

## **Abulad's Post-Machiavelli and his Apology for Duterte**

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### **Abstract**

Years before his death, Romualdo Abulad made himself controversial, a controversy that was not so much on his positive contribution to philosophy as his apology for Duterte and his regime. In this paper, Abulad's apology for Duterte will be discussed. The discussion will be framed from within Abulad's concept of the post-Machiavelli. This concept was earlier developed by Abulad in a chapter of a book co-authored by Alfredo Co.<sup>1</sup> I argue that his concept of the post-Machiavelli is based on a privileging of *The Prince* and a reading that is subtly anti-Machiavellian. I further argue that the ethics of the post-Machiavelli, one that is guided by the philosophical compass of postmodernism, provided the ideological support for Duterte and his regime as it is both obscurantist and empty. The ethics of the post-Machiavelli obscures the politics of the regime by way of the ethics of the good. In doing so it legitimizes the political via the ethical. Here, the coupling or intersection of the political and the ethical provided an ideological support of the former by way of the abstract resources of the latter. However, I assert that ethics and politics ought to be decoupled. The ethics of the post-Machiavelli is likewise empty. Such an emptiness allows, at least in the level of theory, a liberal openness and accommodation to virtually any version of (a future) order, including that of fascism.

**Keywords:** *Machiavellian, postmodernism, politics, political, post-Machiavelli, ethics,*

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<sup>1</sup> Romualdo Abulad, "Post-Machiavelli," in *Two Filipino Thomasian Philosophers on Postmodernism* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2004), 94-102.

Romualdo Abulad had written extensively on the subject of postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> Not only is his depth and grasp of the subject matter remarkable but also his genius in tracing its origins and development from the most unexpected thinkers astonishing.<sup>3</sup> For example, Abulad argued how Immanuel Kant and Thomas Aquinas possess the quality of postmodern thought. Abulad saw in the works of these thinkers the self-critical and self-negating character of postmodernism. This remarkable scholarship, undoubtedly a sign of expertise, made Abulad an authority not only of postmodernism but also of philosophy itself. As his knowledge went beyond the confines of the postmodern tradition, he remarkably grasped and elaborated how postmodern breaks appeared in the philosophical thought of classical philosophers.

In this paper, I will elaborate Abulad's notion of the post-Machiavelli which is governed by the philosophical compass of postmodernity.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is still part of what he saw as postmodernism overcoming the limits of modernism. However, I will argue two points. First, Abulad's post-Machiavelli is based on a simplistic interpretation of Machiavelli, one that is characterized by the privileging of *The Prince* and a reading that is subtly anti-Machiavellian. Second, the ethics derived from the post-Machiavelli laid the ideological basis for his apology of the Duterte regime and the atrocities committed under its rule. While Abulad's dismissive position towards ideology portrayed postmodernism to be a thoroughly non-ideological paradigm, I will explain how

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<sup>2</sup> See Romualdo Abulad, "Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis?," *Kritike*, 13(2), (2019): 37-59; Romualdo Abulad, "Kant and Postmodernism," *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 2, (1998): 32-51; Romualdo Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do they Mix?," *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 8 (2009): 1-18; and Romualdo Abulad, "St. Thomas Aquinas and Postmodernism," *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 4, (2005): 8-18.

<sup>3</sup> Romualdo Abulad, "Kant and Postmodernism," *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 2, 32-51 and Abulad, "St. Thomas Aquinas and Postmodernism," *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 4, 8-18.

<sup>4</sup> Romualdo Abulad, "Post-Machiavelli," 94-102.

the ethics of postmodernism in the post-Machiavelli is laden with the purest ideology.

The paper will be divided into four parts. The first is a short introduction. The second section will briefly discuss Abulad's reading of Machiavelli and a proper Machiavellian response toward it. The third section will elaborate Abulad's notion of the post-Machiavelli and how through its ethics an ideological support for the Duterte regime was developed. The last section will advance a polemic against post-Machiavelli and Duterte by way of a Machiavellian politics.

### **Abulad's Naïve and Simplistic Machiavelli**

Abulad described Machiavelli as the "political par excellence."<sup>5</sup> In asking whether philosophy and politics would ever mix,<sup>6</sup> Abulad made a detour to Machiavelli and contrasted the notions of politics as politico-ethical and politics as power,<sup>7</sup> emphasizing how *The Prince* embodied the ideals of the former. Like Thrasymachus and Hobbes, Machiavelli viewed human existence as evil<sup>8</sup> and favored what Abulad described as "the politics of the strong man."<sup>9</sup> For Abulad, this is power politics, i.e., the constancy on the part of the sovereign ruler to secure the republic from both external and internal destabilizers. To achieve this, the sovereign must unhesitatingly use two modes of fighting, "one in accordance with the laws, the other with force,"<sup>10</sup> as the exigencies of the

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<sup>5</sup> Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do they Mix?," 8 and 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1-18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 98 and 101.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 58: For one can generally say this about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, and greedy for grain.

