

**The Politics of Innovation:
Machiavelli and Political Innovation,
or, How to Stabilize a Changing World**

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Project on the Intellectual History of Innovation

Working Paper No. 17

2014

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Abstract

Five hundred years ago, Niccolo Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* (1513), a book that is still relevant day. One aspect of this book that remains neglected in the literature is Machiavelli's contribution to the idea of innovation.

This paper looks at what innovation is to Machiavelli. Using both *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, the paper documents the central role innovation occupies in politics. To Machiavelli, innovation is a means to stabilize a turbulent world – rather than revolutionize it – in contrast to what theorists of innovation say today.

In quiet times [rulers] never [think] that things change. [It] is common human failing when the weather is fine not to reckon on storms (Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XXIV).

Five hundred years ago, Niccolo Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* (1513), published posthumously. With this book Machiavelli introduces a new “morality” in politics. Machiavelli “set [s] himself”, writes Isaiah Berlin, “to generalize about the behaviour of men in society in a novel fashion ... He completely ignores the concepts and categories – the routine paraphernalia – in terms of which the best known thinkers and scholars of his day were accustomed to express themselves” (Berlin, 1972: 160). To Machiavelli, politics has its own morality, different from that of the then-dominant (Christian) morality: necessity or flexibility in place of moral virtue (Skinner and Price, 1988: 39) and conflict as vital to the state, not a hindrance (Skinner and Price, 1988: 66; Skinner, 1988: 440).

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli asks how a Prince may deal with a world changing constantly. One strategy is innovation. Innovation is a resource for dealing with change and with diseases in the world, or corruption, in the sense of degeneration. Until Machiavelli, innovation had both a negative and a positive connotation, the latter among Latin writers at least. To Christian writers and poets, *innovo* is spiritual “renewing” (Godin and Lucier, 2014). To Machiavelli, innovation is positive too, as this paper documents. Innovation is a fact of politics, and merits a place in a Prince’s arsenal. However, the representation of innovation changes after the Reformation. The concept of innovation shifts to the pejorative. Religious (heretics) and political (revolutionaries) deviants are labeled innovators, in a negative sense.

This paper looks at what innovation is to Machiavelli. It is not just one more article on Machiavelli. Such articles abound in the literature. The paper is rather concerned specifically with the idea of innovation in Machiavelli, of which there exist only a couple of analyses (Pocock, 1972; 1975: chapter 6; Pappin, 2008). To Machiavelli, innovation is introducing changes in government, namely entirely new laws and new institutions. Yet, this is only one meaning of innovation in Machiavelli. *The Discourses*, written fifteen years after *The Prince*, offers a different representation of innovation. Innovation is imitation. Innovation is return to the original foundations which time and people have corrupted. This representation of innovation is in total contrast to the theories of the

twentieth century, in which innovation is, most of the time, revolutionary change. History shows that innovation admits of multiple interpretations.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part looks at *The Prince* and *The Discourses* from the point of view of change and its relationship to innovation. The second part analyzes what innovation is to Machiavelli. It documents two different representations, depending on the context or work in which the concept is used.

A point of methodology: it is imperative to go back to the original Italian. Translators do not necessarily have an interest in innovation, and often translate the term innovation in different ways. For example, Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (1988) do not translate *innovare* as innovate (and the translation is not systematic: once *innovare* is translated as change, and in another instance as replace). On the other hand, Skinner and Price translate the expression *introduttore di nuovi ordini* as innovator (*The Prince*, VI). Not a bad translation considering the spirit of the text, but a “verbal inflation” considering that the word innovator appears only once in *The Prince*. Without going back to the original text, a basic word for the study of innovation is either missing or overstated. From a genealogical and semantic point of view, the word innovation must be translated as such – or at least must be discussed critically.¹

From the translations,² I have thus constructed a list of words relevant for the study of innovation and added the original in Italian as well as the book/chapter/paragraph where it appears.³ The word “new” does not appear in this list since it is present everywhere in Machiavelli’s writings (it would lengthen the list unreasonably). This list appears in the Appendix. Words in bold type are words or expressions not translated literally by the editors, and that could be placed elsewhere in the list, namely under that word itself. For example, Richard Crick and Leslie Walker translated *innovare* as restore (which is indeed

¹ On another word, Bernard Crick and Leslie Walker have translated *mutazioni* and a couple of other expressions in *The Discourses* as revolution. However, revolution was very little used in politics (but was in astronomy) before 1789 (Dunn, 1989). In fact, the word appears only once in Machiavelli (*The Prince*, XXVI). On linguistic inflation and revolution in Machiavelli, see Goulemot (1968).

² Skinner and Price (1988) for *The Prince* and Richard Crick and Leslie Walker (2003) for *The Discourses*.

³ Special thanks to Daniela Ghio. Without Daniela’s knowledge of the Italian language I could not have constructed this list.

one of the meanings of innovation to Machiavelli) instead of innovate. I have thus left *innovare* under restore in the list, but the bold type suggests that it could appear under innovate as well.

Machiavelli, Change and Innovation ⁴

Due to the patronage of his professor, Marcello Adriani, Machiavelli (1469-1527) became second chancellor of the Florentine Republic in 1498, at the age of 29. He then served the government until 1513, when the Medicis re-entered the city and dissolved the Republic. It was during the diplomatic missions he conducted in this post that he learned what became lessons for Princes.

