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The Ruler

Notes on Chapter XV, *Il Principe*, by Niccolò Machiavelli

Preface

This article is devoted to the most important fragment of Niccolò Machiavelli's work, which is the fifteenth chapter of his famous work, entitled "Il Principe". The chapter is connected with many important issues, such as the presentation of the division adopted by the Florentine philosopher on his considerations concerning, on the one hand, "principati" and, on the other hand, "repubbliche", which raises the question of the system of dividing the political systems used by Machiavelli. There is also a question about the adequacy of the Polish translation of "księstwo" as (principality) and "il principe" as "Książę" (The Prince). Finally and most importantly, Chapter XV seems to answer the question of what is the most important philosophical element of the Florentine's thought and the foundation on which his deliberations are based.

Chapter XV of *The Prince* seems to be a unique fragment of Machiavelli's work. It is a fragment of a philosophical intensity rarely presented by him. One can risk a thesis that is the basis of Machiavelli's political doctrine and sheds light on many problems important to his thoughts. Laurence Arthur Burd wrote about this chapter that it is "(...) the most important passage illustrating Machiavelli's purpose and method."¹

The title of the chapter sounds: "Of Those Things for Which Men And Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed", which suggests that it will be devoted to the question of the assessment of conduct, with particular emphasis on the conduct of the rulers. But in the main body of the chapter, right at the beginning of the chapter, one can find an introduction that seems to suggest something quite different:

It remains now to see what the modes and government of a prince should be with subjects and with friends. And because I know that many have written of this, I fear that in writing of it again, I may be held presumptuous, especially since in disputing this matter I depart from the orders of others. But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it.²

"Prince" or "Ruler"?

The first noteworthy issue that appears in the above-mentioned fragment is important, especially for the Polish reader. A doubt arises, which is important also in the context of the title of Florentine's book, to what extent is the translation of "Il Principe" as "Książę" (Prince) adequate? Of course, in terms of a dictionary, the term can be translated in this way, but the question is, to what extent is the context of the term Machiavelli consistent with the Polish context of the word "książe" (prince)?

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Lawrence Arthur Burd (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1891), 282.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, transl. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61.

In Italian, the noun “il principe” means both “książe” (prince) and “władca” (ruler). “Principere” from which the term “il principe” is derived in the Tuscan dialect, means to begin, initiate, and one can say “to stand at the beginning.”³ The Latin term “princeps”, from which the Florentine “Il principe” is derived, has a twofold, although one might say, synonymous origins. On the one hand, the oldest source of this word is the Greek ἀρχή, which for Aristotle, apart from the commonly known meanings in the sense of “beginning”, “source”, was also understood as “power”, “office”, which was later translated into Latin terms: *initium*, *principium* and *empire*. In the Christian tradition, in the Greek language, the context of this word was also introduced in relation to angelology, where ἀρχή appears in the plural as ἀρχαί, which in turn in the Latin version is *principatus* and, for example in Polish translation, in the so-called, Millennium Bible, has been translated as “zwierzchności” (principalities). Then, in Christian theology, the term appears in Pseudo Dionysius Areopagite, who in his work *De coelesti hierarchia*, describing the title structure of the heavenly hierarchy, writes that: “Before this, however, they range pre-eminently, the Orders of Archangels, and the Principalities [*Αρχαί*], the Authorities, and Powers, and as many Beings as the revealing traditions of the Oracles recognise as superior to them.”⁴

The above-mentioned term can also be found in Latin, for example, in Isidore of Seville, who writes in the *Etymology*: “Principalities (*Principatus*) are those who preside over the bands of angels, and they take the name of Principality because they charge the angels below them with fulfilling the divine ministry.”⁵

In the secular tradition, the term *princeps* appeared in the titles of ancient Rome, where the name *princeps senator* was initially associated with the title of the oldest and most empowered senator. After the republic was transformed into an empire, the title of *princeps senator*, later shortened to *princeps*

³ See: Stefano Rosi Galli, *Vocabolario del Vernacolo Fiorentino e del Dialecto Toscano* (Agosto: Romano Editore, 2008), 31.

⁴ Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_13_heavenly_hierarchy.htm#c5.

⁵ Isidore of Seville, “*Etymologiarum sive omnium libri XX*”, book VII (V:19), transl. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, in: *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 161.

itself, was one of emperor's titles and retained the character of an inherited title conferred by the senate. It was in reference to it that the political system of the first phase of the Roman Empire was also called *principate*.