<sup>9</sup> Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?," 9.

<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60.

situation demand. Referring to the constitutive role of war and violence to politics, Abulad emphasized how the sovereign “has to make use of both the carrot and the stick at appropriate times.”<sup>11</sup> Abulad echoed how, for Levinas, war constitutes politics,<sup>12</sup> a rather militaristic view that identifies the force of the gun as the definitive mark of politics. Abulad insisted how power politics – i.e., the political – is incompatible with philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

For Abulad, the seeming contradiction of Machiavelli in the *Discourses* and *The Prince* – the former advocating for a republican or popular rule, the latter a princely or dictatorial order – is reconciled in the latter, when he explained that there are two modes of fighting, a principle of political expediency that Abulad often quoted in many of his works.<sup>14</sup> According to Machiavelli, the prince must fight, on the one hand, according to laws, and on the other, according to force; the former proper to humans, the latter to beasts.<sup>15</sup> And the prince in this regard must be guided by a principle that is half-human and half-beast, equipped with the right intuition when to shift from a humanly disposition to a beastly one.<sup>16</sup> For Abulad, “Machiavelli is correct that from the position of the Prince, there is a natural tendency to employ all the means within its power to keep himself to his post.”<sup>17</sup>

Abulad approved of that type of politics which in the practical sense is organizational management. The latter is not so much the constancy of maintaining power politics as the exercise of methods of organizing society

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<sup>11</sup> Abulad, “Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?,” 3.

<sup>12</sup> Abulad, “Post-Machiavelli,” 97.

<sup>13</sup> For Abulad, “power is all that counts for a politician.” Abulad, “Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?,” 7.

<sup>14</sup> For example, in *Ibid.*, 96-97; Romualdo Abulad, “Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?,” 2-3; and Romualdo Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 6(2), (December 2017): 49.

<sup>15</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Abulad, “Post-Machiavelli,” 96.

according to the dictates of morality. Abulad's model philosopher here is not Machiavelli but Sun Tzu and rejected the former's way as being "naïve and simplistic."<sup>18</sup> In praising the way of Sun Tzu, Abulad described the smart person as one who is not so much "who does whatever suits him, good or bad," but "who is able to achieve his objectives without having to throw ethics overboard."<sup>19</sup> And Sun Tzu is, for Abulad, the typical thinker for this smart person, the warrior. It is in the model of the warrior's organizational method that, for Abulad, politics mixes with philosophy. Here, ethics, rather than power politics, becomes the definitive mark of what counts as politics.

Remaining faithful to his penchant for the ethical, Abulad distinguished how "politics is after the enemy's head," while management is on "having the work or mission done and victory achieved."<sup>20</sup> Abulad described the postmodern human existence as "a species of ethical humanity," someone who is "not patterned after Machiavelli's prince," but of Rousseau's and Kant's general will and good will, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Anchoring on the ethical and echoing Levinas who breaches Totality in favor of the Infinity,<sup>22</sup> Abulad aims to overcome the theoretical limits of the Florentine political thinker through what he called the Post-Machiavelli.<sup>23</sup> Here, one does not so much abandon Machiavelli as to transcend, master, and break him.<sup>24</sup>

Abulad's direction toward a post-Machiavelli is guided by the philosophical compass of postmodernism. What he saw in Machiavelli is a thoroughly modern thinker who, like Rene Descartes, sustained his political philosophy through the agency of the ego. Abulad insisted that the "ego or self

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?," 14.

<sup>21</sup> Abulad, "Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis?," *Kritike*, 13(2): 50.

<sup>22</sup> Abulad, "Post-Machiavelli," 95.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

is the same ground that sustains Machiavelli's Prince, the rational for power politics and the meaning of the survival sought for by him who needs to secure himself by any means."<sup>25</sup> This modernist bent of politics ultimately and essentially serves the "self and defines itself topically in the context of modernity where Descartes' cogito is king."<sup>26</sup> He concluded by way of remarking on the rational basis of modernity is, making a case for what was always dear to Abulad, postmodernism.

