agitation, shall amount to treason."[20] This question implies what we would now call a theory of "speech-acts," of how words produce effects in the world. Blackstone writes that the issue of treasonous utterances has been debated for many years,

[15] Ibid., 89.

[16] Ibid., 78.

[17] Ibid., 79.

[18] Ibid., 79n2.

[19] Ibid., 79.

[20] Ibid.

> But now it seems clearly to be agreed, that by the common law and the statute of Edward III. words spoken amount only to a high misdemesnor, and no treason. For they may be spoken in heat, without any intention, or be mistaken, perverted, or mis-remembered by the hearers; their meaning depends always on their connection with other words, and things; they may signify differently even according to the tone of voice with which they are delivered; and sometimes silence itself is more expressive than any discourse. As therefore there can be nothing more equivocal and ambiguous than words, it would indeed be unreasonable to make them amount to high treason.[21]

Spoken words, insofar as they are "not relative to any treasonable act or design then in agitation," are thus excluded from what counts as high treason.

There nonetheless arises the impression that "If the words be set down in writing, it argues more deliberate intention; for *scribere est agere*. But even in this case the bare words are not the treason, but the deliberate act of writing them. And such writing, though unpublished, has in some arbitrary reigns convicted its author of treason."[22] Historical cases show, however, that

> being merely speculative, without any intention (so far as appeared) of making any public use of them, the convicting of the authors of treason upon such an insufficient foundation [as unpublished writings] has been universally disapproved. Peachum was therefore pardoned: and though Sydney indeed was executed, yet it was to the general discontent of the nation; and his attainder was afterwards reversed by parliament. There was then no manner of doubt, but that the publication of such a treasonable writing was a sufficient overt act of treason at the common law; though of late even that has been questioned.[23]

Blackstone is writing at a time when doubt is cast upon whether even the publication of "treasonable writings" is in itself sufficient proof of

[21] Ibid., 80.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 81.

treason. This period is often considered that of the emergence of a practically complete freedom of public discussion.

By his intricate lines, the jurist suggests that the very fact that whether speaking or writing certain words in a certain way can be an act of high treason remains a topic of debate and controversy should worry speakers and writers. If the laws and statutes determining to what extent and in what ways *scribere est agere* are never, as laws and statutes, definitively settled, one's execution for having used certain words in a certain way will always be most definitive and irreversible, no matter how regretted it may become! This makes it "worth our while," as Strauss puts it, to consider the effects on thoughts and actions of how governments seek to "coordinate speech" with those views they uphold. Blackstone teaches that these views, being governmental, imply a revisable delimitation of what counts as treason. This delimitation effectively belongs to the sovereign *de facto*. A sovereign *de jure* but not *de facto* cannot be betrayed, nor require obedience, as this would endanger subjects on all sides.[24] This is why the non-treason of "usurpers" is not only excused but justified, legally.

Plautianus's breastplate

Machiavelli's chapter on conspiracies, the longest in the *Discourses*, contains thirty paragraphs, if one considers the quotation of Juvenal in Latin—"*Ad generum Cereris sine caede et vulnere pauci /Descendunt reges, et sicca morte tyranni*," "Few kings descend to the dark abode of Ceres without wounds or slaughter, and tyrants never die a natural death"—ends the third paragraph.[25] After a short introductory paragraph, the bulk of the chapter (§§ 2-23) discusses conspiracies against princes. Machiavelli then briefly discusses conspiracies against republics (§§ 24-27), and concludes with general remarks on both princes and republics (§§ 28-30). The Florentine presents the many dangers at stake before, during, and after the execution of a plot,

[24] Ibid., 77-78.

[25] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 331.

analyzes the causes of success and failure, proposes remedies, and uses ancient and modern examples.

Blackstone's text and Machiavelli's are most similar in that they both address the practice of writing in relation to subversive deeds. Although he does not make use of the Latin sentence, Machiavelli also considers, especially in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth paragraphs,[26] that writing is a specific act, and that written documents are dangerous for their authors as they can signal that a treasonous plot is in preparation. These are the three paragraphs that Strauss refers to in the Italian edition that he cites. The most striking difference with Blackstone is that Machiavelli avoids the questions of the legality of conspiracies. Machiavelli's approach to is strategic, tactical, or practical. While Blackstone is concerned with how private or public texts may falsely convict of treason someone who had no treasonous intentions, Machiavelli is interested in how written traces can harm actual conspirators. In the tenth paragraph, he writes:

> I have heard many wise men say that you may talk freely with one man about everything, for *unless you have committed yourself in writing the "yes" of one man is worth as much as the "no" of another*; and therefore one should guard most carefully against writing, as against a dangerous rock, for nothing will convict you quicker than your own handwriting. Plautianus, wishing to have the Emperor Severus and his son Antoninus [Caracalla] killed, committed the matter to the Tribune Saturninus; he however, instead of obeying Plautianus, resolved to betray him, and, *fearing that in accusing him he would be less believed than Plautianus, he exacted from him an order in his own handwriting to attest his authority*. Plautianus, blinded by his ambition, gave him such a written order, which the Tribune used to accuse and convict him. Plautianus denied his guilt with such audacity, that without this written order and other indications he never would have been convicted. You may escape, then, from the accusation of a single individual, unless

[26] Ibid., 337-339. These are the paragraphs that Strauss refers to in the *I Classici del Giglio* edition.