An interesting context of the meaning of this term also appears in the history of Poland. During the period of the country's fragmentation, the title of *princeps*, also known as a *senior*, was held by the superior prince, "the prince over other princes". This rule was introduced by Bolesław Krzywousty in 1138, and it disappeared around 1227 with the death of Leszek Biały. A visible sign of *princeps*' domination over other princes was the privilege of owning the land of Kraków, with Kraków as a symbol of power.

It can be said that the Polish case of the occurrence of the term *princeps* basically combines both of the aforementioned traditions because the titles of Polish princes from the period of the fragmentation also resulted from relations with the ruler of *Sacrum Imperium Romanum*. According to Norman Davies: "In the Latin documents of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Piassts were most frequently denoted by the dignity of Dux. Literally translated as 'Duke', or in German as 'Herzog', the title inaccurately implies a degree of subordination to a feudal superior". Davies adds: "In fact, it might better be rendered by chief or warleader."⁶ When, under the will of Władysław Krzywousty in 1138, the Polish Kingdom was divided, the title of "senior prince" appeared, which was to receive, as already mentioned, the province of Krakow and exercise supremacy over the brothers. This title, in Latin, was *princeps*. It should be added here that in the 16th century Polish, it is the word "prince" that has all the rich baggage of meanings associated with the word *princeps*, where the "prince" will be both the lord, the next ruler after God, as well as the son of the king or magnate wearing this title.⁷

Regardless of one's attitude towards these traditions, it is clear that they coincide and indicate, firstly, the one who is "first" among others on a given hierarchical level, but also to the one who is the source of the prime principles. Rather more importantly in the secular tradition, *princeps* is first among "princes".

⁶ Norman Davies, *God's Playground. A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), v. I, 60.

⁷ See: entry „książę”, in: *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, <http://spxvi.edu.pl/>, access: 15.04.2021.

In conclusion, although *il principe* can be translated as “prince”, the word “władca zwierzchni” (overlord) or the somewhat foreign polonised *princeps* seems to be a more adequate translation.

When it comes to the translation of this term, it should be mentioned that in Polish literature, there are four most important translations of *The Prince*. The first translation of 1868 by Antoni Sozański was published at the Jagiellonian University. The author of the translation claims that he actually translated Machiavelli’s work “already in 1851 from a German translation by Rehberg (Hanover 1810), but it was prevented from printing by the Lviv censorship.”⁸ His translation from 1868 was directly from Italian. The next two translations were published in the Polish Republic. The first one was made by Wincenty Rzymowski in 1917 and the next one in 1920 by Czesław Nanke. The third one should be considered the best out of those three translations. Agnieszka Pietryka, who was already quoted here, writes that:

Nanke’s translation is characterised by great care for the observance of the principles of the art of translation: Nanke provides information about *the Prince’s* manuscripts (in a total number of eighteen) and their description by Tommasini, the translation is based on a comparison of six Italian editions, which were published over the course of almost a hundred years, and declares faithfulness to the original not only in content but also in form.⁹

Nanke’s diligence is confirmed by the biggest popularity of his translation and the fact that it was included in the only Polish-language collection of Machiavelli’s writings, the 1972 volume *A selection of writings*¹⁰ endorsed by Jan Malarczyk¹¹ himself. Finally, there is the only contemporary translation

⁸ Agnieszka Pietryka, „Polska recepcja *Księcia* Machiavellego – rozpoznania wstępne”, *Rocznik Komparatystyczny* 8 (2017): 177.

⁹ Pietryka, „Polska recepcja”: 178.

¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Wybór pism*, preface: Jan Malarczyk, selection, K. Żaboklicki, transl. J. Gałuszka, J. Malarczyk, Czesław Nanke, M. Wyszogorska-Ślązka, K. Żaboklicki (Warszawa: PIW, 1972).

¹¹ At this point it is worth mentioning the work of Jan Malarczyk, which is a special item in Polish literature devoted to the thinker from Florence. To not be groundless, one can use a quote from the dissertation that Lech Dubel devoted to Malarczyk. And he wrote about Malarczyk’s book in the following way: “In 1963, in the series ‘Habitations’, the monograph *At the sources of Italian political realism. Machiavelli and Guicciardini* was published. We can

of 2005 by Anna Klimkiewicz. It is interesting but not very popular due to its poor accessibility.

