

Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Machiavelli: Nationalism, Dynamic Perspectives, and the Fabric of Society

ALABBAS ALSUDANI

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN BAGHDAD

This essay examines how Niccolò Machiavelli's political philosophy and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology overlap, emphasizing how they both offer valuable perspectives on nationalism, government, and social cohesiveness. Merleau-Ponty frames nationalism as a relational and anticipatory construct shaped by dynamic encounters, emphasizing perception, embodiment, and the lived experience. Renowned for his pragmatism, Machiavelli sees nationalism as a tool for strategy, supporting measures like assimilation and eradication to maintain peace and consolidate power. By contrasting these viewpoints, the essay looks at how their theories handle the difficulties of contemporary leadership in a divided and globalized society. Shared elements like flexibility, foresight, and the function of symbols in promoting unity are highlighted in the analysis. Additionally, it assesses their applicability to current concerns such as technological disruption, international cooperation, and populism. Both scholars emphasize how leaders must carefully balance inclusion and coercion in order to preserve social harmony. In addition to broadening our knowledge of political theory, this synthesis provides practical advice for negotiating the challenges of governance in a changing global environment.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Machiavelli, Nationalism, Governance, Phenomenology, Leadership Dynamics

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60690/071zvn12>

Introduction

The convergence of philosophy and political theory provides significant insights on governance dynamics, societal cohesion, and the exercise of power. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an innovative phenomenologist, emphasized perception as a dynamic and connected phenomenon [1]. His theories propose that human comprehension and societal frameworks are influenced by experiential realities and continual modification. Niccolò Machiavelli, conversely, is grounded in realism, promoting pragmatic approaches to leadership, conquest, and governance as examined in *The Prince* [2]. Their theories elucidate essential subjects such as nationalism, evolving perspectives, and the essence of society.

This essay connects Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights with Machiavelli's political techniques, examining their consequences for leadership and social stability. The study analyzes their perspectives on nationalism, adaptation, and societal cohesion, demonstrating their significance in confronting contemporary issues, including escalating populism and global wars. This synthesis enhances our comprehension of political theory and underscores its lasting relevance in a swiftly evolving world.

Nationalism and Society through Ponty and Machiavelli's Lens

Nationalism, a potent force for societal unification or division, is a persistent issue in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli's view on nationalism is grounded in pragmatic governance, highlighting control and power dynamics, whereas Merleau-Ponty's interpretation provides a phenomenological approach that emphasizes lived experiences, perception, and embodiment [1]. Collectively, their concepts offer an extensive framework for comprehending the function of nationalism within society.

Machiavelli perceived nationalism as a tactical instrument for consolidating heterogeneous groups under a singular power [2]. He contended that rulers must either assimilate or eradicate conquered populations to preserve stability and authority. Assimilation, as articulated by Machiavelli, entails adopting the language, habits, and religion of the subjugated populace to foster a sense of collective identity [3]. The Ottoman Empire's choice to incorporate aspects of Greek culture into its administration illustrates the efficacy of assimilation in strengthening authority [2]. Machiavelli suggested elimination as a solution when assimilation is impracticable [4]. Colonization, specifically, was a strategy he advocated to supplant indigenous populations with obedient settlers

[2]. This method mitigated opposition by undermining dissenters and incentivizing supporters [3]. Colonization frequently engendered enduring animosity among displaced communities, shown by the American military occupation of Okinawa, where residents faced isolation and oppression [2].

Conversely, Merleau-Ponty examined nationalism via the perspectives of perception and embodiment [1]. He contended that nationalism arises from personal experiences and the manner in which individuals view themselves within a collective context [5]. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is dynamic and relational, continually influenced by interactions with others and the environment [5]. This viewpoint aligns with Machiavelli's focus on adaptation in leadership, underscoring the fluid and dynamic essence of nationalism as a social construct [6].

Both theorists acknowledged the significance of cultural symbols in promoting nationalism. Machiavelli asserted that rulers ought to embrace the customs and symbols of their subjects to convey legitimacy and cohesion [2]. Merleau-Ponty elaborated on this concept by highlighting the corporeal aspect of cultural identification, positing that communal symbols and rituals strengthen collective affiliation and social unity [7]. These communal behaviors function as perceptual anchors that synchronize individual identities with the broader national framework [5].

The anticipating aspect of perception, a key idea in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, is also reflected in Machiavelli's political tactics [1]. Merleau-Ponty contended that individuals and cultures perpetually envision future possibilities grounded in current perceptions [5]. This corresponds with Machiavelli's counsel for leaders to take preventive measures to neutralize possible dangers before they intensify [4]. Both methodologies emphasize the significance of foresight and adaptability in managing the intricacies of nationalism.

