

*Marta Baranowska*<sup>1</sup>

*Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń*

**HERITAGE OF POLITICAL AND LEGAL THOUGHT  
IN THE WORKS OF MACHIAVELLI.  
PILLAR OR FACADE OF NEW POLITICAL IDEAS**

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/TSP-W.2023.008>

Date of receipt: 30.06.2022

Date of acceptance: 06.03.2023

**(Summary)**

The research object of the article is the search for answers to the following questions: to what extent were Machiavelli's ideas on political solutions and the future of Florence and Italy determined by the heritage of political and legal thought? Did he see this heritage as a form of legitimising his suggested political solutions and an unquestionable authority? In such a case, it is also reasonable to ask whether it was a constraint on his original ideas? Or maybe, since he is known for the idea that the end justifies the means, he referred to this heritage in a completely instrumental manner? To put it in another way, did he treat this heritage as a pillar or just a facade of his work? This analysis of Machiavelli's treatises led to the conclusion, that this heritage was just a beautiful façade for him, because although referring to it is an important part of his narrative about the world of politics, moreover, he proved that using it does not have to be less important and boring at all; his innovative and bold ideas, which are independent of the existing discourse about politics, are in the foreground. It is because of those ideas that his treatises are still a compulsory read for all those wishing to debate substantively about the state, law, and the mechanisms of politics.

**Key-words:** Machiavelli, history of political and legal thought, republic, innovation, interpretation.

**Dziedzictwo historii myśli polityczno-prawnej w twórczości Machiavellego. Filar czy fasada nowych idei politycznych (Streszczenie)**

Przedmiotem badawczym artykułu jest poszukiwanie odpowiedzi na następujące pytania: w jakim stopniu pomysły Machiavellego na rozwiązania ustrojowe i przyszłość Florencji i Italii były zdeterminowane dziedzictwem myśli politycznej i prawnej? Czy to dziedzictwo było dla niego formą legitymizacji proponowanych rozwiązań politycznych i bezdyskusyjnym autorytetem? W takim przypadku zasadne jest też pytanie, czy było ono dla niego ograniczeniem niwelującym jego oryginalnych pomysłów? A może, skoro znany jest z idei cel uświęca środki, odnosił się do tego dziedzictwa całkowicie instrumentalnie? Inaczej można to ująć, czy to dziedzictwo traktował jako filar czy tylko fasadę swej twórczości? Analiza traktatów Machiavellego wiedzie do konkluzji, że to dziedzictwo było dla niego tylko piękną fasadą, bo choć odwoływanie się do niego stanowi ważną część jego narracji o świecie polityki, co więcej udowodnił on, że korzystając z niego wcale nie trzeba być wtórnym i nudnym, to jednak jego nowatorskie i śmiałe idee, odcinające się od dotychczasowego dyskursu o polityce są pierwszoplanowe. To właśnie dzięki nim do dziś dnia jego

---

<sup>1</sup> Marta Baranowska – Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, mb1@umk.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-0365-1023.

traktaty są lekturą obowiązkową dla wszystkich pragnących merytorycznie debatować o państwie i prawie oraz mechanizmach funkcjonowania polityki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Machiavelli, historia myśli politycznej i prawnej, republika, nowatorstwo, interpretacja.

\*\*\*

## 1. Introduction

Scientific debates concerning the law are not limited to the analysis of specific statutory norms but place them in a specific social, cultural and political context. The historical context is equally important, since the origins of modern legal institutions and views on the state and law often reach deep into the past. The historical approach requires a fair presentation of all elements of the doctrine, including those that are outdated or even disavowed and discredited. It is also possible to treat the history of political and legal thought as a heritage that has its roots in the past, but its significance is based on how it can be used today. In such a situation, one usually selects those elements of the doctrine that one considers current or relevant to the construction of one's discourse on state and law. At the same time, it should be stressed that this does not mean automatically disregarding the negative elements of heritage, as they can be just as useful.

From this perspective, the work done by a historian is merely a preliminary, preparatory stage of proper philosophical considerations. [...] Such an author has great freedom in treating the views of his predecessors, even the most eminent ones. If he can justify why he rejects certain elements of someone's position and recognizes others, he has every right to do so (Szymański, 2010, p. 10).