As for the practice of translating the term “prince” within existing translations, for example, Sozański translates “repubbliche e principati” as “republics and monarchies”,¹² so possibly he could have titled the the whole text: “monarch”, and not “Treatise on *The Prince*” as he did. Interestingly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau reasoned similarly in the context of the prince as a monarch, who, repeatedly quoting Machiavelli in his work *The Social Contract*, while writing about *The Prince*, notes that the book gives instructions to “kings”.¹³ This an apt change whose trace was presented by Machiavelli himself, who in *Discourses on Livy* makes this division a few times and writes for example about the general principle “that it never or rarely happens that any republic or kingdom [*repubblica o regno*] is ordered well from the beginning”.¹⁴ The uniqueness of this particular passage is also evident in the title of the chapter: “That It Is Necessary to Be Alone If One Wishes to Order a Republic Anew or to Reform It Altogether outside Its Ancient Orders”.¹⁵ Additionally, the already mentioned Czesław Nanke also expresses doubts about the translation of “Il principe” as “Książę”. In the introduction to his translation, he explains that: “*Principe* is a ruler, monarch, lord overlord. The word *duca*, prince (...) is more limited in its meaning. In the Polish translation, the difference between *duca* and *principe* is blurred.”¹⁶ Among the possibilities indicated by Nanke, “the lord overlord” is an interesting one, which term could be developed as a “superior ruler”, but ultimately, taking into account all the indicated

responsibly say that an equally interesting and erudite work devoted to Machiavelli and Guicciardini has appeared in Poland neither before nor after”. L. Dubel, Jan Malarczyk, in: *Tendencje rozwojowe myśli politycznej i prawnej*, eds. M. Maciejewski, M. Marszał, M. Sadowski (Wrocław: Wydział Prawa, Administracji i Ekonomii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2014), 70.

¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Traktat o księciu*, transl. A. Sozański (Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1868), 15.

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract”, in: *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, transl. S. Dunn (New Heaven–London: Yale University Press, 2002), 205.

¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, transl. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 80.

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 80.

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, transl. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61.

possibilities and variants, it seems that due to the content of the work, “Il principe” should be translated as “ruler”.

Republics and Principalities

But let us get back to our text. The most important part of Chapter XV sounds:

But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing (*verità effettuale della cosa*) than to the imagination of it (*immaginazione di essa*). And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good.¹⁷

At this point, attention should be paid to another essential element of Florentine’s reasoning. Machiavelli writes about “principalities and republics”. On the one hand, it is a piece of important information about the division of constitutional forms used by the author. On the other, it is an important signal that makes the reader understand that it is not only about one of the constitutional forms that the work is devoted to, but that Machiavelli formulates here the truth concerning the entire realm of governing. “Principalities and republics” constitutes the whole of politics; Machiavelli does not mention any other political system forms. It is true that in the introduction to *Discourses on Livy*, the philosopher writes that: “some who have written on republics say that in them is one of three states called by them principality (*principate*), aristocrats (*ottimati*), and popular (*popolare*).”¹⁸ He also mentions the division of Aristotle known from *Politics*, adding to his own typol-

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61.

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 58–59.

ogy the distinction between true and perverted forms, but ultimately remains with the original division into principalities and republics. The practice of carefully separating the content of these two types of the state is very consistent for the Florentine. An example of this can be found in the literal first words of *The Prince*, which begins as follows: “All states, all dominions that have held and do hold empire over men have been and are either republics or principalities”. Then, in the next sentence, the author seems to write that, when it comes to the principality itself, “the principalities are either hereditary, in which the bloodline of their lord has been their prince for a long time”¹⁹ etc. The situation is similar in the second main work of the Florentine *Discourses on Livy*, where he writes: “How dangerous a thing it is to make oneself head of a new thing that pertains to many, and how difficult it is to treat it and to lead it and, when led, to maintain it, would be too long and too high a matter to discourse of. So, reserving it for a more convenient place (...)”²⁰

Returning to the remark made in Chapter XV, the sudden mention in a book on principalities that the truth being presented concerns principalities and republics is an unquestionable signal that the author is departing from the current way of presenting truths concerning only one systemic form and is moving to statements of a general nature. One can also add here that Machiavelli, referring to *The Prince* in the famous letter of December 10, 1513, addressed to Francesco Vettori, called this book “un opuscolo *de Principatibus*”.²¹ Thus, in a work essentially devoted to principalities, one can find a notable exception because the author writes not only about principalities but also about principalities and republics, which should be understood as a situation of formulating theses concerning politics as a whole.

¹⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 5.

²⁰ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 386.

²¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, “Letter 216”, in: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le Opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Bompiani, 2018), 2876.