The Prince was written during 1513, and Machiavelli hoped it might help him find employment with the new government, which he did not. *The Prince* is concerned with how a Prince acquires and maintains new kingdoms: either through *virtu* or else through *fortuna*. Outstanding *virtu* is scarce. Consequently, *The Prince* looks at ways for *virtu* to withstand fortune, at how man can master his fate. To Machiavelli, the characteristics of the *virtuoso* prince are not what was then known as the cardinal virtues (wisdom, justice, courage, temperance) nor the princely virtues (honesty, magnanimity, liberality) nor morality. The prince must do whatever is dictated by necessity. To get honour, glory and fame, a prince must perform actions that are wicked and/or virtuous, use force and/or fraud (be a lion *and* a fox), depending on the circumstances. *Virtu* denotes flexibility (Skinner and Price, 1988: 40). However, although having good qualities is not a prerequisite, the prince must always *appear* to be good. He thus must learn the art of deceit and be a good simulator and dissimulator. Innovation is part of this arsenal. Using Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, as a model, Machiavelli says that it is necessary:

To deal effectively with his enemies, to gain allies, to conquer (whether by force or by cunning), to inspire both devotion and respectful fear in the people, to be obeyed and respectfully feared by troops, to neutralise or destroy those who can or must be expected to injure you, to **replace** [*innovare*] old institutions with **new** ones, to be both severe and kind, both magnanimous and open-handed, to disband loyal troops and form a **new** army,

⁴ The first paragraphs of this section are based on Skinner and Price (1988).

to maintain alliances with kings and other rulers in such a way that they will either be glad to benefit you or be slow to injure you (*The Prince*, VII).

Machiavelli had no success with *The Prince* and did not get hired by the Medici. He therefore turned definitively to writing. From this period came *The Discourses on Livy* (1517). Here, Machiavelli is not concerned with princely regimes but with republics and the contribution of liberty⁵ to the greatness of cities. He turns to history (Rome) for answers. To acquire liberty, keep it safe and prevent corruption, it is necessary, again, that the chosen leader have the same *virtu* as in *The Prince*. But above all, it is necessary that proper institutions be developed to instill this same quality in the masses: religion because it terrorizes people and induces them to prefer the good of the community; a mixed constitution because it balances (without eliminating) opposite factions (common people and the rich).

Machiavelli lived in a time of great changes. “Some of the new features of Italian political theory in the fourteenth century”, suggests Quentin Skinner, “are best explained as a series of attempts to come to terms with changes in Italian political life” (Skinner, 1988: 408). Two changes or forces were considered detrimental to the security and liberty of city-states (Skinner, 1988: 418). One was due to external factors, namely foreign conquest. In the 1490s, France invaded Italy and the Medici were forced into exile. They regained power in 1512, but were exiled again in 1527 until the 1530s, when they finally succeeded in converting the Republic into a principality. Second, there was internal discord and division arising out of factions and powerful individuals “ruling in [their] selfish interest instead of promoting the common good”. This context led many authors, from the fourteenth century onward, to seek a form of government that could best maintain security (for the Prince and his subjects) and/or liberty (for the people). It gave rise to the theory of republican government and to civic humanism. John Najemy has described civic humanism as an ideology arising out of fear, or “horror of political conflicts” (Najemy, 2000: 97): “It was the transformation of domestic politics from the 1380s [the explosive summer of 1378 and the fear of social revolution] into the opening

⁵ Independence from any authority – internal and external – and self-government.

decades of the fifteenth century ... that generated the ideology of civic humanism” (Najemy, 2000: 81).

Change is central to Machiavelli’s thoughts. “All human affairs are ever in a state of flux and cannot stand still” (The Prince, I, 6; see also II, Preface). How does one maintain power in the face of constant changes, how does one affect *fortuna*? To Machiavelli, neither *fortuna* nor God rules everything. Man can control *fortuna*, provided he uses ability. “Fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but it lets us control the other half”. This is difficult: “our natural inclinations are too strong to permit us to **change**, or having always fared well by acting in a certain way, we do not think it is a good idea to **change** our methods”. In order to be successful in controlling circumstances, men need to be flexible and vary their conduct. Men “are successful if their methods match the circumstances” (The Prince, XXV).

The Prince

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli offers a typology of States (see Figure 1) and asks “how principalities can be governed and maintained” (The Prince, I). States are either republics (discussed in *The Discourses*) or principalities. The latter are either hereditary or new, and the new ones are either completely new or acquired. To Machiavelli, hereditary states are much less difficult to hold than new states because people are “accustomed” to the ruler. The latter does not have to change the established order and people are disposed toward him, provided he acts correctly. “The length and continuity of his family’s rule extinguishes the memories of the causes of [past] **innovations** [*innovazioni*]” (The Prince, II). However, it is different with new principalities: “**new** states are full of dangers” (The Prince, XVII). “Men are very ready to **change** their ruler when they believe that they can better their condition, and this belief leads them to take up arms against him”.⁶ Consequently, “a **new** ruler is always forced to injure his **new** subjects,

⁶ On new regimes as suspicious, see the letter from Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori (Skinner and Price, 1988: 93-95).

both through his troops and countless other injuries that are involved in conquering a state. The outcome is that you make enemies” (The Prince, III).

When a conquered territory is in the same country with the same language, it is easy to hold it, “provided the old way of life is maintained and there is no **difference** in customs” (The Prince, III). The ruler should wipe out the old ruling family and “not **change** laws and impose **new** taxes”. However, if the annexed territory is foreign, difficulties emerge. Machiavelli offers two solutions. First, the ruler should go and live there (in order to detect troubles early on), establish colonies, and become a protector. Second, the ruler should destroy the ancient political institutions. People are accustomed to a certain way of life. Despite the passage of time and the benefits bestowed by the new ruler, lost liberties and ancient institutions will never be forgotten.⁷

The ease with which a ruler can found and maintain a completely new principality depends on many factors. One is ability (*virtu*) (as opposed to luck or *fortuna*), or recognizing opportunities. Innovation is precisely such an ability. It is difficult at first, but then fruitful:

Those who become ruler through their own abilities experience difficulty in attaining power, but once that is achieved, they keep it easily. The difficulties encountered in attaining power arise partly from the **new** institutions and laws they are forced to introduce in order to establish their power and make it secure ... Taking the **initiative** in **introducing** a **new** form of government is very difficult and dangerous ... The reason is that all those who profit from the old order will be opposed to the [introduction of a new order], whereas all those who might benefit from the **new** order are, at best, tepid supporters of him. This lukewarmness arises partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the law on their side, partly from the skeptical temper of men, who do not really believe in **new** things unless they have been seen to work well. The result is that whenever those who are opposed to **change** have the chance to attack the **innovator** [*innovatori*], they do it with much vigour, whereas his supporters act only half-heartedly; so that [the Prince] and his supporters find themselves in great danger (The Prince, VI).