Both thinkers indirectly addressed the policy of supporting weaker factions within a society. Machiavelli counseled rulers to safeguard vulnerable groups to establish alliances and counteract dominant factions, thus promoting stability [8]. Merleau-Ponty's focus on the intersubjective aspect of perception underscores the relational dynamics crucial for promoting inclusion and stability within a nation [6]. By acknowledging the interdependence of individuals and their communities, both theorists emphasize the significance of relational governance in tackling the issues posed by nationalism [1].

Nationalism depends on narratives that link individuals to a common past and future. Machiavelli underscored the significance of historical continuity in legitimating political authority [4]. Rulers who harmonized with historical narratives were more effectively able to cultivate loyalty and trust among their followers [3]. Merleau-Ponty emphasized that these narratives are embodied and experienced collectively, influencing individuals' perceptions of their roles within a nation [9].

Both philosophers warn of the dangers of unmanaged nationalism. Machiavelli cautioned that severe oppression and exclusion may incite rebellion and society disintegration [4]. Merleau-Ponty's relational perspective on perception indicates that disregarding the emotional and perceptual aspects of nationalism may alienate individuals and weaken societal cohesion [10]. This collective admonition highlights the precarious equilibrium leaders must sustain while promoting national cohesion [11].

The relationship between nationalism and international collaboration is a significant contemporary problem. Globalization has intensified the interconnectedness among nations, compelling leaders to balance the advancement of national identity with the requirements of an interconnected globe [12]. Merleau-Ponty and Machiavelli provide useful insights for addressing this contradiction, highlighting the importance of adaptation, foresight, and relational comprehension in government.

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Its Overlap with Machiavelli

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers a profound and nuanced perspective on perception, embodiment, and human experience [13]. His philosophy highlights the dynamic and relational nature of perception, suggesting that human understanding is shaped by lived interactions with the world and others [13]. Niccolò Machiavelli emphasizes adaptability, foresight, and the manipulation of societal structures. Despite their differing disciplines and approaches, their ideas share critical overlaps, particularly regarding perception, leadership, and the dynamics of societal control.

Merleau-Ponty argued that perception is not a passive process but an active, relational interaction between the individual and their environment [5]. This view aligns with Machiavelli's emphasis on adaptability in leadership [13]. Machiavelli believed that rulers must remain attuned to the shifting dynamics of society, adjusting their strategies to meet the demands of the moment [3]. For both thinkers, the ability to perceive and respond to change is central to maintaining stability and control.

One of Merleau-Ponty's key contributions to philosophy is the concept of "flesh," which encapsulates the interconnectedness of individuals and their environments [5]. This notion parallels Machiavelli's principle that rulers must immerse themselves within the cultural fabric of their societies to foster unity and legitimacy [2]. For example, Machiavelli recommended that rulers adopt the traditions, symbols, and customs of their subjects to project authority and strengthen bonds with their people [3]. By embodying these cultural markers, rulers create a sense of shared identity, reinforcing societal cohesion [7].

Merleau-Ponty also emphasized the anticipatory nature of perception, where individuals and societies project future possibilities based on present experiences [5]. This forward-looking perspective resonates with Machiavelli's advice for rulers to act preemptively, eliminating potential threats before they become significant dangers [3]. Anticipation and foresight, therefore, emerge as crucial traits for effective leadership in both frameworks. Leaders who can perceive emerging trends and act decisively are better equipped to navigate the complexities of governance and maintain societal order [6].

Symbolism plays a significant role in leadership for both Merleau-Ponty and Machiavelli. Machiavelli recognized the importance of symbols in legitimizing authority, advising rulers to embody cultural symbols to align themselves with their people's values [3]. Merleau-Ponty, in turn, explored how shared symbols and rituals shape collective identity. These symbols serve as perceptual anchors, fostering a sense of belonging and unity within a community [9]. Together, their insights highlight the power of symbolism in creating and sustaining societal cohesion.

Another area of overlap between the two thinkers is their

focus on relational dynamics in governance. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy emphasizes the intersubjective nature of perception, where meaning emerges through interactions between individuals and their communities [5]. This relational approach aligns with Machiavelli's principle of supporting weaker factions within society [14]. Machiavelli advised rulers to protect vulnerable groups as a means of counterbalancing dominant factions, thereby fostering alliances and maintaining stability [8]. By recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals and their communities, both thinkers underscore the importance of fostering relationships that promote mutual benefit and stability [15].

Leadership, according to both Merleau-Ponty and Machiavelli, requires a deep understanding of the emotional and perceptual dimensions of governance. Machiavelli emphasized the need for rulers to project confidence, decisiveness, and strength to maintain their authority [3]. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty highlighted the role of perception in shaping public trust and collective action. Leaders who fail to consider these perceptual dimensions risk alienating their subjects and undermining their legitimacy [10].