One political thinker who drew on the heritage of political and legal thought in his work, yet whose original insights are still an important part of contemporary discourse about the political world, was Niccolò Machiavelli. He reached into the past looking for an answer to the most important question for him, namely how to make his homeland a great power on the political map of Europe. The case of Machiavelli's work is interesting because his deliberations were oriented towards the future, towards the goal which was the unification of Italy, while their foundations were built precisely on the heritage of political and legal thought. The research object of the article is the search for answers to the following questions: to what extent were Machiavelli's ideas on political solutions and the future of Florence and Italy determined by the heritage of political and legal thought? Did

he see this heritage as a form of legitimising his suggested political solutions and an unquestionable authority? In such a case, it is also reasonable to ask whether it was a constraint on his original ideas? Or maybe, since he is known for the idea that the end justifies the means, he referred to this heritage in a completely instrumental manner, and it was only a pretext or a 'smokescreen' for his innovative ideas? To put it in another way, did he treat this heritage as a pillar or just a facade of his work?

## **2. The heritage of political and legal thought in Machiavelli's work.**

The fact that Machiavelli turned to history of political and legal thought so often was in keeping with the trends of his era, when the fascination with antiquity was revived. Leonidas Donskis drew attention to Machiavelli's Renaissance idea of the superiority of Greek thought and Roman politics over the theories of the time. „Machiavelli passionately defends the world against the follies of the modern world and its deviations from the ancient canons” (Donskis, 2011, p. 65). He considered Machiavelli to be a representative of the early historicism, who sought the truth about man and politics in history.

In Machiavelli's view, political practice is not constructed of norms and principles, but of its opposite successful and historically tried-and-true experience. Efficacious truth (*verità effettuale*) is nothing other than successful practice, which is obliged to create a normative dimension in politics and become a recognized form of wisdom. Machiavelli's roots in ancient historiography are deep and obvious. For Machiavelli, as for Plutarch before him, history and circumstance offer occasions (*Fortune*) for taking actions (*virtù*). The readiness to act is far more important than theoretical arguments or abstract truth (Donskis, 2011, p. 56).

This is linked to Machiavelli's belief in the universal qualities of human nature, by which the actions of man can be predicted to some extent, regardless of the time.

The wise are wont to say, and not without reason or at random, that he who would forecast what is about to happen should look to what has been; since all human events, whether present or to come, have their exact counterpart in the past. And this, because these events are brought about by men, whose passions and dispositions remaining in all ages the same naturally give rise to the same effects (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 475).

Machiavelli, in one of his letters to Francesco Vettori, wrote that he loved his homeland more than his own soul: „*[Io] amo la patria mia più dell'anima*” (Machiavelli, 2011, p. 193), and he set himself a goal of preparing suggestions for politicians by which they would make it a stable and powerful state. The pillars of his conception were the

political and legal constructs that he had learned through his studies of ancient philosophy and history. He admired the power of ancient Rome, and was convinced that its greatness was due to Fortune and the military strength that followed from the most important factor, namely a proper political system. He believed that the optimal solution for the future Italy would be a republic with a mixed government (Baranowska 2018). The representatives of the "Cambridge School", influential in contemporary scientific discourse: John Pocock (1975), Quentin Skinner (1978; 2002) and Philip Pettit (1999), emphasized that Machiavelli's republican concept was one of the key factors in the development of the republican discourse. Machiavelli's views on the mixed government were influenced by the considerations of Aristotle (2001, p. 51), who saw the state as a "plurality", hence the inevitable existence of divisions and clashing factions within it<sup>2</sup>. Consideration of the republic as a mixed government was continued by Polybius and Cicero, and it was the Roman *civitas* that became a model for Machiavelli (Gładziuk, 1995, p. 90). The work by Titus Livius (1969) on the history of the Roman republic was also particularly important to him. The mixed government is based on the fact that two groups, the wealthy and the people, take part in governing, so that neither group gains a significant advantage and a balance is maintained<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, he believed that in order to understand the essence of politics, the most important thing was knowledge that showed the sources of conflicts between citizens, which became the leitmotif of the *Florentine Histories* (1990)<sup>4</sup>.

The mixed government is also sustainable because within it people are provided with freedom which, according to Machiavelli, is a basic human need<sup>5</sup>. Although, at moments when the state was being established and in times of crisis, he recommended recourse to the absolute rule of the individual, and considered it undesirable to introduce

---

<sup>2</sup> A summary of the views of ancient thinkers who considered a mixed government system to be optimal, see Ekes, *Natura–wolność–władza*, 26–45.