Therefore, in order to persuade people, force is necessary in addition to innovation: “It is easy to persuade [people] about something, but difficult to keep them persuaded. Hence,

⁷ “Anyone who becomes master of a city accustomed to a free way of life, and does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed by it himself”. This is because the inhabitants “will never forget their lost liberties and their ancient institutions, and will immediately attempt to recover them whenever they have an opportunity” (The Prince, V).

when they no longer believe in you and your schemes, you must be able to force them to believe” (The Prince, VI).⁸

Then comes Machiavelli’s own innovation or “originality” (The Prince, XV-XXI): Machiavelli asks “In what ways a ruler should act with regard to his subjects and allies”. What Machiavelli says “differs from the precepts offered by others” who suggest that a ruler should act honourably (Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca; and humanists like Patrizi, Platina, Pontano, De Castiglione). Certainly, “it would be most-praiseworthy for a ruler to have all ... qualities that are held to be good [merciful, trustworthy, humanity, upright, devout]. But ... it is not possible ...”. To Machiavelli, “a ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary ... Doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one’s own ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one’s own position and cause one to flourish” (The Prince, XV).⁹

⁸ There are three other ways to become a ruler and maintain new states. The first is favour or luck. However, it is difficult to maintain such a state because of inexperience and lack of loyal forces. “States that grow quickly will be destroyed by the first chill winds of adversity” (The Prince, VII). The second way to become a ruler is wickedness. In this case, the cruelty should be done well. “The injuries should be done all together so that, because they are tasted less, they will cause less resentment; [then] benefits should be given one by one, so that they will be savoured more” (The Prince, VIII). The last is astuteness or favour (help) of the citizens (The Prince, IX). Thirdly, Machiavelli discusses armies (one’s own or mercenaries), fortifications and artillery (The Prince, X, XII-XIV) and suggests that “a ruler should have no other objective and no other concern, nor occupy himself with anything else except war and its methods and practices”.

⁹ Meanness is better than generosity: “The rulers who have achieved great things in our own times have all been considered mean” (The Prince, XVI). Cruelty is better than mercy: “it is much safer to be feared than loved” (The Prince, XVII). Deceiving is better than keeping promises: being both fox (fraud) and lion (force), a much-quoted metaphor, from Cicero to Bacon to Pareto. “Be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten ... Men are so naïve, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skillful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived”. A ruler “need not actually possess all the qualities but he must certainly seem so If it becomes necessary to refrain, you must be prepared to act in the opposite way ... A ruler should ... be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary ... A ruler who wants to maintain his power is often forced to act immorally” (The Prince, XVIII). Nevertheless, a ruler “should avoid anything that will make him hated or despised” (and plotted against secretly). To this end, he should create an image of himself: displaying “grandeur, courage, seriousness and strength”. Rulers “should leave unpleasant tasks to others, but themselves do those things that increase their popularity” (The Prince, XIX). “The best fortress a ruler can have is not to be hated by the people” (The Prince, XX). How else to gain a good reputation? “Undertaking great campaigns and performing unusual deeds”; “show himself a lover of talent and honour those who excel in any art”; “keep the people entertained with feasts and spectacles” (The Prince, XXI).

If all the above “measures” are put into practice ¹⁰ they will make a ruler’s power “more secure and stable” than a hereditary ruler:

For men are much more interested in present things than in those that are past, and if they find that their affairs are flourishing, they are content and do not seek **changes**. Indeed, they will do everything possible to defend a **new** ruler, as long as he is not deficient in other respects. Thus he will acquire a double glory: both for having founded a **new** principality, and for having adorned and strengthened it with good laws, strong arms, reliable allies and exemplary conduct (The Prince, XXIV).

The Discourses

The Discourses offers a different perspective on politics. The work is a defense of republics, as the best form of government for preserving liberty and security because power is shared between the lower and upper class. “There should never be an institution which allows the few to decide on any matter which in the ordinary course of things is essential to the maintenance of the commonwealth” (The Discourses, I, 50). ¹¹

Again, Machiavelli acknowledges his originality. “I propose to defend a position which all writers attack ... I arrive then at a conclusion contrary to the common opinion which asserts that populaces, when in power, are variable, fickle and ungrateful; and affirm that in them these faults are in no wise different from those to be found in certain princes” (*The Discourses*, I, 58). The populace:

Is more prudent, more stable, and of sounder judgment than the prince ... Government by the populace is better than government by princes ... If princes are superior to populaces in drawing up laws, codes of civic life, statutes and **new** institutions, the populace is so superior in sustaining what has been instituted (The Discourses, I, 58). The populace always makes fewer mistakes than do princes (The Discourses, III, 34).

To Machiavelli, a republic starts with one man, a prudent and virtuous “organizer” (innovator) (The Discourses, I, 9). However, the maintenance of the republic rests on

¹⁰ As well as measures on secretaries and advisers (The Prince, XXII and XXIII).