“New Modes”

Another, one could say systemic, issue raised in Chapter XV is an innovative approach to the considered topic. On the one hand, the author points out that “many have written of this”, hinting that this subject already has its own literature, and then adds that if the author intends to write things useful for “whoever understands it”, you have to go for the truth and not for its imagination. Trying to understand the philosopher’s intentions, it can be said that this fragment contains a very clear message that the perception of politics is different from politics in reality. The author intends to write for politicians not to deal with the image but with what politics really is. This approach is undoubtedly *novum*, and hence Guiccardini wrote to Machiavelli: “Since you have always been *ut plurimum* extravagant of opinion from the commune, and inventor of new and unusual things.”²² Besides, Machiavelli himself notices his innovativeness when writing in the preface to the first book *Discourses on Livy*:

Although the envious nature of men has always made it no less dangerous to find new modes and orders than to seek unknown waters and lands, because men are more ready to blame than to praise the actions of others, nonetheless, driven by that natural desire that has always been in me to work, without any respect, for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone, I have decided to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone (...).²³

Ultimately, this *novum* in the Florentine’s work can be considered the breakthrough, constituting the foundation of the modern philosophy of politics. The famous *mi e parso più conveniente andare dietro alia veritti effettuale della cosa, che all’immaginazione di essa* (it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it).²⁴ after all, emphasises, equal to Cartesian, a new beginning of philosophy, albeit political. It is worth noting that the similarity in targeting what is new in

²² Guiccardini a Machiavelli, Modena, 18 maggio 1521, in: *Lettere a Francesco Vettori e Francesco Guiccardini*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Milano: Biblioteca universale Rizzoli, 1996), 299.

²³ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 52.

²⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61.

both Machiavelli and Descartes is completely not accidental. According, for example, to Richard Kennington, Descartes' search for a new fundamental method, "renewing" his knowledge and the need to find new foundations, has its source in the achievements of the Florentine. The person who saw this aspect of Machiavelli's philosophy and passed it on to Descartes²⁵ was Francis Bacon. Despite this mediation, the thought of an individually undertaken reform based on a new method is conveyed unchanged and has become the basis of Cartesian research.²⁶

Who Is Machiavelli Writing For?

The passage saying that the author is addressing his words, as it was already mentioned, to "whoever understands it" sounds a bit mysterious. There seems to be a suggestion in this statement concerning the transmission of the truth to those who are ready for it, a truth that will be different from the already mentioned image. This is reminiscent of the classic figure of an enlightened philosopher from Plato's cave, bringing the truth to his fellow men, even though they may not always want to accept it. And just as the philosopher in Plato could be killed, so also "killed" was *Prince* for a time, when Pope Paul IV entered this work into the first Roman index of forbidden books, in which it remained until its abolition in 1966.

Antonio Gramsci, referring to the fragment in question, wrote about the valuable role of "a political education":

It is quite true that Machiavelli revealed something, and did not merely theorise reality; but what was the aim of his revelation? A moralistic aim or a political

²⁵ Descartes does not mention Machiavelli in his writings. We can learn that he knew his writings from two letters to Elisabeth Simmern van Pallandt. Although Descartes, in the first of his letters from September 1646, refers extensively to *The Prince*, including Chapter XV, he overlooks the thesis that attracted his attention in Bacon's writings. We can assume that Machiavelli's thought, despite the documented reading of both *The Prince* and *Discourses*, did not directly affect him. See: https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/cartes1643_1.pdf

²⁶ See: Richard Kennington, *On Modern Origins, Essays in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 202–203.

one? It is commonly asserted that Machiavelli's standards of political behaviour are practised, but not admitted. Great politicians it is said – start off by denouncing Machiavelli, by declaring themselves to be anti-Machiavellian, precisely in order to be able to put his standards “piously” into practice. Was not Machiavelli himself a poor Machiavellian, one of those who “are in the know” and foolishly give the game away, whereas vulgar Machiavellianism teaches one to do just the opposite? (...) One may therefore suppose that Machiavelli had in mind “those who are not in the know This was no negative political education – of tyrant-haters (...) but a positive education – of those who have to recognise certain means as necessary, even if they are the means of tyrants, because they desire certain ends.”²⁷

“There Is” and “There Should Be”