Abulad's post-Machiavelli is rather based on a certain privileging of *The Prince* and a reading that is subtly anti-Machiavellian. Concerning the privileging of *The Prince*<sup>27</sup> Abulad placed more regard to the said work and deployed the seemingly absolutist position of the book in the portrayal of a kingly and egocentric ruler.<sup>28</sup> This privileging glosses over the bulk of Machiavelli's discourses on republicanism,<sup>29</sup> popular rule, and virtue and stresses the exceptional form of rule that is supposed to be limited only at the foundational points of a republic. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli showed a preference over a popular form of government than a princely or kingly one. Specifically, Machiavelli suggested a mixed form of government where a popular magistracy coexists alongside the senate and the consuls.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the *Discourses*,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?," 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 98 and 100.

<sup>29</sup> Machiavelli's republicanism is characterized not so much with unity as the disunion between a magistracy and the citizenry. At the heart of the republic is the conflictual relation between the ruler/s and the ruled without however liquidating such a conflict in favor of an absolutist rule. This is best captured by Machiavelli's assertion that "the disunion of the plebs and the Roman senate made that republic free and powerful." Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Gabrielle Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The Discourses on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, trans. Patricia Gaborik and Richard Nybakken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 42 and Alissa Ardito, *Machiavelli and the Modern State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 155.

Machiavelli examined how the popular regimes or republics in the antiquity were founded, maintained, expanded, and defended. He noted that “cities in which peoples are princes make exceeding increases in a very brief time, and much greater than those that have always been made under a prince.”<sup>31</sup> In this case, Machiavelli is referring to the popular regimes of ancient Rome and Athens after the former expelled the kings and the latter was freed from Pisistratus.<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli saw in the popular order of these civilizations the social rudder that brought their civilizations prosperity and greatness. Contrasting monarchy from a republic, he insisted that the “governments of peoples are better than those of princes.”<sup>33</sup> And while the same vices or virtues could be identified in both the people and the prince, for Machiavelli, the people are wiser and more stable than the prince and “more virtue will always be seen in the people.”<sup>34</sup> A number of scholars have also convincingly argued that Machiavelli was more of a proponent of populism or republicanism than of a government of a single ruler.<sup>35</sup>

As Thomas Osborne explained, Machiavelli regarded the exceptional and the rule of force as only necessary in the beginning but something that could not be sustained ultimately. Hence, the exceptional is tied to “moments of political inception” but not of long term security.<sup>36</sup> Further, this privileging of *The Prince* portrays the sovereign to be an end in itself or the general rule rather

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<sup>31</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 118.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-118.

<sup>35</sup> See Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and the Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Sean McAleer, “Machiavelli: Prince or Republic – An Examination of the Theorist’s Two Most Famous Works,” *The Corinthian*, 17(9), (2016): 116-125.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Osborne, “Machiavelli and the Liberalism of Fear,” *History of the Human Sciences*, 30(5), (2017): 77.

than a means to take advantage of social events or accidents to build a stronger republic and develop a better constitution. This portrayal of the exceptional as the general rule is not actually what Machiavelli had in mind, as will be elaborated subsequently.<sup>37</sup>

Concerning Abulad's anti-Machiavellian reading, such an interpretation is characterized by an insistent portrayal of Machiavelli as promoting tyranny, cruelty, and other nefarious means of rule to sustain and maintain an egocentric relation of power. While Abulad supposedly advanced a reading that is post-Machiavelli, an interpretation that would somehow transcend Machiavelli, at the heart of his argument is the fundamental identification of Machiavelli with egocentric power politics.<sup>38</sup> It is based on an interpretation of Machiavelli that confuses the tactical means to be the political ends themselves. While Machiavelli set provisions for a certain form of exceptional rule and the equally exceptional means to realize political ends, Machiavelli's position is more nuanced<sup>39</sup> and tricky,<sup>40</sup> compared to how Abulad saw Machiavelli's way as "naïve and simplistic."<sup>41</sup> For example, Machiavelli insisted that a single ruler is necessary but only within specific political conjunctures. These are conjunctures

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<sup>37</sup> Still other thinkers portrayed his works as having a satirical effect, warning the citizens of the potentials and dangers of absolutism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau commented that "whilst pretending to teach lessons to kings, he taught great lessons to people." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95. Benedict de Spinoza also hinted how on reading *The Prince* a "free multitude should beware of entrusting its well-being entirely to one person." Benedict de Spinoza, "Political Treatise," in *The Collected Works, vol. 2*, trans. Edwin Curley (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 65-34.

<sup>38</sup> Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?," 98 and 100.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Osborne, for example, insisted how Machiavelli took a nuanced position concerning the problem of cruelty as a political tactic. See Osborne, "Machiavelli and the Liberalism of Fear," *History of the Human Sciences*, 69, 74, and 76.