> you are convicted by some writing or other pledge, which you should be careful never to give.[27]

Machiavelli then gives other examples illustrating how communicating a plot is always risky, even if one can deny the charges with "audacity" afterward. The "remedy" is to avoid communicating a plot until the very last moment, to then share it with as few people as possible, and to leave no traces. In the twelfth paragraph, he writes that writings can also expose the intentions of a ruler to injure one or many subjects. Intercepting such a piece of writing "may force you to do unto the prince that which you see the prince about to do to you."[28] Writings from authorities can thereby hasten or even provoke conspiracies. Blackstone does not explicitly discuss this fact, but he acknowledges it when he claims that the multiplication of "new treasons" can make a rule "arbitrary."

There is a second way in which Machiavelli writes of writing and conspiracies. In the twentieth paragraph, which Strauss does not mention, he writes: "Conspiracies against single individuals are generally apt to fail, for the reasons I have adduced; but when undertaken against two or more persons, they fail much easier. Such conspiracies present so many difficulties that it is almost impossible they should succeed."[29] After writing that it is impracticable to attempt to kill two individuals at the same time in different places and that "to attempt to do so at different moments of time would certainly result in the one's preventing the other," Machiavelli, whose *Discourses* are presented as commentaries of a historian's work, returns to Plautianus and writes:

> So that, if it is imprudent, rash, and doubtful to conspire against a single prince, it amounts to folly to do so against two at the same time. And were it not for the respect which I have for the historian, I should not be able to believe possible what Herodianus relates of Plautianus, when he charged the centurion Saturninus by himself to kill Severus and Caracalla, who lived separately in different places; for it is so far from

[27] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 337-338 (I underline).

[28] Ibid., 338.

[29] Ibid., 342.

> being reasonable, that nothing less than the authority of Herodianus could make me believe it.[30]

In other words, Machiavelli writes that a writer can persuade a reader that what seemed impossible is possible. It is only due to "the authority of Herodianus"—also known as Herodian of Antioch (c. 170-240), a civil servant who published a history of the Roman Empire—that Machiavelli claims he can believe that Plautianus was so unreasonable as to conspire to assassinate the emperor and his son at the same time. This singular authority attributed to Herodianus should bring Machiavelli's inquisitive reader to examine the possibility that some teachings are transmitted not only "between the covers of the *Discourses* and those of Livy's *History*,"[31] but also between the covers of the *Discourses* and those of Herodianus's *History*.

The "blind ambition" of Plautianus led to his being convicted and executed, Machiavelli writes, less because it brought him to conspire than because it brought him to set his treasonous plot in writing.[32] This is also the formulation of Herodianus:

> The tribune [Saturninus] was astounded and perplexed by this proposal [of Plautianus], but he was a man accustomed to keeping his wits about him (he was a Syrian, and the men from the East are rather more cunning in their thinking); observing the fury which gripped his commanding officer and well aware of his power, he did not oppose him, not wishing to be killed over these matters. Pretending therefore to be hearing things long prayed for and warmly welcomed, the tribune prostrated himself before Plautianus as if he were already emperor and begged him for a written memorandum ordering the murder. If a man were condemned to death without a trial, the tyrants customarily put the order in writing so that the sentence might not be carried out solely on verbal authority. Blinded by his ambition, Plautianus gave the tribune a directive in writing and

[30] Ibid. See the mention of Herodian in relation to conspiracies in Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 196.

[31] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 121.

[32] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 337-338.

> sent him off to commit the murders. He further ordered Saturninus, after killing the emperor and his son, to summon him, before the deed became known, that he might be in the palace before anyone realized he was seizing the empire.[33]

Herodianus relates that Plautianus presented Saturninus with the fateful alternative of either conspiring or being killed, and that this prompted Saturninus's own counter-conspiracy, his treason of his treasonous superior. In Book III, Chapter XII, Herodianus then relates that Saturninus was able to gather Severus and Caracalla in the same room. These remarks were certainly of interest to Machiavelli, for they indicate how a conspiracy against two might approach success.

Saturninus gathered both the emperor and his son within his reach by denouncing Plautianus to the former, using the written order as his "witness." The piece of writing, however, did not by itself convince Severus. The emperor first envisaged a conspiracy organized *against* his friend Plautianus by his unruly son, who was therefore summoned to his room.[34] Caracalla vigorously denied being involved. Saturninus then proposed to give the emperor further evidence of Plautianus's guilt by summoning him to the palace. When the message falsely announcing the successful outcome of the plot reached him, "with high hopes, Plautianus, though it was late at night, put on a breastplate beneath his robe for protection, mounted a chariot, and drove to the palace at top speed."[35] When he faced the living emperor and his son, as well as the tribune he had sent to kill them, Plautianus "was terror-stricken, and pleaded with them, trying to defend himself and swearing that it was all a mistake, a plot, a conspiracy against him." Herodianus writes that the prefect almost succeeded in convincing Severus, "until his robe fell open and revealed the breastplate beneath it."[36] Caracalla then "spoke up: 'How would you explain these two facts? First that you came unordered to your emperor at night, and second, that you came here wearing that

[33] Herodian of Antioch, *History of the Roman Empire*, trans. Edward C. Echols (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 99-100 (Book III, Chapter XI).

[34] Ibid., 100.

[35] Ibid., 101.

[36] Ibid.

breastplate? Who goes to a feast or a revel in full armor?' After saying this, Caracalla ordered the tribune and the other praetorians present to draw their swords and kill this proven enemy."[37] Plautianus was executed on the spot.