The tension between coercion and persuasion is another theme explored by both thinkers. Machiavelli acknowledged the necessity of coercion in certain situations but warned against its overuse, cautioning that excessive oppression breeds resentment and rebellion [3]. Merleau-Ponty's relational philosophy reinforces this caution, suggesting that neglecting the emotional and perceptual aspects of governance can destabilize societal harmony [6]. Effective leadership, therefore, requires a balance between pragmatic action and relational sensitivity.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology also provides a unique lens through which to interpret Machiavelli's strategies for fostering unity and stability. By framing nationalism and governance as embodied and perceptual phenomena, Merleau-Ponty expands our understanding of the mechanisms that sustain societal cohesion [16]. His emphasis on the lived experience of individuals within a collective framework complements Machiavelli's practical insights into leadership, highlighting the interplay between perception, embodiment, and power [12].

In a modern context, the synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's and Machiavelli's ideas offers valuable guidance for addressing contemporary challenges in governance and societal stability. Globalization, rising nationalism, and technological advancements have transformed the dynamics of leadership, requiring leaders to navigate increasingly complex and interconnected systems [17]. By integrating Merleau-Ponty's focus on relational perception with Machiavelli's pragmatic strategies, leaders can better understand and respond to the evolving needs of their societies [7].

Both thinkers also underscore the importance of adaptability in leadership. For Machiavelli, adaptability is a practical necessity for maintaining power in the face of changing circumstances [3]. For Merleau-Ponty, adaptability reflects the fluid nature of perception, where individuals and societies continuously reshape their understanding of the world based on new experiences [5]. Together, their perspectives emphasize the need for leaders to remain flexible and responsive to change, balancing tradition with innovation.

Interpreting Dynamic Perspectives in Modern Contexts

The synthesis of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and

Niccolò Machiavelli's political theories provides a valuable framework for analyzing contemporary issues in governance, nationalism, and societal dynamics [6]. Their combined insights reveal how perception, power, and adaptability shape modern leadership, particularly in the context of globalization, populism, and international conflicts.

Nationalism, as a socio-political force, serves as a focal point for understanding the application of their ideas in modern contexts [18]. Merleau-Ponty argued that nationalism is rooted in lived experiences and the shared perceptions of individuals within a collective [5]. This view complements Machiavelli's emphasis on the strategic cultivation of national identity [1]. According to Machiavelli, rulers should align themselves with the cultural and symbolic values of their people to foster unity and loyalty [3]. Leaders who fail to resonate with these shared perceptions risk alienating their constituents and undermining their authority [9].

Populist leaders exemplify these dynamics by adopting rhetoric and symbols that reflect the identities of their constituents [19]. This approach mirrors Machiavelli's principle of assimilation, where rulers must immerse themselves in the cultural frameworks of their societies to consolidate power [3]. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of relational perception further explains how these leaders navigate the complexities of collective identity [15]. By aligning their narratives with the lived experiences of their followers, populist leaders create a sense of belonging and shared purpose [6].

Globalization presents additional challenges to leadership, as it necessitates balancing national identity with the demands of an interconnected world [20]. Machiavelli's emphasis on adaptability provides guidance for navigating these complexities. He advised rulers to adjust their strategies to respond to shifting circumstances, a principle that resonates with Merleau-Ponty's dynamic view of perception [5]. Leaders who fail to adapt to the realities of globalization risk losing relevance and influence in an increasingly competitive international arena [7].

The role of perception in shaping societal cohesion also finds relevance in contemporary geopolitics. Merleau-Ponty's insights into the anticipatory nature of perception suggest that leaders must remain attuned to emerging trends and future possibilities [5]. This perspective aligns with Machiavelli's advocacy for preemptive action to neutralize potential threats before they escalate [3]. For example, during the Cold War, the United States preemptively weakened the Soviet Union through economic and military strategies, reflecting both thinkers' emphasis on foresight and adaptability [21].

Symbolism remains a powerful tool in modern leadership, as it reinforces national identity and fosters societal cohesion [22]. Machiavelli recognized the importance of symbols in legitimizing authority, advising rulers to embody cultural markers that resonate with their people's values [3]. Merleau-Ponty expanded on this idea by exploring how shared symbols and rituals shape collective identity. These symbols, whether manifested in national flags, anthems, or cultural traditions, serve as perceptual anchors that align individuals with the larger collective [9].

Both thinkers also highlight the risks associated with the misuse of power and the neglect of relational dynamics. Machiavelli warned against the overuse of coercion, cautioning that excessive oppression breeds resentment and rebellion [3]. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty emphasized the importance of relational governance, suggesting that neglecting the emotional and perceptual dimensions

of leadership can destabilize societal harmony [10]. These warnings underscore the delicate balance leaders must maintain to foster stability without alienating their constituents.