<sup>3</sup> „In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli's system of checks and balances, to use an anachronistic phrase, is most often described as a dynamic tug-of-war between the haves and have-nots, the aristocracy and the people, each of whom has radically different interests and perspectives. [...] political health derives from a creative tension between the haves and have-nots – what Marx would later call the class struggle” (Unger, 2011, pp. 266–268).

<sup>4</sup> He wrote this treatise at the behest of the Medici, mainly Cardinal Giulio de' Medici. Commissions of this kind were usual at the time. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century court historians appeared, whose task was to tell the history of the only righteous dynasty. Machiavelli included his political beliefs in this treatise. As Jerzy Szacki pointed out, history “functioned as a kind of mythology of *virtù*, through which the Italian patriot strengthened his ideal in times when it seemed infinitely distant from reality” (Szacki, 1973, p. 152).

<sup>5</sup> Grzegorz Seidler (1997, p. 325) pointed out that the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century saw a change in the understanding of freedom. Until then it had been identified with the independence of the Italian city-states from the emperor and the pope, while the *quattrocento* humanists introduced the idea of civil liberty, relating it not only to the state but also to the individual. Kazimierz Dziubka (2008, p. 119) emphasized that in Machiavelli's writings one can find the view that freedom is identified with citizenship, which is in line with the earlier Roman tradition, continued in the Renaissance.

freedom where people were not accustomed to it, the existence of the state in the long term requires the establishment of civil liberties. Every instance of autocracy, especially tyranny eventually collapses because people are unable to live in a state of constant enslavement and always revolt in the end. Machiavelli insisted that the people's decisions were wise, not because of their education, but because they followed from a desire to avoid enslavement, and therefore in retrospect proved best for the state.

The rule of law is also the basis of the mixed government. The rule of law minimizes the threat of rioting. Machiavelli wrote in *Discourses*:

Of this we have an example in the kingdom of France, which enjoys perfect security from this cause alone, that its kings are bound to compliance with an infinity of laws upon which the well-being of the whole people depends. And he who gave this State its constitution allowed its kings to do as they pleased as regards arms and money; but provided that as regards everything else they should not interfere save as the laws might direct (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 69).

It is worth quoting a passage from *Discourses*, in which he emphatically indicated how harmful it is to break the law, even in extraordinary situations, because it always sets a bad example for citizens: „as giving rise to a practice of violating the laws for good ends, under colour of which they may afterwards be violated for ends which are not good” (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 112). Machiavelli also emphasized that securing the law with sanctions is not enough. It is necessary for the law to be respected by all, and this will be the case if all sections of society participate in its creation.

According to Machiavelli, one of the pillars of the mixed government is citizens who follow moral principles. He considered the moral corruption of citizens to be one of the causes of Florence's weakness. State institutions in which dishonest, bribed officials work are not respected and their judgments and orders will not be respected. And if someone wants to destroy these institutions, no one will stand up for them. It's a simple way for a tyrant to take over.

„Florence, immoral and depraved as it was, did not need brutal military power to subjugate it. [...] Not even weapons were required to conquer Florence. Florence could be defeated by allowing it to finally degenerate and drown in its internal turmoil and struggles over wealth, power, and prestige. Moral decrepitude inevitably ends in political collapse and the loss of liberty. Machiavelli, to whom all manner of sins are imputed, understood its better than any other political thinker” (Donskis, 2011, p. 61).

The pillar of a well-functioning state is also the religiousness of its citizens<sup>6</sup>. For Machiavelli, religion was a political means, useful to the state because religious people are easier to rule. A ruler can invoke the will of God only when he pretends to be religious himself. However, not every religion serves the state well. He was negative about Christianity, while he appreciated the pagan religion of ancient Rome:

Accordingly, while the highest good of the old religions consisted in magnanimity, bodily strength, and all those other qualities which make men brave, our religion places it in humility, lowliness, and contempt for the things of this world; or if it ever calls upon us to be brave, it is that we should be brave to suffer rather than to do. This manner of life, therefore, seems to have made the world feebler, and to have given it over as a prey to wicked men to deal with as they please; since the mass of mankind, in the hope of being received into Paradise, think more how to bear injuries than how to avenge them (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 201).