¹¹ In a republic, a ruler should choose peaceful methods (rather than war) to persuade the citizens (rewards and generosity, not only punishments). Dictatorship is acceptable temporarily as an extraordinary measure: “a way out of abnormal situations” (The Discourses, I, 34).

institutions.¹² And a Prince should not hesitate to innovate here. In a corrupt state, “the **introduction** of **new** laws [*innovazione*] requires the **modification** of institutions” (*The Discourses*, I-18).¹³

While *The Prince* uses innovation with a perspective on the future – introducing new laws, totally new laws, unknown to the state conquered – *The Discourses* adds another dimension and looks at the past, or history. Rome is Machiavelli’s model.¹⁴ Again, Machiavelli stresses his originality. In political affairs, there is “lack of a proper appreciation of history”. One honours and admires antiquity, but rarely imitates it. “I want to get men out of this way of thinking ... I have decided to enter upon a **new** way, as yet **untrodden by anyone else**”. This is a difficult task. Like the “search for **new** seas and unknown lands ... It has always been ... dangerous to discover **new** ways and methods” (*The Discourses*, preface).¹⁵

To Machiavelli, there are two types of cities. One, like Rome, is a free and secure city built by natives and organized with strict discipline and laws. At the opposite end is Florence which, because it was an acquired city built by people from elsewhere, faced difficulties. “It is almost impossible that states of this type should by any eventuality be set on the right road”. It is very difficult to “introduce order without incurring danger, because few men ever welcome **new** laws setting up a **new** order in the state unless

¹² In several places in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli says that men die and princes change; see I, 9, 11, 17, 19): laws, tribunes and courts mediate between the plebs and the senate (I, 5-10). Religion (not the Church, “which keeps Italy divided”) is of great help here (I, 11-15). Religion is an institution or “instrument necessary above all others for the maintenance of a civilized state”, “**reforming**” a city and prosecuting wars: citizens are “more afraid of breaking an oath than of breaking the law ... Nor in fact was there a legislator who, in introducing extraordinary laws to a people, did not have recourse to God for otherwise they would not have been accepted” (I, 11).

¹³ *The Discourses*, I, 9, talks of innovation in the same terms: change [*innovato*] of ancient institutions.

¹⁴ Book I of *The Discourses* is devoted to Rome’s constitutional development; Book II is concerned with the growth of Rome’s empire, and Book III concerns the role of great men in the flourishing of the Empire.

¹⁵ “In all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same passions as there always were. So that, if one examines with diligence the past, it is easy to foresee the future of any commonwealth ... But since such studies are neglected and what is read is not understood, or, if it be understood, is not applied in practice by those who rule, the consequence is that similar troubles occur all the times” (*The Discourses*, I, 39). “Everything that happens in the world at any time has a genuine resemblance to what happened in ancient times ... Men have, and always have had, the same passions, whence it necessarily comes about that the same effects are produced” (*The Discourses*, III, 43). “He who would foresee what has to be, should reflect on what has been, for everything that happens in the world at any time has a genuine resemblance to what happened in ancient times” (*The Discourses*, III, 43).

necessity makes it clear to them that there is need for such laws” and “such a necessity cannot arise without danger: the state may easily be ruined before the **new** order has been brought to completion” (The Discourses, I-2).

Machiavelli looks at history and asks: “what were the institutions of the city of Rome and what events conduced to its perfection” (The Discourses, I, 2)? Machiavelli’s answer is: a combined form of government that leaves room for (or rather regulates) conflicts. As Skinner puts it, “The belief that all civic discord must be outlawed as factious, together with the belief that faction constitutes one of the greatest threats to political liberty, had been one of the leading themes of Florentine political theory ever since the end of the thirteenth century” (Skinner, 1978: 182). To Machiavelli, tumults, discord and conflicts are not damaging to freedom in a Republic, but are rather a consequence of political participation (The Discourses, I-4). Discord and quarrels between the plebs and the nobles produce good effects: “good laws [come] from those very tumults which many so inconsiderately condemn ... Tumults deserve the highest praise since, besides giving the populace a share in the administration, they served as a guardian of Roman liberties” (The Discourses, I, 4).

Rome’s greatness, according to Machiavelli, comes from being a republic, and its expansion comes from innovation in wars: “how wise [Romans] were to **depart** from generally accepted methods” (The Discourses, II, 6). By methods, Machiavelli is not concerned with warfare or technology.¹⁶ Machiavelli believes in strategy rather than artillery: “methods” of war – sieges, assaults (The Discourses, II, 32) – tactics (called

¹⁶ “It is not true, contrary to what is commonly believed, that “war before long will be reduced to the question of artillery” (The Discourses, II, 17). Artillery needs to be backed up with good methods and a good and disciplined army (infantry). “It is infantry that should constitute the basis and sinews of an army and that should be held in high esteem” (The Discourses, II, 18). To Machiavelli, warfare artillery certainly helps a nation be “successful” in wars. However, because attacks with such devices are generally short, “armies [will soon] come to hand-to hand conflicts [and] neither heavy nor light artillery can hurt you”. In short, Machiavelli prefers a good, loyal and trained infantry to artillery. “Artillery is useful to an army provided it is backed by valour”. Similarly, Machiavelli does not favor fortresses (The Discourses, II, 24): “Rome never held either cities or provinces by means of fortresses save when they were already built”. On the one hand, if built for controlling citizens, fortresses are harmful to a prince’s subjects. It makes his subjects furious and rebels – in fact, citizens are already rebels if a prince thinks of building a fortress. To Machiavelli, it is better for a prince to use *virtu* and rely on subjects’ loyalty. On the other hand, if built against enemies, fortresses are “futile” because of artillery, and the more so if a Prince has a good army.

“novel devices”, “inventions”) in military operations, all depend on the right use of circumstances, good discipline, and abilities (The Discourses, III, 10-15). *The Prince* offers similar views. There are only a few words on fortresses – and only one mention of weapons at the very end. To Machiavelli, a ruler should certainly fortify his city (The Prince, X) but “the best fortress a ruler can have is not to be hated by the people” (The Prince, XX).

The study of the past suggests to Machiavelli the concept of renovation: restoring (revival, re-birth) of (religious and government) institutions to their foundations. This is what great men did to contribute to Rome’s greatness.

Changes make for their [institutions] conservation which leads them back to their origins. Hence those are better constituted and have a longer life whose institutions make frequent **renovations** possible [“laws which put a check on human ambition and arrogance”], or which are brought to such a **renovation** by some event which has nothing to do with their constitution ... Without **renovation**, these bodies do not last ... The way to **renovate** them ... is to reduce them to their starting-point ... There is nothing more necessary for a community, whether it be religious establishment, a kingdom or a republic, than to **restore** to it the prestige it had at the outset, and to take care that either good institutions or good men shall bring this about rather than external force should give rise to it (The Discourses, III, 1).

