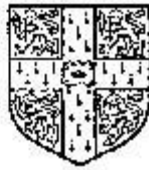


UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
FACULTY OF HISTORY



POLITICAL THOUGHT AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY
RESEARCH SEMINAR 2013-14

Series 1

Monday 3 February 5.00 - 6.45
Old Combination Room, Trinity College

**Postmarxism, Radical Democracy, and the Machiavellian
Moment**

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The author

Warren Breckman is Professor of Modern European Intellectual and Cultural History at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Marx, the Young Hegelians and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge, 1999), *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2007), and *Adventures of the Symbolic: Postmarxism and Radical Democracy* (New York, 2013), as well as many articles, most recently “Intellectual History and the Interdisciplinary Ideal,” published in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds. S. Moyn and D. McMahon (Oxford, 2014). He is the executive co-editor of *Journal of the History of Ideas* and a founding member of the editorial *Arbeitskreis* of the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*. Having just published his book on Postmarxism, he is currently starting work on two books, one a micro-history of World War One based on the diaries of a Canadian cavalryman and the other a study of Machiavelli in twentieth-century radical thought. This talk is a first sketch of some of the themes that will likely dominate the latter work.

The paper

Niccolò Machiavelli has been both a provocation and an inspiration in the history of political thought. This was true for the entire twentieth century, which witnessed an ever-growing interest in the Florentine thinker among historians and philosophers alike. One of the most surprising, yet unremarked dimensions of this modern engagement with Machiavelli is surely his recurring presence as figure and motif within left-wing philosophical discourse. While students of the history of radical political thought may be familiar with Antonio Gramsci's *The Modern Prince* and Gramsci's use of Machiavelli as an analogue to his own project, less familiar will be Machiavelli's role in the emergence of postmarxist theories of radical democracy. How is it that a thinker indelibly associated with the cynical and amoral manipulation of politics could have become an inspiration for theorists of a robust democratic life? This talk will explore this role, with particular attention to a constellation of French thinkers including Louis Althusser, Claude Lefort and Miguel Abensour. It will be argued that Lefort and Althusser's divergent readings of Machiavelli give us not only a vital index to their very different theoretical projects but also provide something of a parable for tensions facing contemporary activists and radical theorists.

Related Literature

Primary

Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. Max Blechman and Martin Breugh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011)

Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999)

Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings, 1978-1987*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006)

Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)

Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012)

Secondary

Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Postmarxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), esp. ch. 4

Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006)

Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolo Machiavelli and Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*, trans. Gareth Griffiths and Kristina Köhli (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011)

Martin Plot, ed., *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)