However, the most important statement to be found in Chapter XV is the fragment about the difference between “how one lives” to “how one should live”. This fundamental distinction can be reduced to a simpler one: “is” and “should be”, which becomes a specific point of reference for the entire political sphere. We find numerous references to this fragment in the philosophical literature. Jean Jacques Rousseau writes in *The Social Contract*: “I want to inquire whether, taking men as they are and laws as they can be made to be.”²⁸ Spinoza, in the introduction to the *Political Treatise*, seems to refer directly to this fragment:

Philosophers conceive of the passions which harass us as vices into which men fall by their own fault, and, therefore, generally deride, bewail, or blame them, or execrate them, if they wish to seem unusually pious. And so they think they are doing something wonderful, and reaching the pinnacle of learning, when they are clever enough to bestow manifold praise on such human nature, as is nowhere to be found, and to make verbal attacks on that which, in fact,

²⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and transl. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 332–333.

²⁸ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 155.

exists. For they conceive of men, not as they are, but as they themselves would like them to be.²⁹

Francis Bacon, writing about Machiavelli, notes: “So that we are much beholden to Machiavel and others, that write what men do, and not what they ought to do.”³⁰ The same Bacon, referring to those who describe this “as it should be”, notes: “As for the philosophers, they make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light because they are so high.”³¹

The distinction between “is” and “should” is, in fact, the basis of the doctrine of so-called “political realism”. If we refer to “as it should be” in politics, we are dealing with idealism, and if, like Machiavelli, we take “as it is” as a point of reference, we are talking about political realism. Due to this distinction, Machiavelli not only provides a clear explanation of his own position, but he also gives a precise tool defining the opposite position. Based on realism, politics turns out to be a specific space cut off from all other areas. “The political world has lost its connection not only with religion or metaphysics but also with all the other forms of man’s ethical and cultural life. It stands alone-in an empty space”,³² as Ernst Cassirer summed up the situation.

It is worth adding here that the source and the first version of the key part of Chapter XV is the letter written in Perugia to Giovanni Battista Soderini of October 1506, where Machiavelli writes:

(...) because times vary and affairs are of varies types, one man’s desires come out as he had prayed they would; and that man is fortunate who harmonises his procedure with his time, but on the contrary he is not fortunate who in his actions is out of harmony with his time and with type of its affairs (*tempo et da*

²⁹ Benedict de Spinoza, “Political Treaties”, in: *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, transl. from the Latin, with an Introduction by Robert Harvey Monro Elwes, vol. 1, *Introduction, Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus, Tractatus Politicus*. Revised edition (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891), https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/elwes-the-chief-works-of-benedict-de-spinoza-vol-1#Spinoza_1321.01_1158.

³⁰ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, book II, chapter XXI, par. 9, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5500/5500-h/5500-h.htm>.

³¹ Bacon, *The Advancement*, book II, chapter XXIII, par. 49, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5500/5500-h/5500-h.htm>.

³² Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1946), 140.

l'ordine delle cose). Hence it can well happen that two men working differently come to the same end, because each of them adopts himself to what he encounters, for affairs are of as many types as there are provinces and states. Thus, because times and affairs (*tempo et da l'ordine delle cose*) in general and individually change often, and men do not change their imaginings and their procedures, it happens that a man at one time has good fortune and at another time bad. And certainly anybody wise enough to understand the times and the types of affairs and to adopt himself to them would have always good fortune, or he would protect himself always from bad, and it would come to be true that the wise man would rule the stars and the Fates.³³

This prototype of Chapter XV seems to shed more light on the understanding of Machiavelli's central philosophical thesis. A man should follow two variables, which are: time (*tempo*) and the order of things (*l'ordine delle cose*). If he "stiffens" his way of acting by applying timeless and unchanging principles, he makes his actions deviate from reality, and the one who acts this way, as Machiavelli writes in *The Prince*, "learns his ruin rather". Hence, according to Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli's central political belief is "that the clue to successful statecraft lies in recognising the force of circumstances, accepting what necessity dictates, and harmonising one's behaviour with the times."³⁴

The main difference between the letter of 1506 and the later Chapter XV of *The Prince*, which determined the scandalous doctrine of Machiavelli, is the presumption that the thesis conveyed in *Il Principe* is limited to morality. Let us note that in place of the general thesis about the changeability of "times and the nature of things", it is a thesis about a broad spectrum in which the ways of proceeding used in political life are located and that the permanent element would be moral principles requiring one to act in only one, strictly defined, way. In this light, morality becomes an element that prevents the ruler from fully adjusting to the circumstances. In order to weaken the moral impact of Machiavelli's thesis, one can simply speak of empiricism or apriorism in the assessment of human nature, following the example of Isaiah Berlin.