Herodianus's text teaches that the revelation of the breastplate that Plautianus put on for protection was the fatal event that sealed his destiny. The historian suggests Plautianus *could* have succeeded, and that he was overcautious. The accidental revelation of the protective measures he had taken was the turning point in an otherwise uncertain night. Machiavelli does not tell this story in so many words, but this very fact signals interpretative pathways to the reader of Strauss's "Persecution and the Art of Writing." It does so precisely because the otherwise-careful Florentine seems to have forgotten the role of Plautianus's breastplate. If Machiavelli read Herodianus reverently, and if he was interested in the causes of the success and failure of conspiracies, he *must* have read of this concealed breastplate whose very concealment made it exposable.

In fact, Machiavelli gives one sign that he knew of the breastplate. In the tenth paragraph, he writes: "without this written order and other indications [Plautianus] never would have been convicted."[38] The only other indications mentioned by Herodianus are the facts, put in Caracalla's mouth, that Plautianus came to the palace at night unordered, and that he did so wearing a breastplate.

Reading and writing between texts, one could also ponder how "the breastplate for protection" mentioned by Herodianus and silenced by Machiavelli recalls "the breastplate of righteousness" mentioned in *Ephesians* 6:11-16.[39] It is noteworthy that this epistle commands children to obey their parents and servants to obey their masters, but also: "father, provoke not your children to wrath," and "ye masters, do the same things onto [your servants], forbearing threatening." It is a central teaching of Machiavelli's chapter on conspiracies that issuing threats is more dangerous than injuring because it elicits a vivid

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 338.

[39] For another echo, this time with *Ephesians* (2.2), see Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 335n90.

desire for revenge without diminishing the means for revenge. In the sixth paragraph, Machiavelli counts Plautianus among those whose conspiracy has been prompted "by an excess of benefits," as one of those who "had been so loaded with riches, honors, and dignities by their Emperors that nothing seemed wanting to complete their power and to satisfy their ambition but the Empire itself."[40] Herodianus, however, makes it clear that Caracalla, who was forced by Severus to marry Plautianus's daughter,

> was exceedingly hostile to the girl, and to her father too, and refused to sleep or even eat with his wife; the truth is that he loathed her and daily promised to kill her and her father as soon as he became the sole ruler of the empire. She reported these threats to her father and aroused his fury by stories of her husband's rancor. […] Observing that Severus was now old and constantly racked by disease, while Caracalla was a rash and reckless youth, Plautianus, in fear of these threats, elected to act first rather than to delay and suffer at his son-in-law's hands.[41]

Plautianus thus believed he was faced with the alternative of perishing or conspiring. Machiavelli suggests that practically no one ever chooses to perish.

The curious contemporary reader can learn that another historian, Cassius Dio (c. 155-235), published a different version of Plautianus's.[42] Caracalla—who, like Saturninus in Herodianus's text, is said to have been of Syrian origin—is portrayed by Dio as the initiator of the conspiracy, and the writer of the order that convicted Plautianus. He did so because he feared Plautianus's threats. The emperor's son is also said to have recruited Saturninus and other "centurions" to execute his plot, as Severus first thought was the case according to Herodianus. Dio, however, makes no mention of a breastplate.[43] Neither does the soldier and historian Ammianus

[40] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 333.

[41] Herodian, *History*, 97-98.

[42] See Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, vol. IX (n.p.: Loeb Classical Library, 1927), 269-277 (Epitome to Book LXXVII).

[43] Dio's account is explicitly mentioned as a counter-narrative by translator T. Guiraudet in his 1803 edition of Machiavelli's *Discourses* in French, in a rare footnote that is appended to the tenth paragraph. Guiraudet writes: "We

Marcellinus (c. 330-395) in his *Roman History*, where only two passages mention Plautianus. In Book XXVI, Chapter VI, one reads of "Plautian, who was prefect under Severus, and who with more than mortal pride would have thrown everything into confusion, if he had not been murdered out of revenge."[44] In Book XXIX, Chapter I, one reads that Severus, "when extremely old, was assailed as he was lying in his bed-chamber, by a centurion of the name of Saturninus, who was instigated to act by Plautian the prefect, and would have been killed if his youthful son had not come to his assistance."[45] Nothing is written of the written order and of Saturninus's counter-conspiracy against his conspiring superior.

In light of these different versions, there arises a doubt that Herodianus's may have been the "official" one. Caracalla is portrayed quite favorably, and he did become emperor after Severus's death. He even acquired the reputation of a most cruel and ferocious ruler, as Machiavelli indicates in *The Prince*.[46] In his inventory of Machiavelli's sources, Leslie J. Walker underlined that no edition of Dio's works

know this Antoninus is the same as the famous Caracalla, whom his father Severus married to the daughter of Plautianus, his favorite. Machiavelli follows on this event the story of Herodianus and Amianus Marcellinus. But Cassius Dio regards the written deposition of the tribune Saturninus as an invention of Caracalla who wanted to free himself from Plautianus, his father-in-law, just as he had wanted to stab his father. Since between these two vile crooks the difference in immorality cannot settle the indecision, or contribute to document historical likelihood, we cannot but rely on the reciprocal interest of the two accused and the outcome of the conspiracy. Indeed, what a fancy it is that a conjured gives to the other, and in writing, the order to execute the plot! This is not likely… Indeed, we see Plautianus being mandated according to this deposition, going to the palace unarmed, negating the accusation he is charged with, and soon being assassinated following the orders of Caracalla." *Œuvres de Machiavel; traduction nouvelle par Tt. Guiraudet*, 2nd edition, Tome 2 (Paris: Pichard, An XI—1803), 165-166 (my translation).