<sup>40</sup> Gabrielle Pedullà explained the method on how Machiavelli answered complex questions by likening it to the traditional method of double-entry bookkeeping of Florentine merchants that considered both gains and losses in every alternative. See Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The Discourses on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Abulad, "Post-Machiavelli," 96.

of socio-political (re)ordering, that is, when the republic founds itself either in its moment of inception or during a process of social reform at its later existence. For Machiavelli, the general rule in every moment of foundation of a republic is that it could only be so well ordered if ruled by one individual and not the multitude of the people.<sup>42</sup> The caveat of this supposed general rule is its reference to moments of foundation (again, whether in a republic's beginning or a period of reform) so that most of the time it is ruled by many and not by one. Especially when the republic suffers from tumultuous situations or wars that threaten its unity and organization, or when drastic reforms have to be organized to respond to a crisis, the exceptional figure of a "prudent orderer of a republic" is presumed to restore order in the republic.<sup>43</sup> For Machiavelli, "it would be necessary to turn [the republic] more toward a kingly state than toward a popular state so that the men who cannot be corrected by the laws because of their insolence should be checked in some mode by an almost kingly power."<sup>44</sup> Necessity compels the sovereign to shift from one form of rule to another.

For Machiavelli, people are shown by necessity so that they should act.<sup>45</sup> McCormick argued that necessity "inspires people to greater deeds than does choice" and potentially dangerous events can improve and renovate a regime.<sup>46</sup> This reveals a popular dimension of the exceptional rule that comes along with it as the dictatorial rule within the conjunctures of the exceptional moment mobilizes the people towards social renewal. Here, Machiavelli's portrayal of a dictatorship is far from being a thoroughly cruel rule of a singular dictator as it

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<sup>42</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 and 51.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 49. Emphasis mine.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>46</sup> John McCormick, "Addressing the Political Exception: Machiavelli's 'Accidents' and the Mixed Regime," *American Political Science Review*, 87(4), (1993): 893.

is “the partisan and conflictual dimension of republic life.”<sup>47</sup> McCormick denied that only through an executive-centered political response could such a state of exception be managed. He argued that a mixed regime is the most effective remedy against disruptions, events, or disturbances.<sup>48</sup> The mixed regime expresses the conflictual relationships in a political process that found a new order or regime. These tensions are specifically between that of the great (dictator) and the people.<sup>49</sup> So while Machiavelli argued for the necessity of a princely or dictatorial rule, such could only be perfected when combined with popular initiatives and activities. Del Lucchese argued how Machiavelli’s dictator comes to be the “real moving and constituent force of power itself,” thus providing an illustration of the immanent coexistence between constituent and constituted power, or between the political and the legal. Although such a necessity is by no means in keeping with the general rule, it does not fail to involve the people in the constitution of a new regime. In this way, the people’s will becomes an instrument to “understand, define, but also limit the constituent power in and through the constituted and formal mechanism of law.”<sup>50</sup> Paradoxically, the dictator appears only to constitute that which later limits or overcomes itself.

Abulad’s anti-Machiavellian reading also confused Machiavelli’s depiction of a skillful use of deception with traditional politics or *trapo* (or traditional politician) in the country.<sup>51</sup> However, as Osborne suggested, such seemingly deceptive maneuvers are but tactics rather than forms of government

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<sup>47</sup> Del Lucchese, “Machiavelli and Constituent Power: The Revolutionary Foundation of Modern Political Thought,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> McCormick, “Addressing the Political Exception: Machiavelli’s ‘Accidents’ and the Mixed Regime,” *American Political Science Review*, 888.

<sup>49</sup> Filippo Del Lucchese, “Machiavelli and Constituent Power: The Revolutionary Foundation of Modern Political Thought,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, 16(1), (2014):14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” 50.

themselves,<sup>52</sup> means rather than ends. There is an unbridgeable distance between someone who only *appears* to be cruel and someone who *really* is cruel. And the *trapo* in the Philippines is not so much an appearance of corruption, incompetence, and cruelty as the reality of corruption, incompetence, and cruelty itself. No wonder why Abulad saw the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos as the epitome of Machiavellian politics.<sup>53</sup> But such an identification of Machiavelli with a thoroughly ruthless and fascist ruler not only is a disservice to Machiavelli and his contributions but also constructs the wrong impression that the exceptional order (i.e. Martial Law) invoked by the tyrant was, after all, for the progress of the republic. Machiavelli never tolerated tyranny and even condemned Caesar, among many others, for being a tyrant.<sup>54</sup>