What is Innovation?

John Pocock deserves mention for having brought attention to *The Prince* as a study of innovation (Pocock, 1972; 1975: chapter 6). Nevertheless, forty years later, Pocock’s analysis merits some revisions. Pocock suggests that *The Prince* offers a “typology” of (political) innovators. This is an over-interpretation. Certainly, *The Prince*, as well as most of the writings of Machiavelli, abounds in typologies (in the form of dichotomies), as Ernst Cassirer has emphasized (Cassirer, 1946: 156). However, there is no explicit typology of innovation or innovators in *The Prince*. To Machiavelli, there are innovators and non-innovators (those who rely on luck for their fate). One should be careful not to “typologize” types of Princes ¹⁷ into categories of innovators. Machiavelli discusses how new princes are more or less successful in their actions, depending on their ability to deal

¹⁷ Rulers by ability, by luck (favour), by wickedness or by astuteness, each discussed in a separate chapter (The Prince, VI-IX).

with the people involved and with their adversaries, and the kind of actions they perform. But not all their actions are “innovative” – unless one equates innovation to change, an association contested by many theorists of innovation.

We should be careful too not to equate action – any action of a new prince – to innovation simply because this action comes from a “new” prince. Pocock likens mere action or change, any change, to innovation because of the fact that action and change disturb custom and tradition. Nowhere has Machiavelli defined innovation as, or even suggested that innovation is, “the overthrow of an established system”, “the destruction of a previously existing legitimacy system” (Pocock, 1975: 160; 161). Innovators are those who act differently, for example those who introduce new laws – not those who act or rule new regimes with old means, like force.

Nevertheless, change is certainly a major idea in understanding innovation – more than *fortuna*, contrary to what Pocock suggests. Of the many senses of *fortuna* in Machiavelli, as discussed by Skinner and Price, one refers to change – although the authors do not seem to have seen this and do not use this concept (change) in their analysis: *fortuna* is “a force or agent that intervenes in human affairs” (Skinner and Price, 1988: 104-106). It is precisely change, as discussed widely in Chapter 25 of *The Prince*, that is the fundamental idea for understanding innovation: change as a background condition to innovation. One innovates because there is a changing situation which requires new ways of doing things, or new things to do. One innovates when, in the face of changes, he himself changes things by introducing something new to stabilize a turbulent environment.

What is missing in Pocock’s analysis is a representation of innovation at the time of Machiavelli and a critical understanding of the category.¹⁸ But I do not want to get into a scholastic and sterile debate with Pocock and offer one more interpretation of Machiavelli’s idea. What I want, rather, is to document the meaning or meanings of

¹⁸ I suggest that readers interested in Pocock’s analysis read Pocock, 1972, rather than Pocock, 1975, the former being a more concise and less imprecise analysis of the concept of innovation.

innovation in Machiavelli as a “moment” of particular importance for innovation as a category of (Western) thought.

A Private Act (for the Public Good?)

To Machiavelli, innovation has no connotation of creativity or originality.¹⁹ To be sure, Machiavelli stresses his own originality repeatedly, and consciously so, as we have seen above. Yet, like Francis Bacon later on – the second writer on innovation after Machiavelli (Godin, 2014) – Machiavelli does not use the concept of innovation to this end. To both writers, innovation is political.²⁰

The word innovation and its variants appear seven times in Machiavelli:

	<i>The Prince</i>	<i>The Discourses</i>
Innovare	2	1
Innovatori	1	0
Innovazioni (ne)	1	2

The word is thus of rare occurrence. Yet, a whole semantic field is used, and from this vocabulary the meaning of a concept may be discovered. Many of Machiavelli’s words are changing, modifying, altering, etc. Others are from a family of words with the radical “re”: renovate, reform, restore. Still others involve initiative, undertaking (see Appendix).

¹⁹ The word ingenuity exists already to this end, although rarely used in the sense of creativity before the eighteenth century (Murray, 1989). Machiavelli uses *ingegno* (and *ingegnoso*) to describe a prince as intelligent, skillful, wise and clever, and compares him to a fox (Rebhorn, 1988). He also uses terms like *savi*, *virtuoso*, and *arte*. Yet, these “abilities” are related to action, not to thought.

²⁰ There are many similarities between Machiavelli and Bacon, and these have often been discussed (e.g. Rebhorn, 1988): stressing “foundations”; contrasting his originality to fantasies, speculations and theories; accepting rhetoric (need to “retain names”); shifting hierarchies, “Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action. It has assigned as man’s highest good humility, abnegation, and contempt for mundane things ... This kind of education, then, and these grave misinterpretations account for the fact that we see in the world fewer republics” (II, 2).

²¹ To Machiavelli, innovation is changing the basic political institutions, by introducing new laws, new practices and new methods. Such innovations allow the Prince to discipline the people and to maintain order, and brings honour to the prince. “Nothing brings so much honour to a new ruler as **new** laws and **new** practices that he has **devised** ... It is the introduction of such **new** methods of fighting that enhances the reputation of a **new** ruler, establishing him as a great leader” (The Prince, XXVI).

Innovation as introducing new laws, entirely new laws, is only one meaning of innovation. *The Discourses* carries another connotation, or rather keeps to the connotation of the time (Godin and Lucier, 2014). Innovation is going back to foundations, or renewing. Time corrupts things, as it does the human body. “The downfall of cities ... comes about because institutions in republics do not change with the times ... but change very slowly” (The Discourses, III, 9). Hence the need to renovate, revive, restore to foundations, origins or principles. This is the essence of *The Discourses*. Innovation is imitation of great (successful) men’s deeds (*The Discourses*, III) and imitation of (return to) ancient institutions.