The author of *Discourses* pointed out that pagan Rome led the entire world, and Christian Italy was being divided and destroyed by foreign armies. He was also a firm opponent of alliance between the government and the Church. It was the policy of successive popes that contributed to the general weakening of Italy. Machiavelli „placed his faith in a brutal albeit civilized and secular political power that sought to revive the laws and institutions of the Roman republic” (Donskis, 2011, p. 61).

The institution of temporary dictators, which is supposed to secure the existence of the state in exceptional situations, is also important for the mixed government. In a republic, no council or official can order action on their own – lengthy deliberations are usually needed – so in emergency situations that require quick decisions it becomes necessary to appoint dictators with limited powers for the time. Such an arrangement was in operation in Rome and, according to Machiavelli, „among the institutions of Rome, this of the dictatorship deserves our special admiration, and to be linked with the chief causes of her greatness” (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 111).

Machiavelli also turned to historical treatises when, as a diplomat, he wanted to interpret the mechanisms of politics and the actions of politicians on an ongoing basis. He believed that his understanding of Cesare Borgia’s intentions was facilitated by his reading

---

<sup>6</sup> „And that is without considering Machiavelli’s insight about religion, which, he says, is essential to a society from a practical viewpoint, as a force that mobilizes, conditions behavior, and provides a useful framework for a society. Religion is a social construct, without which any civilized or organized social existence would be impossible. After all, the people do not require complex instruction on faith or, worse, theological disputes. Practical truth help them orient themselves” (Donskis, 2011, p. 57).

of *Plutarch's Lives*, which enabled him to compare Borgia with past statesmen. „Machiavelli understood quite well that only someone of the ilk of Cesare could put an end to papal political omnipotence, while putting an untrammelled political banditry of a dysfunctional state, and thereby create a strong centralized state similar to France or Spain” (Donskis, 2011, p. 53).

In the writings of the ancients, in the heritage of the past, Machiavelli sought the answer to the question of what are the pillars of a well-functioning state. In the ancient idea of a mixed government and many political elements of the Roman republic he saw the optimal solutions for a future united Italy. History was for him a teacher of political life, especially the biographies of great statesmen.

### **3. Legal heritage – manipulation and means to an end; limitation versus originality?**

The fact is that Machiavelli, in ancient writings, sought solutions to political problems. First, however, he was well aware that historical treatises do not provide a true picture of the past because usually bad things are passed over in silence, failures are presented in a positive light, and good things are exaggerated. Secondly, what he found did not always fit his narrative of an optimal system, which is a mixture of three elements: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. He himself admitted to manipulating the image of the past, misrepresenting facts or changing their meaning, and especially to an exaggerated admiration of the times of the Roman republic. It is worth emphasizing that such a teleological presentation of history was not something exceptional at the time (Maneli, 1968, p. 57). There was a purpose in these manipulations in constructing narratives about the past. He wanted Italy to be united under the aegis of Florence, and so in his treatises he showed that the history of his homeland was inextricably linked with the fate of the other states of the Apennine Peninsula, which he treated “as an ethnically established whole, despite the existence of many separate political organisms within it” (Malarczyk, 1968, p. 17)<sup>7</sup>. The introduction of a mixed government after the unification and strengthening of

---

<sup>7</sup> “There is certainly nothing new in the fundamental presupposition in the idea of Italy as a unit distinguished from the surrounding world, in the demand for the expulsion of the foreigners. Machiavelli himself concludes the chapter with a quotation from Petrarch's *Italia Mia* which had already expressed these ideas; and in the fourteenth century the sentiment of Petrarch's *Canzone* had been re-echoed in the works of other poets, by Fazio Degli Uberti, Francesco di Vanoazo, and the poets of the Visconti court. It was natural to fall back on this tradition when a situation similar to that from which Petrarch's song originated had arisen. [...] It is a recurrent theme in humanist literature that Italy has a special position in the world because her frontiers were drawn by nature herself. The view that Italy was a separate geographical unit on whose soil foreign Barbarians have no right to be, is a fundamental assumption of humanist political reflections. [...] there is enough