[44] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History* (London: Bohn, 1862), 418.

[45] Ibid., 507.

[46] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli in Four Volumes*, vol. II, trans. Christian E. Detmold (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1882), 66 (Chapter 19).

"was published in Greek until 1548 or in Latin until 1591."[47] It is thus unlikely that Machiavelli read Dio. The reader who *rereads* Herodianus's text after Dio's, however, can see that it does not truly foreclose the possibility that Severus, who is described by Machiavelli as knowing very well how "to play the part of the fox and of the lion,"[48] was right from the start in thinking his son conspired against Plautianus by pretending Plautianus was conspiring. One teaching of Machiavelli's account of conspiracies is precisely this reversibility of accusations, and the corollary requirement to act swiftly.

In the twentieth paragraph, after praising Herodianus Machiavelli presents other examples of failed conspiracies against more than one.[49] These lines include the only mention of Plato in the *Discourses* and *The Prince*, in the central example.[50] They lead to the final example, "the conspiracy of Pelopidas to deliver his country, Thebes."[51] This Theban citizen "had been declared a rebel and had been banished"—not unlike Plautianus, of whom "some say he was banished [as a youth] after being convicted of treason and many other crimes."[52] Pelopidas managed to return to his city, to conspire, and to free Thebes from her *ten* tyrants. This is an impressive example as Machiavelli only mentioned failed conspiracies against *two*. He insists that Pelopidas

> succeeded thus mainly through the assistance of a certain Charon, privy counselor to the tyrants, who facilitated his access to them and the consequent execution of his plot. Let no one, however, be seduced by this example; for it was an almost impossible enterprise, and its success was a marvel, and was so regarded by the historians, who speak of it as a most extraordinary and unprecedented event. The execution of such

[47] Leslie J. Walker, "Table XIII. Sources," in *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Leslie J. Walker, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1950), 299.

[48] Machiavelli, *Prince*, 65.

[49] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 343.

[50] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 327n187.

[51] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 343.

[52] Herodian, *History*, 97.

> a plot may be interrupted by the least false alarm, or by some unforeseen accident at the moment of its execution.[53]

Machiavelli's chapter on conspiracies makes clear that all conspiracies are risky. That this especially daring one was riskier only makes its success more impressive. The fact that he warns his reader not to be seduced signals the seductive character of his example. This paragraph ends by a return to "the historians," whom Machiavelli qualified as authorities able to persuade that what appeared impossible is possible. Being spoken of or written about by future historians as the doer of extraordinary, unprecedented, or miraculous deeds may itself become a blinding ambition, and Machiavelli's warning plays on this desire for glory. The mention of the crucial role of "a certain Charon, privy counselor to the tyrants" whose name was also recorded shows the reader one does not need to be the one who *executes* a conspiracy to achieve glory.

It is at this point that what Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., following Strauss, calls "Machiavelli's conspiracy" comes into play. Commenting on "Of conspiracies," he writes: "This chapter is chiefly addressed to the man of notable quality (III 2) who would rather retire. It shows him how to enter politics effectively by indirect conspiracy. […] The intention of this chapter is not merely to discuss the neglected topic of conspiracies; it is chiefly to discuss Machiavelli's conspiracy, through which conspiracies in general will (not incidentally) receive their due attention for the first time."[54] Mansfield goes further in analyzing the effects of Machiavelli's writings by arguing they confront his reader to a fateful alternative. In effect,

> Machiavelli causes men to think sinful thoughts, each according to his capacity. To cause men to sin in thought or intention is to put them under threat of God's punishment, and thus to impel them to face that punishment or join Machiavelli's conspiracy. They must make this "choice" under pressure of "the necessity that does not give time," their mortality. Machiavelli shares this necessity of course, but by putting other men under the same

[53] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 343.

[54] Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the* Discourses on Livy (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1979), 319.

> necessity as he to decide on the meaning of their mortality he can extend his "influence," as we say so weakly today, beyond the span of his life. This "influence" of a writer is called his *fortuna* by the Italians, and so it can be said that Machiavelli desired to master his own fortune by means of his own conspiracy. His revenge, as he first presented his motive, is shown to be identical with his necessity; for he is forced to conspire against the prince.[55]

Machiavelli would even have found a way to make sure his own "threats" will not elicit revenge by framing his book as

> a pretended conspiracy which becomes real by tempting men, first to pretend to conspire, then to conspire in private, and last to execute in public. Even the pretending, however, is an involvement in the crime; so the reader seeking to understand the book by entering into its spirit, hence pretending to agree merely in order to grasp what it says, will not report Machiavelli to the authorities. And even if he does, the worldly authorities, refusing to imitate the foolish duke of Athens, will honor him for accusing conspirators, as he does throughout this chapter, and above all for accusing the comprehensive modern conspiracy against themselves. […] Machiavelli learned the technique of government by conspiracy from the religion that implicates all men in one homicide, binds them with their involvement, and rules them with absolutions or excuses.[56]

As he makes these remarks, Mansfield insists on a distinction between the inspirers and executioners of conspiracies, arguing that Machiavelli primarily sought to inspire.

Seventeen years after writing "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Strauss publishes the claim that "One is tempted to describe Machiavelli's relation to the young as a potential conspiracy."[57] However,

[55] Ibid., 331.

[56] Ibid., 343.

[57] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 168.