In such a context, how might innovation be introduced? Machiavelli offers two strategies. One should note at the outset that Machiavelli admits people’s ambivalence toward innovation. People are at the same time fond, of and averse to, innovation. On one hand, “Men are fond of **novelty** ... This desire for **novelty** throws open the door to anyone in the neighborhood who puts himself at the head of a **new** movement ... Men run after him ... They crowd round him, boost him and push him forward” (The Discourses, III, 21). “Men always follow in the footsteps of others, imitation being a leading principle of human behavior” (The Prince, VI). ²² On the other hand, there is resistance to innovation.

²³ People are accustomed to a certain way of life:

²¹ *Fara novita* is an example of an expression that is a synonym of innovation. See *The Discourses*, I, 8, on calumnies against Giovanni Guicciardini, commander of the Florentine army, and his friends “who desired to introduce innovation [*fare novita*] in Florence”, namely regulations on calumnies, as Rome did.

²² “To discern ... inconveniences [dictatorships like Cosimo de Medici’s] in their initial stage is the more difficult the more men are by nature inclined to look with favour on **new** enterprises; a favour which is likely to be bestowed, above all else, on enterprises which seem to have in them a certain virtue and which are taken up by young men. For, if in a republic there appears some youth of noble birth and outstanding

Man who is accustomed to act in one particular way, never **changes** ... There are two reasons why we cannot **change** our ways. First, it is impossible to go against what nature inclines us to. Secondly, having got on well by adopting a certain line of conduct, it is impossible to persuade men that they can get on well by acting otherwise. It thus comes about that a man's fortune **changes** for she **changes** his circumstances but he does not change his ways [methods]. The downfall of cities also comes about because institutions in republics do not **change** with the times ... but **change** very slowly (The Discourses, III, 9). Men in general are as much affected by what a thing appears to be as by what it is, indeed they are frequently influenced more by appearances than by reality (The Discourses, I, 25).

Given such ambivalence, there is need for strategy. "It always remains difficult", writes Machiavelli in *The Discourses*, "to maintain liberty in a state or to get one state from servitude to freedom: some people will always remain hostile". Two courses are available: "defective institutions must either be **renovated** [*innovare*] all at once ... or little by little ... Neither course is possible, I maintain" (The Discourses, I, 18). In the first case, extraordinary measures are necessary, like force, which is bad in a republic; in the other case, it is difficult to anticipate the inconveniences.

Machiavelli's suggestion is twofold. First, dissimulation: "One should not declare one's intentions, but should seek to get what one desires anyhow" (The Discourses, I, 44), states Machiavelli on many occasions. Thus, the new Prince can "organize everything **afresh** ... appoint **new** governors, with **new** titles and a **new** authority, the governors themselves being **new** men; ... in short, to leave nothing of that province intact, and nothing in it, neither rank nor institution, nor form of government, nor wealth, except it be held by such as recognize that it comes from you" (The Discourses, I, 26):

He who desires or proposes to **change** the form of government in a state and wishes it to be acceptable and to be able to maintain it to everyone's satisfaction, must needs retain at least the shadow of its ancient customs, so that institutions may not appear to its people to have been changed, though in point of fact the **new** institutions may be **radically different** from the old ones ... Since **novelties** cause men to **change** their minds, you

virtue, the eyes of every citizen at once turn towards him, and without any further consideration they agree to show him honour" (The Discourses, I-33).

²³ Depending on context or type of man: "Young men are less cautious and more aggressive" (The Prince, XXV); "It is easier to persuade rude men to adopt a **new** institution or a **new** standpoint [than] persuade civilized men to do so" (The Discourses, I, 11).

should see to it that **changes** retain as much as possible of what is old, and that, if **changes** are made in the number, the authority and the period of office of the magistrates, they should retain the traditional names (The Discourses, I, 25).

Second, one should innovate early and fast, as *The Prince* suggests repeatedly.²⁴ It is better to act quickly. With time, people forget the innovation and get accustomed to the changes: “The injuries should be done all together so that, because they are tasted less, they will cause less resentment” (The Prince, VIII). In both cases – dissimulation and alacrity – innovation is both a private and a public act. Innovation is public in its effects: it aims at the public good – or the Prince’s power. However, it must be dissimulated. In this sense, innovation remains private. Innovation is innovating under the guise of continuity.

Again, it is interesting to contrast Machiavelli to Bacon. A century later, Bacon suggested a totally different strategy. Innovation is to be conducted openly and gradually. In his essay *Of Innovations* (1625), Bacon suggests that, in order that people get accustomed to innovation one should innovate slowly, as time does. To Bacon, innovations “at first are ill-shapen”. They “are like strangers” because “what is settled by custom ... is fit ... whereas new things piece not so well They trouble by their inconformity”. Yet, “he that will not apply new remedies, must expect new evils ... A forward retention of custom, is as turbulent a thing as an **innovation**”. Bacon’s proposal is “That men in their **innovations** would follow the example of time itself; which indeed **innovateth** greatly [“time is the greatest **innovator**”], but quietly, by degrees scarce to be perceived ... It is good also, not to try experiments in states, except the necessity be urgent, or the utility evident; and well to beware, that it be the **reformation** that draweth on the change, and not the desire of change, that pretendeth the **reformation**. And lastly, that the **novelty**, though it be not rejected, yet be held for a suspect”.

²⁴ This rule of prudence applies to every action of the Prince: “A ruler who does not recognize evils in the very early stages cannot be considered wise” (Prince, XIII). “A ruler will always find it easy to win over those men who were hostile to him in the early stages of his regime” (*The Prince*, XX). “It is difficult to recognize such evils in the initial stage owing to the false impression **new** enterprises make on you at the outset” (The Discourses, I, 33); “All bad examples arise from good beginnings” (The Discourses, I, 46). “If the first signs of trouble are perceived, it is easy to find a solution; but if one lets trouble develop, the medicine will be too late, because the malady becomes incurable ... If one recognizes political problems early, they may be resolved quickly, but if they are not recognized, and left to develop so that everyone recognizes them, there is no longer any remedy ... Anyone who enables another to become powerful brings about his own ruin” (The Prince, III).