### **Killing in the Name of the Good**

Abulad's post-Machiavelli is an instance of what he described as a postmodern ethics. Unlike the supposed Machiavellian, the postmodern human existence is still ethical, perhaps the ethical *par excellence*. This is so because his/her ethics is not a modernist one that, on the one hand, stands on the certainty of the ego and, on the other, trapped within some absolute and immutable moral concepts. The ethics of the post-Machiavelli is carried by the fluid and constant processes of overhauling and transvaluation to arrive not on a foundation but on foundationlessness itself.<sup>55</sup> Rather than a grounding, such an ethics is governed by an (un)grounding, that is, the grounding in ungrounding itself. This ethics explodes the anthropocentric foundations of modernity and (un)grounds a Nietzschean morality that is "beyond good and evil and a religion

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<sup>52</sup> Osborne, "Machiavelli and the Liberalism of Fear," 77-78.

<sup>53</sup> Abulad, "Martial Law and Religion," 49.

<sup>54</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 31-32.

<sup>55</sup> Abulad, "Post-Machiavelli," 100.

meant for the religionless.”<sup>56</sup> Without a foundation and a form, the postmodern ethics of the post-Machiavelli proceeds *via negativa* and deconstructs norms and moral systems that are taken for granted. This is why Abulad proclaimed that the new consciousness that defines a new ethics of the postmodern “is no longer caught up in the web of any one ideology or system.”<sup>57</sup> The apparent metallic strength that is ideology simply melts into thin air, to borrow a Marx’s expression, when exposed to the negative and formless fire of postmodern critique and contingency.

Perhaps the most controversial question a postmodern could raise today is the question why we should not kill.<sup>58</sup> Abulad himself asked this. He mused where we got the “idea that it is an evil thing to kill another” and went on to assume that we have simply taken for granted that we should not kill.<sup>59</sup> He insisted that the right to and sacredness of life had been presupposed – that is, taken for granted as if the presupposition itself is immune from critique or suspicion – by both the liberal democratic and Judeo-Christian traditions for centuries already.<sup>60</sup> Yet from a postmodern perspective, this seemingly absolute and taken for granted presupposition needs to be subjected to the most thorough critique and transvaluation. Abulad challenged that contemporary times “demand that we keep our minds open and dare to rethink and review our revered values.”<sup>61</sup> Abulad traced the theological basis of such an assumption to the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 5:17) and explicated how the New Testament “rewrote” the old and summarized it in one commandment: “love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>62</sup> Love has become the “genuine measure of good” and,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Romualdo Abulad, “Kant and Postmodernism,” 47.

<sup>58</sup> Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” 51.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Abulad, “Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis?,” 52.

<sup>62</sup> Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” 51.

for Abulad, with love as the measure, “everything becomes possible.”<sup>63</sup> Abulad likened the Christian notion of love with Immanuel Kant’s notion of the good will and the latter with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of the general will. For Abulad, “any act that flows from the good will is good” and that the general will “never errs.”<sup>64</sup> He explained that the “general will, or the good will, comes from within us and is the source of all that is good.”<sup>65</sup> Which means that, it is not so much the act as the (loving, good, or general) will that determines the morality of a course of action. This is why Abulad dismissed as a mistake “to consider killing as... absolutely wrong” especially if a good or general will is behind such an action.<sup>66</sup> Extending Abulad’s explication, if for love or for a will that is general or good one has to kill, then he/she is morally justified or at least beyond moral reproach.

But what gave unity to Abulad’s arguments is not so much the recourse to the Enlightenment philosophies of Kant or Rousseau as the turn to the Nietzschean transvaluation of values. While Raymun Festin saw the immediate introduction of Nietzsche shortly after the elaboration on Kant as where “Abulad’s train of reasoning skids and gets off the track,” such a Nietzschean turn illustrated what an ethics of the post-Machiavelli (and what a mind of a postmodern thinker) really is. For it is not so much the phenomenology of love or the metaphysics of the will as the nihilist strategy of Nietzsche that (un)grounds the ethics of the post-Machiavelli. The centerpiece of such a nihilism, the transvaluation of morals,<sup>67</sup> (un)grounds the ethics of the post-Machiavelli. Coming from a Nietzschean nihilist ethics, Abulad insinuated how “the meaning of ‘human rights’ might have changed overnight”<sup>68</sup> and possibly

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>68</sup> Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” 58.