Italy required the citizens to love their homeland, be virtuous and religious, and be ready to work for the common good. It should be emphasized that Machiavelli did not have in mind only politicians, but all citizens, because their attitudes are equally important for the good of the political community. This is what he wrote about in *The Life of Castruccio* (1972, p. 696) – that all men should be strong and capable of anything. For Machiavelli, therefore, a properly presented past, especially models of virtues and attitudes, was intended to guide the actions of politicians and to shape the patriotism of the people of Italy. It should be added that he did not strive to create more ideals, he did not want to make angels or heroes out of people, because he knew that this was impossible. However, one can manipulate people, their basic passions and aspirations, which are themselves unchangeable, so that they act for the good of the state. He wanted to create a real community, and for that purpose making references to the common past, to the cultural, political, and legal heritage, is simply indispensable. This shows that Machiavelli also treated the heritage of the past instrumentally. For him, good politics is an activity that effectively pursues the reason of state. Anything can be used for this purpose, including the heritage of the past, because it is not a superior authority or goal.

We should also ask whether this heritage of political and legal thought, and such a high regard for the past, did not limit Machiavelli in formulating his unique theses? Machiavelli seems to have recognised the danger in preaching innovative and bold ideas. In the Preface to *Discourses* he wrote:

Albeit the jealous temper of mankind, ever more disposed to censure than to praise the work of others, has constantly made the pursuit of new methods and systems no less perilous than the search after unknown lands and seas; nevertheless, prompted by that desire which nature has implanted in me, fearlessly to undertake whatsoever I think offers a common benefit to all, I enter on a path which, being hitherto untrodden by any, though it involve me in trouble and fatigue, may yet win me thanks from those who judge my efforts in a friendly spirit (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 3).

Maybe that is why there are so many references to the past in his writings, because under the guise of heritage he tried to smuggle in his original theses. To this day, it is *The Prince* that is his most famous treatise, and it continues to excite readers. Although the advice to

---

evidence to show that the renewal of an era of foreign invasions which opened with the expedition of Charles VIII resulted in the awakening of a national feeling in wider groups. We have popular songs directed against the foreigners; we know that in 1509, before the battle of Agnadello, the soldiers shouted «Italy, Italy» into the face of their foreign opponents” (Gilbert, 1954, p. 41).



the prince is based on examples from the past, it was undoubtedly formulated in a novel way, that is, without prudery, without scruples, breaking the rules of generally accepted Christian ethics. Until now, most thinkers have been concerned with what politics should look like, and politicians have been written about through the prism of their virtues. However, Machiavelli believed that it was important to portray how people actually act in the political world<sup>8</sup>. Although political realism can be traced back to antiquity, it was Machiavelli who so spectacularly consolidated it into the history of political thought<sup>9</sup>. A realistic assessment of reality is a prerequisite for a politician to be able to choose the means of action appropriate to the circumstances. For Machiavelli, the ideal politician is a person who is effective in working to ensure the security and prosperity of the state. This view was innovative and did not fit into the previous tendencies that had shown politicians through the prism of virtues. Owing to the fact that effectiveness is the most important thing, one should reach for any means without hesitation. It is in the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius* that we find the main principle of Machiavellianism: the end justifies the means. Machiavelli cited the story of Romulus killing Remus and commented on it thus: „And none who is wise will ever blame any action, however extraordinary and irregular, which serves to lay the foundation of a kingdom or to establish a republic” (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 42). He emphasized that Romulus, after the establishment of the state, did not seize all power to pursue his ambitions, but appointed a senate. He thus achieved his goal of establishing and strengthening the state. He used this example to show that there are no universal means for acting effectively, but the means should always be chosen according to the circumstances. Some methods are necessary for the establishment of a state, and others for its maintenance. At this point, it is important to emphasize that these measures are never an end in themselves, nor do they nullify the fact that a stable republic must be based on the pillars listed above. „Politics cannot exist without that which creates the miracle of sociability, the associative link among people. It cannot exist without norms, beliefs, and values. Technique and mechanics shortly become caricatures whenever they are torn from goals and meaning” (Donskis, 2011, 55). It is the reason of state that is the

---

<sup>8</sup> Machiavelli’s approach to the problem of cognition was primarily a response to the Christian perspective that dominated thought at the time. He believed that Christian approach, which in his opinion falsified the picture of reality, should be rejected (Manent, 2014, p. 17).

<sup>9</sup> It should be added that Machiavelli did not refer to his method as political realism, for the concept itself was not formed until the nineteenth century as an opposition to political romanticism, which placed importance on the intentions rather than the effects of actions (Berlin, 2002, pp. 239–240).

most important objective, and this also had its original dimension<sup>10</sup>. It is also worth noting the concept of *virtù*, fundamental in Machiavelli's work, which means the totality of one's personality and powers. Though it bears a deceptive resemblance to the ancient term *virtue*, it is not used by him in the ancient sense of virtue.