Conclusion

Machiavelli's view of innovation is summarized in the following four of his sentences. It is “**wise to depart**”, writes Machiavelli, “from generally accepted methods in order to pave the way to greatness of the highest order” (*The Discourses*, II, 6). Yet, Princes “begin to lose their state the moment they begin to break the laws and to disregard the ancient traditions and customs under which men have long lived” (*The Discourses*, III, 5). “How dangerous it is to take the lead in a **new** enterprise”, claims Machiavelli, “and how difficult it is to handle and direct it, and once directed on its way, to keep it going” (*The Discourses*, III, 35). “Anyone who thinks that **new** benefits make important men forget old injuries is mistaken” (*The Prince*, VII).

To Machiavelli, innovation serves to stabilize, not to revolutionize. The world is changing constantly, hence the need for innovation to stabilize it. There is need to stabilize a ruler's power and secure it through innovation: establishing a new political order for consolidating power (governing and maintaining a state; retaining a rank or position of ruler). In contrast, to modern theorists, the world is too stable and needs innovation to change it, even revolutionize it.

To Machiavelli, innovation has no connotation of (political) revolution – this would come later. In one place only does Machiavelli use innovation in the sense of “rebellion”. While discussing the French regime, he suggests that one always finds discontented nobles (barons) “ready to lead new revolts” [*innovare*] (*The Prince*, IV). Overall, to Machiavelli, innovation has multiple meanings, from a connotation of the past (*renewing* institutions – according to the ancient model) to one of the future (*making new* forms of government – new to the citizens), from the particular (introducing new laws) to the most fundamental (founding a new order), all having to do with “initiative”:

- Introduction of a new order: new form of government, new institutions, new laws (*The Prince*, II, IV; *The Discourses*, I, 18)

- Renewing (renovating, replacing, changing) the ancient institutions (The Prince, VII; The Discourses, I, 9; I, 18)
- Rebellion (The Prince, IV)

The connotation of innovation as revolution emerged in the seventeenth century. As we have seen, to Machiavelli a Prince should innovate to secure power. In contrast, after the English Reformation, innovation was explicitly forbidden by law. Even the King did (should) not innovate. In mid-seventeenth-century England, Charles I had to defend himself against the Parliament that accused him of innovating in matters of religion and government. A few decades later, after the English revolution, innovation meant violence and revolution, according to clergymen, monarchists and many others. As a consequence of such a representation, political innovation remained the benchmark criterion for judging (pejoratively) all types of innovation for centuries.

It remains to be documented whether and to what extent the reception of Machiavelli's work is responsible for this representation. The literature opposing Machiavelli emerged soon after his death, including religious literature (Skinner, 1978a: 248-54; Skinner, 1978b: 143, 171-73, 307-9). Machiavelli as heretic is a recurrent accusation. Has the concept of innovation suffered from the bad reception of *The Prince*? Might the reading of Machiavelli's work have had anything to do with this change in the meaning of innovation? Is it Machiavelli's focus on political innovation that gave rise to a pejorative representation of innovation for centuries to come, in fact until the ninetieth century? These points require further study.

Machiavelli is a rarity in the political literature of the time, talking of innovation in positive terms – this representation most probably comes from his reading of Livy's *Histories* to whom innovation (*res nova*) is positive (Godin and Lucier, 2014) Nobody listened, or rather almost everyone refused to adhere to his views. Interestingly enough, Machiavelli also gets scant hearing among the modern theorists of innovation (twentieth century). To these latter, political innovation is seldom an object of study. The emblematic case of innovation is technological innovation – which was not innovation to

Machiavelli. Equally, innovation is understood as revolutionary or major innovation today. Again, a different view from that of Machiavelli, to whom innovations do not revolutionize but stabilize.

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**Annex
Machiavelli's Lexicon**

The Prince

Newness	novitas	17
Innovation	innovazioni	2
Innovator	introduttore di nuovi ordini	6
	innovatori (n.)	6
Initiative	farsi capo e difensore	3
	cosa (n.)	6 (2)
	mossa (n.)	25 (2)
Undertake <i>campaigns</i>	imprese (n.)	10
Undertaking	guadagnati (v.)	8
	espugnazione difficile (v.a.)	10
	fanno (v.)	21
	intraprendere (v.)	21
Enterprise	imprese	11
Introduce	introdurre	6
Change	mutazione (n.)	2, 22
	mutare (v.)	3, 4, 23, 24, 25 (2)
	alterare (v.)	3
innovare (v.)		4
cose nuove (n.a.)		6
non cercano altro (v.e.)		24
variazione (n.)		25 (4), 26
opporsi (v.)		25
deviare (v.)		25
venuti tempi <i>nuovi</i> (v. e.)		25
rivoluzioni (n.)		26
Restore	ritornargli (v.)	7
	ridusse (v.)	7
	per torre (v.e.)	7
	aveva racconcia (v.e.)	17
	richiamassimo (v.)	24
Replace	innovare gli ordini antichi	7
Reestablish	riacquista	2
Revive	resurgere	11
Recover	ricorrono	5
	recuperare	25
Differ (<i>to say differs</i>)	disputare	15
Deviate	deviato	25
Foundation	edifizio	6
	fondamenti	7 (3), 9, 12 (2), 21
Founded	fondato	6
	dato principio	24
Founder	fondatore	6
Build	edificare	6
Create (<i>a disturbance</i>)	romoreggiare	3