muddled by the biases of both the “yellowtards”<sup>69</sup> and the Church. Behind such a contention is a dangerous assumption that, on the one hand, the concept of the “human” which is behind the concept of rights, has changed and along with it the notion of human rights; on the other, the concept might have also been altered and excluded from its extension a portion of the population: the criminals. Such an assumption was openly admitted by Duterte himself who accused that criminals have no humanity,<sup>70</sup> if only the concept could be theoretically altered as easily as postmodernism does on virtually every established socio-political or moral category. Abulad further maintained how, “Duterte’s perception of human rights is now ahead of ours,”<sup>71</sup> thus making more urgent the need to have an open mind. Here, Abulad not only placed Duterte in the same intellectual plane as Nietzsche who came too early to be misunderstood by the crowd, but also scoffed at the critical herd who he believes Duterte understands more than them understanding his perception.<sup>72</sup>

Through his concept of the post-Machiavelli, Abulad knitted the problem of the drug war, its ruthless killings, and the entire Duterte regime within the ethical framework. From Abulad’s analysis of the Duterte regime, ethics has intersected the regions of politics. A closer reading of Abulad, however, would reveal that he considers ethics as an ideological support of the regime itself. Despite Abulad insisting on the non-ideological quality of postmodern ethics,<sup>73</sup> its purely ideological character becomes undeniably obvious vis-à-vis Abulad’s ethical justification of Duterte’s regime. What we have here is Zizek’s reading of the Hegelian coincidence of opposites, where the neutralization of an ethical

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<sup>69</sup> Referring to the political spectrum of the yellow liberal party.

<sup>70</sup> Leila Salaverria, “Duterte: Criminals Have no Humanity,” *Inquirer.net*, 02 March 2017, retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/876970/duterte-criminals-have-no-humanity>.

<sup>71</sup> Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” 58.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Abulad, “Kant and Postmodernism,” 47.

framework (purifying itself of its ideological contents) constitutes ideology *par excellence*.<sup>74</sup>

The ethics of the post-Machiavelli obscures the violence of a regime and develops an apology that frames political violence from within the discourse of the ethics of the good. Abulad admitted that even God would have no “qualms about killing, if that would be tantamount to good.”<sup>75</sup> Not that violence in itself is morally abhorrent and so has to be condemned. Rather, Abulad’s apology leaps from the political to the ethical and defends the former from the abstract resources of the latter. The leap suggests two things. On the one hand, only via the ethical can events in history, such as the political, gain sensibility and unity. This idealism presupposes that in itself, the political is devoid of autonomous material categories for the construction of its own meaning. On the other, the presupposition that the political depends on ethical categories for its sense and meaning rather dismisses political agency, i.e. a subjective agency. For what constitutes meaning and sense, but also tragedy and disaster, in politics no longer comes from real political agents but from the meaning accorded to it by the ethics of the good. Imagine a God having no qualms about killing only if it is for the good. This provides the basis for non-accountability if not impunity. In a slightly inversed situation, Badiou criticized what he called as the “defenders of ethical ideology” for having assigned in the ethical category of evil the cause of the horrors of the holocaust.<sup>76</sup> For Badiou, this position is feeble and cowardly. Badiou’s main contention is that the horrors of the holocaust should be confronted as what it really was, that is, the consequence of a political, not ethical, procedure the categories of which provided the basis for the process of extermination.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the procedure of extermination under the current

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<sup>74</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 21.

<sup>75</sup> Abulad, “Martial Law and Religion,” 52.

<sup>76</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2012), 65.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

regime should be glanced and evaluated according to the political categories (drug addicts, communists, terrorists, etc.) that it deployed to support its regime.

Abulad's optimism in relation to the Duterte regime is assured by ethics, making him conclude that "it might turn out that we have, despite of the scandal of killings, a truly ethical and religious president."<sup>78</sup> Abulad was optimistic that while the exercise of Martial Law was "desecrated by the Machiavellian hands of Marcos," this time, "it will not be so desecrated by the more realistic hands of the still immensely popular Mayor of Davao."<sup>79</sup> Of course, Abulad would not associate Machiavelli with Duterte this time because doing so would only associate Duterte with Marcos. But more than this avoidance of association is the conceptual frame of the ethics of the post-Machiavelli that guided Abulad, where he distinguished between politics and management. The former, supposedly proper to Marcos, is solely "after the enemy's head," while the latter, supposedly proper to Duterte, gets "the work or mission done and victory achieved" without throwing ethics overboard.<sup>80</sup> Of course, with the fluid and empty ethics of postmodernism, any ruler could conveniently mobilize to its cause the most subversive ethics. In taking his readers to the heights of the ethical and by using the abstract resources of the latter to lend sense and meaning to the political, Abulad treaded in controversial waters, where history would possibly judge him as someone apologizing for a president who instigated crimes against humanity.