> Machiavelli's argument silently shifts from more or less dangerous conspiracies against the fatherland or the common good which, if successful, benefit the conspirators, to patient long-range corruption, which is neither dangerous to the corrupter nor productive of crude benefits to him. *We prefer to say that, being a teacher of conspirators, he is not himself a conspirator*. It goes without saying that the man who, from the point of view of the established order, necessarily appears as a corrupter may in truth be the first discoverer of those modes and orders which are simply in accordance with nature. *It also goes without saying that whether writing is dangerous or not depends to a considerable extent on whether the writing in question serves a conspiratorial purpose or merely long-range corruption*. Machiavelli goes on to say that if a man desires to seize authority in a republic and to impress his evil forms on a republic, he must have at his disposal a matter which little by little, from generation to generation has become disordered, or a matter which has been disordered by time; for since all things of the world, and therefore in particular mixed bodies, have a limited life span, they necessarily become disordered by the mere passing of time.[58]

According to Strauss, "The matter on which Machiavelli attempts to impress his form is 'the Christian Republic'."[59] A long endnote is appended to the passage on conspirators and teachers of conspirators. In the second half of the note, Strauss writes:

> The difference between conspiratorial and "corrupting" writings is adumbrated by the story of Agis and Cleomenes as told in I 9. Agis, who desired to restore the old Spartan order, was killed by the ephors as one who desired to become a tyrant; through the writings which he left, he aroused the same noble desire in his successor Cleomenes who killed all ephors and thus succeeded in completely restoring the old Spartan order. The action of Cleomenes is described in III 6 [346] as a conspiracy against the fatherland. This conspiracy was originated by writings of Agis. Agis was not hurt by his writings

[58] Ibid., 169-170 (my emphasis).

[59] Ibid., 170.

> and Cleomenes was greatly helped by them. Cf. II pr. toward the end. Machiavelli indicates the difference between the teacher of conspirators and the conspirator himself by the sole reference to Plato which occurs in either book—*Discourses* III 6 [343]—; two disciples of Plato conspired against two tyrants and killed one of them. He indicates the same difference by referring in the same context to Pelopidas' conspiracy against the Theban tyrants and by his other references to Pelopidas and his friend Epaminondas (see especially III 18 beginning and 38).[60]

Strauss insisted earlier in the book that "Machiavelli discusses the failure of conspiracies in order to show how they might have succeeded. Accordingly, he shows that conspiracies against two or even more tyrants are by no means doomed to failure: a conspiracy in Thebes against ten tyrants had a most happy issue because the adviser of the tyrants was in his heart their enemy."[61] It seems Machiavelli came to find even Charon's position too exposed, so he settled for "patient long-range corruption."

"Our nephews"

It may be a surprise, but Descartes tells of a similar project in his *Discours*. Published in the Netherlands in 1637 under his own name, the text in six parts now known as the autonomous *Discours de la méthode* was, in its first editions, the introduction to three others: *La Dioptrique*, on optics, *Les Météores*, on cosmology, and *La Géométrie*, on analytic geometry. These four texts were published in French and only later translated into Latin. The choice of the vernacular French indicates the volume was intended as a set of popular writings. The beginning of part VI, to which Strauss refers, presents Descartes's reasons for publishing this text. It makes explicit what he felt were the pressures and limitations to consider publishing his book without being harmed, or those pressures and limitations he felt could be written about without already endangering himself.

[60] Ibid., 327-328n187 (the brackets modify the page numbers given by Strauss to refer to the 1882 edition of Machiavelli's *Discourses* used throughout this article).

[61] Ibid., 27.

Part VI contains twelve paragraphs.[62] Strauss refers to the "beginning." Just where the beginning begins seems given, but where it ends is debatable. One thus has to read all that seems relevant to the claim that "*scribere est agere.*" In the first paragraph, Descartes begins by relating the situation in which he found himself "three years ago," as he started revising a treatise he intended to bring to a printer.[63] This treatise is not extensively described in Part VI, but it is discussed through Part V as an attempt to present all he came to know on "the nature of material things."[64] At the beginning of Part VI, Descartes mentions one event that made him rethink his deed and renounce publishing his *Physics*:

> I learned that people, to whom I defer and whose authority can affect my actions as much my own reason can affect my thoughts, had disapproved of an opinion in physics, published shortly before by some other, which I do not want to say that I shared, but rather that I had noticed nothing in it, before their censorship, that I could imagine being harmful either to religion or the state, and therefore, nothing that would have prevented me from writing it myself, if reason had persuaded me of it.[65]

The very way in which Descartes describes, in a published text, the event that made him decide not to publish his treatise bears witness to his art of writing. Notably, he gives no name. It is generally agreed that the event in question is the 1632 trial of Galileo (1564-1642) by the Roman Catholic Inquisition for the publication of a book defending heliocentrism, which led to his being convicted of heresy and being kept under house arrest. This frightened Descartes as it raised the possibility that, having "failed" once, he could also have failed to notice a similarly harmful opinion among those he was about to publish. He thus warns the reader of this *other* text that he has taken care not to include opinions that could be deemed harmful "to religion or the state" by religion or the state.

[62] Descartes, *Discours*, 35-42 (all citations are my translation from the French).

[63] Ibid., 35.

[64] Ibid., 28-34.

[65] Ibid., 35.