Originality	varietà della material non abbia invenzione	Dedicatory letter 22
Imitate	imiti (v.)	6, 7, 8, 14 (5), 19
	imitazione (n.)	14
	conformassi	14
	usare bene	18 (3), 19
	seguire	19
	pigliare	19, 26
	dare oggi per precetto	20

n. = noun

v. = verb

a. = adjective

v.e. = verbal expression

The Discourses

Novel	nuove	I, 56, III, 14	
Novelty	le cose nuove	I, 25, III, 21	
	novità	III, 14	
	desiderio di novità	III, 21	
	novità	I, 36	
Novice	novità	I, 36	
Innovation	fare novità	I, 8	
	Innovazione	I, 18	
Initiative (initiate)	per privato consiglio	I, 1	
	mosse	I, 17	
	il grado del comando	II, 4	
	muovere nuove	II, 33	
Undertaking	mettere in	I, 53	
	cosa	I, 60	
	impresa	III, 6, III, 8, III, 9	
	esito	III, 8	
Enterprise	impresa	I, preface, III, 8	
	principi delle cose	I, 33	
Introduce	ordineranno, ordinata	I, 2, III, 46	
	novità	I, 7	
	fare novità	I, 8	
	lascita	I 10	
	introdotta, introdurre	I, 11 (4), I, 55, II, 19, III, 24, III, 36	
	ordinatore	I, 11	
	fare	I, 2, I, 16, I, 18, I, 49	
	ridurre	I, 18	
	innovazione	I, 18	
	cominciare	I, 33	
	creare	I, 49	
	verso il principio	III, 1	
	rompere	III, 3	
	condotta	III, 8	
	industria	III, 11, III, 15	
	Industry	ordinatore, ordinare	I, 9 (7),
		fare	I, 26
servare l'ordine		II, 18	
Instituting	pigliarlo	III, 1	
Set up	ordinare	I, 34	
Create (tion)	creare	I, 3, I, 13, I, 18 (2), I, 37, III, 1	
	tumultare	I, 5	
	creazione	I, 17, I, 49(2)	
	fare	I, 40, II, 23	
	divertire	III, 18	
Foundation	fondamento	I, 6	
Founding	ordinatori	I, 10	
	fondato	I, 10	
Founder	ordinatori	II, 5	
Change	alterazione, alterare	I, 5, 25, II, 5; III, 1(3)	
	innovare	I, 9	
	variare, variazione	I, 18 (5), 25, 58 II, Preface (3)	

		II, 5(2), 24, 30 (2); III, 1, 6(4), 9(9), 22, 27, 31 (5), 49
	reformare	I, 25 (2)
	mutare, mutazioni	I, 25, 41, 49 (2), II, 8, 23, 27; III, 7(2), 12, 25
	saltare	I, 41
	diventare	I, 41
	togliere	I, 41
	fare	III, 7
Change welcoming	passare da un'azione all'altra	III, 34
	accettare	I, 51
	prima non necessario	II, 6
Reform (ing)	ordinare	I, 10 (4)
	riordinare	I, 13, II, 18
	reformare	I, 17, 49
	rifare	II, 12 (4), 16 (3)
	serbare l'ordine	II, 18
Restore (ation)	restituzione	I, 13, 53
	ripigliare	I, 16
	riavere	I, 16
	ridurre	I, 17, 57, III, 22, 28
	nascere	I, 17
	rimettere	I, 32, II, 27
	rendere	I, 38, III, 1, 43
	ristituire	I, 59, III, 27
	fare	II, 5
	tenere appresso	II, 18
	rinnovare	II, 22, III, 22
	ritirare	III, 1 (2), 2. 12
	comporre	III, 26
	riunire	III, 26, 27
	unire	III, 27
Renovate	rinnovare	I, 18 (2), 25; III, 1 (6)
	rinnovazioni	III, 1(2)
Renew	rinnovare	I, 9; II, 16, 18; III, 1
Reorganize	riordinare	I, 2, 13
	tale ordine	I, 9
Renaissance	rinascere	I, 17 (2)
Revolution	tentare cose nuove	I, 45
	perdere lo stato	II, 15
	mutazioni	III, 7 (4)
Reconstitute	riordinare	I, 18
Revive	rinfrescare	I, 11
	ridurre	III, 1 (2)
	ritirare indietro	III, 22
Re-appoint	rifare	I, 40 (3)
Re-elect	rifare	I, 41
Regain	captare	I, 40
Remedy	rimedio, rimediare	I, 34 (2), 37 (3), 39, 50, 58; II, 16, 17 (2), 19, 32; III, 6 (2), 11 (2), 16, 17, 24, 26, 27, 49
Recover	ricuperare	I, 15, 46; II, 24 (5), 28
	ridurre	I, 17
	ritornare	I, 43

	ricomperare	II, 19
	riavere	II, 24 (2)
	riprendere	II, 24
	ripresa	III, 1,11 (2)
	ristituire	III, 15
	ricuperazione	III, 44
Retake	riacquistare	II, 24
	riprendere	II, 24 (2)
Resuscitate	risuscitare	II, 18
Reinstate	rimettere	I, 59
Reconciled	accordare	I, 47
Reunited	unire insieme	I, 47
Rebirth	rinascere	III, 1 (2)
Reconstitute	riordinare	I, 45
	ripigliare	III, 1 (2)
Return	ritornare	I, 46, III, 3
	ritirare	III, 1 (2)
Removing	urtare	I, 46
	spegnere	I, 46
Transform	riformare	I, 9
	diventare	I, 42
	ridurre	II, 4
Modification	rimutare	I, 18
	innovare	I, 18
Alter	mutare	III, 9, 49
Different	al tutto alieni	I, 25
Depart	deviare	II, 6
Never (before)	non ce n'era	II, 4
	non é stato alcuno	II, 4
Unexplored	dubbio	II, 33
Untrodden	trita	I, preface
Fresh (life)	risuscitare	I, 9
Fresh	fare	I, 45
	nuovo	I, 45 (2), 46 (2), 49, 53; II, 33; III, 4,8, 11, 18, 49
	dare vita	II, 18
	rinnovare	II, 22; III, 22
	rinfrescare	III, 8
Afresh	di nuovo	I, 9, 18, 26
Imitate	imitare, imitazione, imitabile	I, preface, II, preface, 4 (3), 23; III, 1, 5, 22, 33, 37, 45
	seguire	I, 10
	medesimo	I, 22
Emulate	pigliare esempio	III, I, 10; III, 47