While Machiavellian (modernist) politics is brutally honest in the exceptional case of a violent political procedure, Abulad's post-Machiavellian (postmodernist) ethics obscures and apologizes senseless violence by way of the "good." Further, while Machiavellian pragmatism is honestly disdainful of

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<sup>78</sup>Abulad, "Martial Law and Religion," 55.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>80</sup> Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?," 14.

the ethical in favor of the political, Abulad's post-Machiavelli intersects the two and laid the support of the latter in the former. Legitimizing a ruthless and fascist regime through ethics is not an altogether novel intellectual exercise as we have heard similar accounts by Nazi leaders and architects of the holocaust such as Heinrich Himmler.<sup>81</sup> But Abulad went further by justifying Duterte's regime on the basis of an ethics of the post-Machiavelli, that is, an ethics against Ethics. The ethics of post-Machiavelli dismissed the very foundations or metanarratives that the modern tradition has handed over. In doing so, post-Machiavelli provided an ethics that, while critical, is empty of any grounding. Such emptiness renders ethics to be a fluid critique of whatever there is. Every established norm is subjected to the harshest critique not so much to derive a new norm as to perpetually exercise the spirit of critique itself. In this case, the means toward the subversion of values become the very end itself. Post-Machiavelli is a subversive ethics and it could potentially, at least theoretically, destroy hitherto existing values. But beyond this subversion is an emptiness upon which every moral or political system, including the status quo, could derive ideological support.<sup>82</sup>

A further note, this time concerning Abulad's method of research. A kind of subjectivism pervades all throughout his work *Martial Law and Religion*. For example, Abulad presumed the drug culture that "caused the slow death of our country which wastes our youth."<sup>83</sup> Presumed because Abulad presented nothing that could support his claim. It is rather alarming that a well-published and trusted philosopher failed to support his presumptions with authoritative

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<sup>81</sup> See for example André Mineau, "Himmler's Ethics of Duty: A Moral Approach to the Holocaust and to Germany's Impending Defeat," *The European Legacy*, 12(1), (2007): 55-73.

<sup>82</sup> One may check for comparison: Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 134. Terry Eagleton, in elaborating the ambivalent character of postmodernism, warned that while postmodernism celebrates the contemporary inability to "envisage a future for us much different from the present," there is the possibility of a future, among others, that postmodernism's emptiness could lend ideological support to, and its name is fascism.

<sup>83</sup> Abulad, "Martial Law and Religion," 54.

data and reliable facts. Not even the exaggerated numbers of Duterte himself was used by Abulad to justify his claim. He could have consulted Nathan Gilbert Quimpo who has already shown how the securitization of the drug problem in the country was manufactured based on an exaggerated assessment by the government itself.<sup>84</sup> Another is how Abulad legitimized the Duterte regime by invoking the Latin dictum *vox populi, vox dei* and maintained how the people's voice was reflected in the outcome of an election that "turned out to be reliably clean and honest, as well as credible."<sup>85</sup> Not only was the elections marred with allegations of fraud and violence, its credibility was also at stake especially in the aspect of manipulating voters psychology.<sup>86</sup> The fiasco of Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm that is also linked with Duterte's presidential campaign, only reveals the extent of manipulation during the elections.<sup>87</sup> Abulad advanced controversial claims without even supporting these with available data. Either such data were unbeknownst to the esteemed philosopher, which is highly unlikely, or Abulad simply obscured all these to make a consistent construction of an ethical Duterte. And the latter seems to be a consistent method of Abulad's ethical leap, where rather than actual and concrete data, abstract ethical principles are deployed to give sense and meaning to the political.

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<sup>84</sup> Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Duterte's War on Drugs: The Securitization of Illegal Drugs and the return of National Boss Rule," in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 147-151.

<sup>85</sup> Abulad, "Martial Law and Religion," 54.

<sup>86</sup> Rappler, "Youth Groups Protest Against Perceived Election Irregularities Offline," Rappler, 14 May 2019, retrieved from <https://rappler.com/nation/elections/youth-groups-take-protest-perceived-irregularities-offline>.

<sup>87</sup> Raissa Robles, "How Cambridge Analytica's Parent Company Helped 'Man of Action' Rodrigo Duterte Win the 2016 Philippines Election," *South China Morning Post*, 04 April 2018, retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2140303/how-cambridge-analyticas-parent-company-helped-man-action>; and Alex Hern, "Cambridge Analytica: How did it Turn Clicks into Votes?," *The Guardian*, 06 May 2018, retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/06/cambridge-analytica-how-turn-clicks-into-votes-christopher-wylie>.