Machiavelli's virtue is not ancient or Roman manliness. [...] For Machiavelli, virtue does not consist in having a virtuous character, as for Aristotle. Virtue is alert, on the make; it is not a habit. One must of course get used to the exacting requirements of loose morals and to some extent learn by doing or at least pretending; the main need, however is not habituation but new and better opinions, or the replacement of inadequate by adequate presumption (Mansfield, 1996, pp. 36, 45)<sup>11</sup>.

The very conception of the prince's rule as a transitional power is also unique. Machiavelli does not refer to it as "tyranny", but as Igor Kąkolewski (2007, p. 66) has pointed out, it is crucial to understanding the nature of his power. The prince, however, is not every tyrant, but only one who creates a new state or reforms it. „Only a sovereign who had a perfect grasp of the technology of power and statecraft could have survived in a realm rife with a such corruption and assassins-for-hire. Such a sovereign's goal would not be the power for its own sake, but, instead, the re-establishment of the law and order of the Roman Republic” (Donskis, 2011, p. 61). Machiavelli modelled the prince largely on Cesare Borgia, whom he admired as a politician.

When all the actions of the duke are recalled, I do not know how to blame him, but rather it appears to be, as I have said, that I ought to offer him for imitation to all those who, by the fortune or the arms of others, are raised to government. Because he, having a lofty spirit and far-reaching aims, could not have regulated his conduct otherwise, and only the shortness of the life of Alexander and his own sickness frustrated his designs (Machiavelli, 1998, chapter 7)<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Although the author of the *Prince* did not use the concept of *ragione di stato* or the French equivalent *raison d'état*, he can still be considered, as Arkady Rzegocki (2008, pp. 36-49) stressed, its doctrinal creator. Thomas Schölderle even stated that reason of state is synonymous with Machiavellianism and power politics. „Und nicht von ungefähr konnten die Begriffe Machiavellismus, Machtpolitik und Staatsräson in der Folge gleichsam als Synonyme gelten” (Schölderle, 2002, p. 27). In the Polish scholarly literature, Jan Baszkiewicz (1973, p. 86) also perceived the significance of Machiavelli's doctrine as groundbreaking, because, unlike in the Middle Ages, the reason of the 'new prince' is identified with the reason of state, with the wellbeing of the homeland.

<sup>11</sup> More on the interpretation of *virtù* (Fiktus, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> His greatest inspiration, however, was not Borgia himself, but his creation, the new state (Cassirer, 2006, pp. 155–156).

The dispute as to whether Machiavelli's considerations actually focus on tyranny or republic still fires the imagination of scholars today. There have been different positions in the scholarly literature. There was also a thesis that these two major treatises contradicted each other, allowing the argument that only one of them properly reflected Machiavelli's views. Assuming this, one can basically attribute a split personality to him, especially since he wrote them at the same time. He began work on *Discourses* in 1512 and finished it in 1517. In 1513 he took a break to write *The Prince* (Rubinstein, 1991, p. 44). In my view, these two treatises are complementary and this position is also present in the scholarly debate<sup>13</sup>. According to Machiavelli, considering the historical moment in which Florence was at that time, it was only an individual, by assuming full power, who was likely to realize the project he had presented. This problem was aptly presented by Miles J. Unger (2011, p. 225), who pointed out that most people ask the question, what is the best system? Meanwhile, Machiavelli was considering the only real issue in his view: what kind of system is possible at any given time in an unpredictable world of violence? It should be remembered that he constantly stressed the necessity of taking into account the circumstances, and therefore recommended various forms of government accordingly. This is his personal lesson about political systems, which is also distinct from the discourse to date.

#### 4. Conclusions

In his work, Machiavelli constantly made references to the past. He certainly found pleasure in reading ancient writings and describing past events, but above all in history he sought an answer to the question of how to turn Florence into a powerful state that was able to defend itself against such powers as those of France and Spain and then compete victoriously with them on the political scene of Europe. History was for him an authority, a source of verified knowledge about the universal laws of history, about the nature of man and the mechanisms of his action in the world of politics.