In an era marked by technological advancements, the interplay between nationalism and international cooperation takes on new dimensions [23]. Social media and digital platforms have amplified the ways in which perceptions are shaped and shared, creating opportunities and challenges for leaders [24]. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on relational perception offers insights into how leaders can navigate this digital landscape. By engaging with diverse perspectives and fostering inclusive narratives, leaders can mitigate polarization and promote cohesion [12].

Machiavelli's strategies for maintaining power also find resonance in the modern context of climate change and global crises [2]. Addressing these challenges requires leaders to act decisively and anticipate future risks, a principle central to both Machiavelli's and Merleau-Ponty's frameworks [5]. Leaders who fail to address these issues risk eroding public trust and undermining their legitimacy on the global stage [7].

Ultimately, the synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's and Machiavelli's ideas offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of modern governance. By integrating Merleau-Ponty's focus on perception and embodiment with Machiavelli's pragmatic strategies, leaders can better navigate the challenges of nationalism, globalization, and societal cohesion. Their combined insights underscore the importance of adaptability, foresight, and relational governance in addressing the evolving needs of contemporary societies.

In conclusion, the synthesis of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Niccolò Machiavelli's political theory offers profound insights into leadership, nationalism, and societal dynamics. Through the lens of Machiavelli, nationalism is a tool for power consolidation, relying on strategies of assimilation, elimination, and preemptive action. Merleau-Ponty enriches this perspective with his emphasis on perception, embodiment, and relational dynamics, highlighting the lived experiences and symbols that bind societies together.

Both thinkers converge on the importance of adaptability, foresight, and relational governance. In modern contexts, their ideas resonate in addressing the challenges of globalization, rising populism, and technological advancements. Leaders who integrate Machiavelli's pragmatism with Merleau-Ponty's focus on perception are better equipped to navigate complex political landscapes.

By bridging philosophy and political practice, Merleau-Ponty and Machiavelli offer enduring frameworks for understanding the evolving needs of governance and society, emphasizing balance, inclusion, and strategic foresight.

References

- [1] N. Perreault, Interviewee, *Nationalism*. [Interview]. November 2024.
- [2] N. Perreault, Interviewee, *The Prince*. [Interview]. October 2024.
- [3] P. e. Bondanella, *Niccolò Machiavelli: The Prince*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [4] J. V. Femia, "The Concept of Nationalism in Machiavelli's *The Prince*," *Studies in the Renaissance*, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 65–82, 1968.
- [5] E. N. a. U. N. e. Zalta, "Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy," Stanford, CA, Metaphysics Research Lab, Philosophy Department, Stanford University.
- [6] J. Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty and 'Dirty Hands': Political Phronesis and Virtù Between Marxism and Machiavelli," *Critical Horizons*, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 231–248, 2023.
- [7] L. Hass, "Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature," *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 31–44, 2004.
- [8] J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, Longmans, 1963.
- [9] D. Coole, "Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism," *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 8, pp. 313–333, 2009.
- [10] M. Dillon, "Merleau-Ponty and the Political," *Man and World*, vol. 10, pp. 165–181, 1977.
- [11] T. Carman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy as Political Engagement," *Cambridge University Press*, 2010.
- [12] L. Lawlor, "Chiasmi International: Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty," *Chiasmi International*, pp. 5–10, 1999.
- [13] S. Gallagher, "Philosophical Conceptions of the Self: Implications for Cognitive Science," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 14–21, 2000.
- [14] J. Pocock, "Machiavelli and the Idea of the Renaissance," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 159–174.
- [15] S. Matherne, "Merleau-Ponty on the Body," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 69–78, 2016.
- [16] A. Inkpin, "Merleau-Ponty's 'Sensible Ideas' and Embodied-Embedded Practice," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 501–524, 2023.
- [17] D. H. a. A. McGrew, "Globalization, Nationalism, and Governance: The Challenges for Contemporary Leadership," *Global Policy*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 255–267, 2010.
- [18] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 2006.
- [19] B. Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism," *Government and Opposition*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 189–217, 2015.
- [20] M. Saada, "Balancing National Identity and Cultural Heritage with the Influences of Globalization," *Journal of International Relations and Diplomacy*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 123–135, 2021.
- [21] B. Flynn, "The Development of the Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty: Humanism and the Rejection of Terror," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 40, pp. 125–138, 2007.
- [22] A. D. Smith, "National Identity and the Idea of European Unity," *International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 1, pp. 55–76, 1992.
- [23] C. M. a. I. Schieferdecker, "Technological Sovereignty as Ability, Not Autarky," *International Studies Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2023.
- [24] C. C. Miller, "How Social Media Silences Debate," *The New York Times*, 8 Aug 2014.