## Machiavelli Contra Post-Machiavelli and Duterte

The contrast between Machiavelli and Abulad's post-Machiavelli can be traced in the overlapping concepts of necessity, conflict, and the (de)coupling of ethics and politics. First, concerning necessity. Unlike Giorgio Agamben who theorized the political and legal concept of necessity,<sup>88</sup> Machiavelli barely touched on it as a theory and rather invoked it in its existential sense. Invoking the notion of necessity merely in its existential sense, Machiavelli oftentimes associated it with the unexpected socio-political exigencies or accidents. In many instances in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli mentioned about accidents, what he recognized as a break from the usual socio-political course. For example, Machiavelli discussed how "it will be seen that often things arise and accidents come about that the heavens have not altogether wished to be provided against."<sup>89</sup> He also noted the unexpected or unforeseeable character of accidents cautioning people about their occurrence.<sup>90</sup> These accidents could be in the form of plagues or famines caused by the unexpected occurrences of the natural world or unforeseen events that take place within and rupture the social order itself. For Machiavelli, an accident is an occurrence that brings with it the potential for a political reorganization that takes the republic back to its point of foundation thereby initiating a process of social renewal.<sup>91</sup> While an accident in politics is something unexpected, its occurrence rather has an instrumental quality that, as McCormick explained, if taken advantage of properly could be put into good use.<sup>92</sup> So, while a regime is put in danger under exceptional circumstances, it likewise is placed in an opportunity "for even greater

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<sup>88</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 2017), 185-189.

<sup>89</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 197.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> McCormick, Addressing the Political Exception: Machiavelli's 'Accidents' and the Mixed Regime," 889.

achievements.”<sup>93</sup> Machiavelli himself expounded how accidents instrumentally perfect the organization of republics.

One could perhaps ask whether Duterte is facing an exceptional moment, one that necessitates him to adopt a dictatorial form of rule. To answer in the affirmative presupposes that the country today is facing a socio-political accident or event and is in a foundational moment. This could mean a potential for social renewal and progress for both the republic and the constitution that governs it. But what is it that, at least according to Abulad, rather makes the situation exceptional? As far as his *Martial Law and Religion* is concerned, it is the supposed drug menace. However, as pointed out, Abulad failed to provide authoritative data to support such a claim. Unlike the existential basis for Machiavelli’s necessity and the exception that goes along with it, Abulad’s and Duterte’s portrayal of the supposed drug menace is based on exaggeration if not fabrication. The situation does not warrant an exceptional form of rule for the problem that is rather identified is simply ordinary and within the control of existing laws and processes.

Second, concerning conflict, one could perhaps ask whether Duterte is tolerant of it or not. To answer in the affirmative presupposes a healthy democracy where discourse and dialogue, rather than threats, intimidations, and killings, characterize social life. This would also mean that Duterte’s regime satisfies the criteria of Machiavelli’s mixed regime, sustained by the tension between the great (dictator) and the people. But the socio-political situation today is far from suggesting that Duterte’s regime is sustained by conflict. Rather, Duterte aims at its liquidation. As a matter of fact, the recent enactment of the Anti-Terror Law is the epitome of the regime’s intolerance. Such an intolerance is obscured in such a way as to portray a category of an enemy (the terrorist this time) worthy of being obliterated. And such a liquidationist

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

orientation guided the regime's conflictual relation with the supposed drug users and peddlers. Rather than a rehabilitative and reconciliatory policy towards those with whom it potentially has a tension with, the regime addresses conflict by obliterating conflict itself, that is, by obliterating those it has a conflict with.

Lastly, concerning the coupling of ethics and politics, such is absent in Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses*. Not that an ethics cannot be derived from Machiavelli's work. On the contrary, his pragmatism has been a constant subject of debate in moral philosophy. What the decoupling of ethics and politics rather means is that politics should be regarded as an entirely autonomous dimension of human existence, one that takes a life on its own and generates for itself its own principles. Hence, politics should be evaluated in itself and not by some abstract ethical principles. Evaluating politics in itself means engaging it according to the facts that it generates or as Vladimir Lenin maintained, the concrete analysis of concrete situations.<sup>94</sup> What a coupling of the political with the ethical shows, ultimately, is the danger of an ethical framing and support of the political. And such a danger could not be more pronounced than in an (un)grounded postmodern ethics of the post-Machiavelli.

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<sup>94</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "Kommunismus: Journal of the Communist International," *Lenin: Collected Works*, vol. 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1920), 166.

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