The rest of Part VI presents Descartes's reasons for having intended to publish his *Physics* in the first place (§§ 2-3), his reasons for deciding to write his findings yet to keep them unpublished during his lifetime (§§ 4-7), his reasons for publishing *Discours de la méthode* and the three texts printed with it instead (§§ 8-9), and his indications for how his reader should approach the book (§§ 10-12). The second paragraph argues it is superfluous to publish texts on "mores" as there seems to be as many "reformers" as there are individuals. Yet it is necessary to publish one's findings on "general notions in physics," for not doing so would amount to "sinning" against the "law" that obliges everyone to contribute as much as they can to "the general good of men."[66] Notions and principles in physics can be "very useful to life" by enabling new instruments, and by improving the science of "the conservation of health" in a way that could "make us as it were masters and possessors of Nature."[67] To develop and test these notions and principles, it is useful to communicate one's findings to "the public" and to invite others to do the same since "the brevity of life" and the extent of the required "experiments" make it so that we can "go much farther all together than any single individual could." The third paragraph then explains "experiments" are needed to distinguish the right explanation from the many plausible ones. Sharing them in writing can thus be helpful.

In the fourth paragraph, however, Descartes begins explaining what made him believe he ought to continue writing his findings but should "in no way consent to their publication during [his] life."[68] Writing can enable a detached examination of one's own thoughts. It can also benefit "the public" after one's death. Publishing one's conclusions, however, is bound to raise "oppositions and controversies." While it is inevitable that "objections" should arise, they are, most often, a "waste of time." As the foundations of Descartes's *Physics* would cause "great" controversy, publishing them would make him waste a considerable amount of his limited time.[69] In the fifth paragraph, he supports this claim by describing how experience taught him that

[66] Ibid., 36.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., 37.

[69] Ibid., 38.

"oppositions" are much less useful than they seem. The "fights" in "the schools" never led to a better grasp of the truth.[70] The most rigorous and fair "censor" is oneself, or one's reason. In the sixth paragraph, Descartes then undermines the claim that publishing his *Physics* could be useful to others by arguing people most often misunderstand what is explained to them to the point that when they explain back, one does not recognize one's own "opinions." The history of philosophy is said to prove this. He further claims those who honestly seek the truth will find all they need in his *Discours* as it is, and that his "principles"—his method—will be of no use to those who merely seek to increase their *reputation* for wisdom. In the seventh paragraph, he rests his case for not publishing his treatise on physics by writing that experiments shared in writing tend to be so badly framed that distinguishing those that are useful would itself require too much time.

The eighth paragraph is most interesting, albeit it is beyond the "beginning" referred to by Strauss. It is in this passage that Descartes clearly presents his reasons for publishing the *Discours* nonetheless. In the fourth paragraph, he wrote that since one's contribution ought to "extend beyond the present time," "it is good to omit things that could perhaps benefit to those who are alive, if it is in order to do other things that will benefit much more to our nephews."[71] This last expression, "our nephews," is Descartes's way of writing about the generations to come, of those who are not born yet. This concern for future generations returns in the short eighth paragraph, as Descartes relates that he faced two problems that compelled him to write and publish the *Discours*. The second, most evident one is the "infinity of experiments which [he] need[s], and which [he] cannot make without the help of others."[72] He would be "failing himself" if he did not write to invite the communication of experiments, and he would also give an opportunity to "those who will follow" to reproach him of not having achieved his best by having neglected to explain to others what they could do to help.[73] The first problem is most interesting for the

[70] Ibid., 39.

[71] Ibid., 38.

[72] Ibid., 41.

[73] Ibid.

student of politics concerned with treason, conspiracy and corruption. Descartes writes he was "obliged to put here some particular essays, and to give an account to the public of [his] actions and intentions,"[74] for if he *failed* to do so,

> many, who had learned of my prior intention to put into print a few writings, could imagine that the causes of my abstention were more to my disadvantage than they really are. Because, although I do not love glory out of excess, or even, dare I say it, I hate it, since I deem it contrary to repose, which I value above all things, *I never attempted to conceal my actions as if they were crimes*, nor have I taken many precautions to be unknown; as much because I thought I would thus harm myself, than because this would have caused me some species of worry, that would have been even more contrary to the perfect repose of the mind which I seek. And since, having always deemed it indifferent to be known or unknown, I could not prevent my gaining some sort of reputation, I thought that I should do my best to at least exempt myself from having a bad one.[75]

This problem is what Plautianus's breastplate symbolizes. Descartes, echoing Machiavelli, whom he read and found respectable, sought to master his own fortune.[76] Can the Frenchman be said to have intended to do so "through his own conspiracy," as Mansfield writes of the Florentine?

The remaining paragraphs help to address this issue. The ninth paragraph explains that, facing these problems, Descartes decided to publish essays on "some matters" that are "not subject to much

[74] Ibid., 40.

[75] Ibid., 40-41 (my emphasis).

[76] Richard Kennington writes that Descartes's "caution is evident in the fact that he never published praise or blame of any political philosophy in his own name, but only an anonymous praise of Bacons's *Great Instauration* and *New Atlantis*; whereas in private letters he accepted 'the principal precept' of Machiavelli, 'noticed nothing bad' in his *Discourses on Livy*, and thought Hobbes's politics in his *On the Citizen* superior to his metaphysics." See Richard Kennington, "René Descartes (1596-1650)" in *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss & Joseph Cropsey, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 422.

controversy," that do not force him to "declare [his] principles" more than he desires, but that show "clearly" what he "can, or cannot, in the sciences," that is: *the power of his method*.[77] The tenth paragraph asks the reader to read the whole texts before writing to object to the use of certain terms, and tells he seeks to avoid that

> certain minds, who imagine they can know in one day what another has taken twenty years to think through, as soon as the latter tells them two or three words about it, and who are all the more subject to error, and all the less capable of truth, as they are penetrating and sharp, could seize the opportunity to build some extravagant philosophy on what they will believe are my principles, and for which I would then be blamed.[78]

The eleventh paragraph argues the machine presented in the essay on optics may work even if it cannot be built at the present, and explains that Descartes writes in French to reach the wider reading public. Finally, the twelfth paragraph explains he wants to dedicate the rest of his life "medicine," and asks to be supported only in the unimpeded leisure that study requires.