Nonetheless, Machiavelli, as did later Francis Bacon, Giambattista Vico, and David Hume, believed that the truths he discovered did not belong to any single period, and are universal. Even if the *Prince* is considered a political document intended first and foremost for all Florence and for the Medicis, it is based on many centuries of confirmed truths about human

---

<sup>13</sup> Kąkolewski (2007, pp. 81-82) pointed out that since the interwar period there has been a tendency to interpret both works by Machiavelli in a complementary way, and he pointed to such authors as Friedrich Meinecke and Federico Chabod.

nature. This is why there is no merit in limiting Machiavelli's analysis of immorality and corruption to his era alone. He addresses all of humanity from a historical perspective (Donskis, 2011, p. 65).

Filippo Del Lucchese also emphasized that although *The Prince* was written for politicians who could help strengthen Florence, the advice formulated in it is so insightful and built on sound knowledge that it does not lose its relevance and can be applied by politicians of all times: „this brief pamphlet [*Il Principe*] on sixteenth-century Florence, therefore, exceeds its own limits and becomes one of the grounding texts of the following centuries and of the whole Western history of political thought” (Del Lucchese, 2015, p. 73). It should be emphasized that by reaching back to history Machiavelli did not recreate it unreflectively, but concentrated on deriving from it universal lessons that would help politicians create a strong and stable state in the future.

History was a source of knowledge for him, but certainly not an undisputed authority. He realized that the past did not always align with his vision of politics, so he altered its meaning in his narrative, treating it as a means to an end. The heritage of the past was never an overwhelming burden for him that destroyed his original ideas. On the contrary, it opened him up to new perspectives of his vision of the world, which was liberated from the previous way of narrating the state and politics. By analysing his use of the heritage of the past, one can say, using contemporary language, that he actually created a narrative based on past events that was marked as much as possible by the present, by his views on how the state should function. As Roland Barthes (1984, p. 225) wrote, historical discourse does not track reality, but gives it meaning. I refer here, of course, to narrativism, which focused on a certain metalinguistic level of the historical work, which allows us to get to the essence and meaning. It is worth noting that in Machiavelli's era, symbolic thinking was well-established, and he himself also resorted to this demanding interpretive and ambiguous method. He used numerous metaphors, such as the most famous one about the politician as a lion and a fox, which are not at all obvious and require hermeneutical thinking skills. Meanwhile, as Donskis pointed out: „Probably no other Renaissance writer has been read letter-by-letter and word-for-word” (Donskis, 2011, p. 56).

When considering the answer to the question of the importance of the heritage of political and legal thought in Machiavelli's work, whether it was a pillar or a façade, it seems that different answers may be given, for to this day his treatises are interpreted differently. In my opinion, this heritage was just a beautiful facade, because although

referring to it is an important part of his narrative about the world of politics, moreover, he proved that using it does not have to be less important and boring at all; his innovative and bold ideas, which are independent of the existing discourse about politics, are in the foreground. It is because of those ideas that his treatises are still a compulsory read for all those wishing to debate substantively about the state, law, and the mechanisms of politics.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

- ARYSTOTELES (2001), *Polityka*, (trans. M. Chigerowa et al.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa.
- BARANOWSKA M. (2018), *Cel uświęca środki, czyli Niccolò Machiavellego rozważania o władzy*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń.
- BARTHES R. (1984), *Dyskurs historii*, (trans. A. Rysiewicz, Z. Kloch), in „Pamiętnik Literacki: czasopismo kwartalne poświęcone historii i krytyce literatury polskiej” 75, no. 3, pp. 225-236.
- BASZKIEWICZ J. (1973), *Niccolò Machiavelli – jakobin XVI wieku*, in A. Tomasiak-Brzost (ed.) *Niccolò Machiavelli. Paradoksy losów doktryny*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa.
- BERLIN I. (2002), *Zmysł rzeczywistości. Studia z historii idei*, (trans. M. Filipczuk), Zysk i S-ka, Poznań.
- CASSIRER E. (2006), *Mit państwa*, (trans. A. Staniewska), Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, Warszawa.
- DEL LUCCHESI, F. (2015), *Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- DONSKINS L. (2011), *The Modern, who believed that he was the Ancient: Niccolò Machiavelli in European thought and political imagination*”, pp. 49-65, in: L. Donskis (ed.), *Niccolò Machiavelli: history, power, and virtue*, Rodopi, Amsterdam–New York.
- DZIUBKA K. (2008), *Obywatelskość jako virtù podmiotu demokracji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław.
- EKES J. (2001), *Natura–wolność–władza. Studium z dziejów myśli politycznej Renesansu*, PAX, Warszawa.
- FIKTUS P. (2008), *Interpretacje virtù Machiavellego w nauce polskiej*, in „Wrocławskie Studia Erazmiańskie”, pp. 105-116.