Feeling compelled and deciding to write and publish in order to prevent being accused of concealing writings that could potentially be harmful to religion or the state can be described by the injunction *publish or perish*. Having read Machiavelli's chapter on conspiracies, Strauss's curious reader of Descartes may ponder whether this alternative is similar to that between conspiring and perishing. The reader of Machiavelli will at least recall that virtually no one chooses to perish. The reader of Herodianus may further recall how the fate of Plautianus shows that being exposed as having tried to conceal increased means of self-protection can lead to perishing as a "proven enemy," and that the actions of Saturninus show that "choosing" to conspire does not necessarily mean accepting that specific conspiracy forcefully presented as the only possible alternative to perishing. The reader of Dio's *History* also knows that writings of all sorts may be forged or tweaked to become effective agents of a conspiracy. Finally, the reader of Blackstone's chapter on high treason will have remarked

[77] Descartes, *Discours*, 41.

[78] Ibid., 41-42.

that even English law, which is not reputed to be volatile, can transform in a day what once were acceptable sentences into treasonous scribbles.

Descartes was confronted with the alternative to publish or perish by people who had become aware—or whom he imagined had become aware—of his intention to publish and of his decision to abstain. He supposes they will attribute his decision to his concern for self-preservation. The "schools," or the scholarly establishment, or the image of these forces Descartes made for himself, can be said to have silently forced him to "conspire" along with them by publishing a "scholastic" text that would be harmful neither to religion nor the state, or to publish nothing but run the constant risks of being accused of concealing harmful texts, and of being compelled to make private papers public. Descartes decided to "conspire"—or at least, he decided to publish. What he published, however, are quite peculiar texts, especially in the case of the *Discours de la méthode*. This is a text that promises no other, or very few other texts will ever be required once it has been read. It promises to help its reader escape the influence and authority of "old books." It argues that reason alone is to be followed, and it claims to exemplify what only following one's pure natural reason looks like. It implies that, given the ever-changing conditions and pressures under which writings are published—Descartes's text being exemplary—, a systematic doubt should be casted upon the view that the "opinions" in books, old or new, are always those that reason alone compelled their writer to publish. The *Discours* argues "society" is inimical to the search for truth, that it prefers "superstitions." The only text to be trusted, if there is one, would therefore limit itself to the presentation of natural principles of pure reason, or of "method," of *the* method that can help to search for the truth, beyond the limits placed on its publication.

Descartes chose to initiate a new, divergent, epochal counter-conspiracy, intended as a long-range corruption through the instruction of as many "nephews" as possible in the knowledge of this power of "method." This divergent plot promotes the autonomy or the autonomization of method, which is justified by the "autonomy of reason."[79] Every topic then becomes subject to be approached

[79] Kennington, "René Descartes," 423-424; 438.

through the forms of mathematical rigor. This is a view that many of Descartes's "nephews" held, and that they deemed conspiratorial. D'Alembert, for instance, praised Descartes as "a chief of conspirators who first had the courage to raise himself up against a despotic and arbitrary power."[80] This "power" was scholasticism. The sentence continues: "and who, by preparing a resounding revolution, has laid down the foundations of a government more just and more felicitous than any other one he could see being established."[81] This "government" would be that of the *République des Lettres*. Insofar as Descartes is considered the "founder" of modern philosophy or modern science, he seems to have been successful in teaching how to make his method the sole "universally valid" mode of truth-seeking, while remaining mostly unharmed.[82]

Machiavelli teaches the only danger arising after a successful conspiracy against a prince resides in having left a possible avenger alive, and that there is no danger that arises after a successful conspiracy against a republic since it founds a new order and legality—no danger, that is, safe for those inherent to absolute power, which is to say: many dangers indeed, that can only be defused by renouncing absolute power. When Modernity is not described in terms of Machiavelli's "founding" or of the "foundational" French Revolution, it is often presented as the epoch dominated by "the Cartesian subject." A detour with Strauss through Machiavelli's and Descartes's texts shows this "subject" is not very different from the conspirator or corrupter who attempts to master *fortuna* through cunning deeds that include writing. It would remain to be seen whether Machiavelli or Descartes truly are *de facto*, if not the *de jure* "authorities," and whether they left some "avengers" sufficiently

[80] Ibid., 436.

[81] Jean le Rond d'Alembert, "Discours préliminaire des éditeurs," in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton & Durand, 1751), xxvi (my translation). See Kennington, "René Descartes," 421.

[82] Descartes is said to have died of pneumonia, but a book in German argues he was poisoned. See Lizzy Davies, "Descartes was 'poisoned by Catholic priest'," *The Guardian* [Online], Feb. 14, 2010.

unharmed, sufficiently armed, and sufficiently threatened to dare retaliate in some conspiracy.