- GELDERREN M., SKINNER Q. (eds.) (2002), *Republicanism: a Shared European Heritage*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- GILBERT F. (1954), *The Concept of Nationalism in Machiavelli's Prince*, in "Studies in the Renaissance" 1, pp. 38-48.
- GŁADZIUK N. (1995), *W górę rzeki*, in S. Filipowicz, N. Gładziuk, S. Józefowicz (eds.), *Republika. Rozważania o przemianach archetypu*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa.
- KĄKOLEWSKI I. (2007), *Melancholia władzy. Problem tyranii w europejskiej kulturze politycznej XVI stulecia*, Wydawnictwo Neriton, Warszawa.
- LIVIUS T. P. (1969), *The early history of Rome: books I-V of the History of Rome from its foundation*, (trans. A. de Sélincourt), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- MACHIAVELLI N. (1883), *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, (trans. N. H. Thomson), Kegan Paul Trench and co., London.
- MACHIAVELLI N. (1972), *Żywot Castruccia Castracaniego z Lukki*, pp. 669-700, in N. Machiavelli, *Wybór pism*, (trans. Jan Malarczyk), Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa.
- MACHIAVELLI N. (1990), *Historie florenckie*, (trans. Karol Estreicher), PWN, Warszawa–Kraków.
- MACHIAVELLI N. (1998), *The Prince*, (trans. W. K. Marriott), online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm#chap07> (access date: 15.05.2022)
- MACHIAVELLI N. (2011), *Niccolò Machiavelli a Francesco Vettori, Forlì, 16 aprile 1527*, in S. Masaracchio, C. Bachecca (eds.), *Niccolo' Machiavelli Lettere a Francesco Vettori*, p. 193. Ebook. [http://www.aiutamici.com/PortalWeb/eBook/ebook/Niccolo\\_Machiavelli-Lettere\\_a\\_Francesco\\_Vettori.pdf](http://www.aiutamici.com/PortalWeb/eBook/ebook/Niccolo_Machiavelli-Lettere_a_Francesco_Vettori.pdf) (access date: 9.05.2022).
- MALARCZYK J. (1968), *Historyzm Machiavellego*, in „Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie- Skłodowska Lublin-Polonia” XV, no. 1, pp. 5-22.
- MANELI M. (1968), *Machiavelli*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa.
- MANENT P. (2014), *Przemiany rzeczy publicznej. Od Aten do całej ludzkości*, (trans. W. Dłuski), Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, Gdańsk.
- MANSFIELD H. C. (1996), *Machiavelli's Virtue*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London.

- PETTIT P. (1999), *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- POCOCK J. G. A. (1975), *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Political Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- RUBINSTEIN N. (1991), *Italian Political Thought, 1450-1530*, pp. 30-65, in: J. H. Burns, M. Goldie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. DOI:10.1017/CHOL9780521247160.004
- RZEGOCKI A. (2008), *Racja stanu a polska tradycja myślenia o polityce*, Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków.
- SCHÖLDERLE T. (2002), *Das Prinzip der Macht. Neuzeitliches Politik- und Staatsdenken bei Thomas Hobbes und Niccolò Machiavelli*, Galda Verlag, Berlin–Cambridge.
- SEIDLER G. L. (1997), *Humanieści florency*, pp. 325-343, in: A. Korobowicz, H. Olszewski (eds.), *Studia z historii państwa, prawa i idei. Prace dedykowane Janowi Malarczykowi*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin.
- SKINNER Q. (1978), *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- SZACKI J. (1973), *Użytki historii w doktrynie politycznej Machiavellego*, in A. Tomasiak-Brzost (ed.), *Niccolo Machiavelli. Paradoksy losów doktryny*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa.
- SZYMAŃSKI S. (2010), *Od tłumacza*, pp. 9-29, in: J. Rawls, *Wykłady z historii filozofii polityki*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa.
- UNGER M. J. (2011), *Machiavelli. A Biography*, Simon & Schuster, New York.