Anarchy and repetition

The primary assumption required for qualifying a deed as an act of treason, conspiracy, or corruption, is the existence of an order that can be betrayed, conspired against, or corrupted. Blackstone's legal or juristic approach of treason makes this requirement evident in the case of a modern state, and by extension, of those forms of collective organization that can be said to be analogous to a state. That there is a place, a site or a position, within or perhaps above such forms, for a sovereign instance, is what makes it possible to distinguish between *de facto* and *de jure* pretenders to this position. This distinction, in its turn, makes it possible to distinguish adequate and inadequate uses of the term treason to characterize certain deeds that seek to unsettle, contest, or even eliminate that sovereign instance or those pretenders who found their way to what is commonly called the seat of power. Ultimately, Blackstone argues that it is power, or strength, that determines what does and what does not count as treason. This is why only a *de facto* sovereign can be the victim of high treason. However, an individual or a group that, while not being sovereign *de facto*, considers itself the—or one possible—*de jure* sovereign, may understandably feel it is itself the victim of a vast conspiracy, but it cannot, strictly speaking, be the object of a treason in the legal sense.

When the "collective" once called the Republic of Letters is concerned, however, the very existence of a sovereign is contestable. It is the case that many tend to assume "academia," "scholarship," "the university," "the disciplines," or "philosophy" are structured like a modern state. Nonetheless, there are not only disagreements on who *should* occupy the sovereign position. There are also conflicts and disagreements on just who is in truth the *de facto* sovereign, who handles the reins of power and authority, that is: who reigns, if anyone. Attending to this observation suggests the possibility that the Republic of Letters is in fact, if not in right, anarchic, without an actual sovereign power or governing principle worthy of the name, without *archè*. Its closest model seems the complex overlapping jurisdictions of the medieval era—less the cosmic unity. It is certainly the site of *coups d'éclat*, but

it is uncertain that there are *coups d'État* in this realm. This issue is one of the stakes of Strauss's reading of Machiavelli.

The reading of Machiavelli as an epochal corrupter and of Descartes as the founder or enforcer of the "government" of instrumental rationality and technological mastery raises a number of difficult questions on the effects of reading and writing, on how *scribere est agere*. Strauss notes: "Conspiracies may be said to be distinguished from all other crimes by the fact that if they fully succeed, their very notoriety contributes to the extinction of their criminality, and they may carry with them rewards surpassing by far the rewards to be hoped for from any other action. Successful conspiracies may therefore be said to shake the common notions regarding penal justice."[83] This remark is profitably read in relation to the earlier claim that scholars

> misinterpret Machiavelli's judgment concerning religion, and likewise his judgment concerning morality, because they are pupils of Machiavelli. Their seemingly open-minded study of Machiavelli's thought is based on the dogmatic acceptance of his principles. They do not see the evil character of his thought because they are the heirs of the Machiavellian tradition; because they, or the forgotten teachers of their teachers, have been corrupted by Machiavelli.[84]

A fully successful corruption, in Strauss's sense, has the same effect as a fully successful conspiracy, namely the extinction of its own criminality, and the shaking of common notions regarding justice. In this view, the fact that the forgotten teachers of our teachers, the "uncles" of "our uncles" if you will, have been "corrupted" by Machiavelli means that, as their students or "nephews," we live in a world where conspiracies are openly discussed, for Machiavelli's conspiracy was one "through which conspiracies in general will [or did] (not incidentally) receive their due attention for the first time."[85] One of the means of this "conspiracy" involved the retelling in writing of "the deeds of great men." For instance, Machiavelli

[83] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 195.

[84] Ibid., 12.

[85] Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*, 319.

> transforms the Roman ruling class as it was into a ruling class as, according to him, it should have been; he makes the Roman ruling class "better" that it was; he transforms a group whose best members were men of outstanding virtue and piety into a group whose best members, being perfectly free of vulgar prejudices, were guided exclusively by Machiavellian prudence that served the insatiable desire of each for eternal glory in this world.[86]

In Strauss's view, Machiavelli's writings publicized claims about "self-preservation" or "self-interest" that it became safe, or safer, to repeat without what once were the mandatory words of blame that seemingly *had* to precede or follow. If it is indeed possible to found "new modes and orders," and if such a founding deed is to incur words of praise for their author, or no blame, it is predictable that conspiring deeds attempting new foundations will proliferate. As Descartes already put it, there seems to be as many "reformers" of mores (and regimes) as there are individuals.

This proliferation seems less a characteristic of political life in general than of one of its region inhabited by individuals who make a profession out of reading and writing, and who gather in more or less permeable "schools" that define and differentiate themselves primarily by virtue of what they hold as the *de facto* authorities to dethrone. In a practically anarchic regime, such authorities first require to be put into place, to be enthroned.[87] Multiple attempts at founding scholarly "regimes" mean that a same deed can be qualified as both an act of legitimate foundation and an illegitimate conspiracy. If philosophy, in the Platonic tradition, requires that a same deed cannot be qualified in two opposite ways at the same time, these

[86] Leo Strauss, "Machiavelli and Classical Literature," *Review of National Literatures* (St. John's University Press, 1970), 24.

[87] For an early and arguably successful attempt by the so-called Cambridge School to portray (or enthrone) Leo Strauss as an "anti-contextualist" authority to be dethroned, see Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no 1 (1969): 5, 12-16. For a critical account, see Rafael Major, "The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science," *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 58, no 3 (2005), 477-485.

practices are the objects not of philosophy but of the sociology of philosophy. The method of this sociology of *written* philosophy needs not abide by Cartesian standards, or caricatures thereof.

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