³³ Niccolò Machiavelli, "Letter 116", in: *A Letters of Machiavelli*, A Selection, ed. and transl. Allan Gilbert (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 99.

³⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 43.

Men must be studied in their behaviour as well as in their professions. There is no a priori route to the knowledge of the human material with which a ruler must deal. There is, no doubt, an unchanging human nature the range of whose response to changing situations can be determined (there is no trace in Machiavelli's thought of any notion of systematic evolution or of the individual or society as a self-transforming entity); one can obtain this knowledge only by empirical observation.³⁵

However, it should also be noted that all the realism, even if assumed to be right, also has its limitations, and each attempt to absolutely define "the things as they are" is tainted with the author's imaginations and inevitably moves towards what he believes "should be." As Piotr Kimla aptly noted it:

The realism of the author of *Florentine Stories* is not absolute. Not because none of the living can be fully realistic, but each to a greater or lesser extent feeds on the unreal food of his own imagination and pious wishes. The decisive factor in qualifying as realists is primarily the method of diagnosing reality, determining the scale of deformation. Machiavelli's method can be considered scientific, provided that after the sixteenth-century thinker, we will not expect the degree of systematicity, purposefulness and self-awareness of a nineteenth-century or twentieth-century scholar.³⁶

Ultimately, one can use the diagnosis of Ernst Cassirer, who, seemingly defending Machiavelli, noticed: "*The Prince* is neither a moral nor an immoral book: it is Simply a technical book."³⁷ It can also be assumed that Machiavelli, as Carl Schmitt noticed over four hundred years later, considered the sphere of politics "rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced."³⁸ Anyway, if Machiavelli is to be accused of something, it is a concern for efficiency. "His political experience had taught him that the political game never had been played without

³⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current, Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 51.

³⁶ Piotr Kimla, *Historycy-politycy jako źródło realizmu politycznego* (Kraków: WUJ, 2009), 114.

³⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth*, 153.

³⁸ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, transl. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

fraud, deception, treachery, and felony. He neither blamed nor recommended these things. His only concern was to find the best move – the move that wins the game.”³⁹

History was an additional way of “finding the winning game move”, hence the historical activity of the author of *The Prince* is often paid attention to. According to Machiavelli, history carries a lesson about the patterns of, one might say, human action. Machiavelli himself admits to use this method in *Discourses on Livy*, writing:

Whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humours, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic and to take the remedies for them that were used by the ancients, or, if they do not find any that were used, to think up new ones through the similarity of accidents. But because these considerations are neglected or not understood by whoever reads, or, if they are understood, they are not known to whoever governs, it follows that there are always the same scandals in every time.⁴⁰

A little later in the same work, he adds:

Prudent men are accustomed to say, and not by chance or without merit, that whoever wishes to see what has to be considers what has been; for all worldly things in every time have their own counterpart in ancient times. That arises because these are the work of men, who have and always had the same passions, and they must of necessity result in the same effect. It is true that their works are more virtuous now in this province than in that, and in that more than in this, according to the form of education in which those people have taken their mode of life.⁴¹

³⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth*, 143.

⁴⁰ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 145.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 400.

The Prince's Virtues

The last part of Chapter XV constitutes a discussion of the virtues that a ruler should have. “Thus, leaving out what is imagined about a prince and discussing what is true, I say that all men, whenever one speaks of them, and especially princes, since they are placed higher, are noted for some of the qualities that bring them either blame or praise.” The catalogue of features belonging to the prince, listed below, is an introduction to a completely different issue, the question of the ruler’s virtue, which Machiavelli treats, of course, in isolation from the moral evaluation of the above-mentioned features. However, this topic has already been widely discussed in the literature on the subject, and there is no need to take it up again here, especially since it is a separate and pervasive issue.⁴² It is enough to state here that the Florentine addresses the discussion of the virtues of the ruler.

He begins by alluding to the familiar humanist commonplaces: that there is a special group of princely virtues; that these include the need to be liberal, merciful, and truthful; and that all rulers have a duty to cultivate these qualities. Next he concedes – still in orthodox humanist vein – that ‘it would be most praiseworthy’ for a prince to be able at all times to act in such ways. But then he totally rejects the fundamental humanist assumption that these are the virtues a ruler needs to acquire if he wishes to achieve his highest goals. This belief – the nerve and heart of humanist advice books for princes – he regards as an obvious and disastrous mistake. He agrees, of course, about the nature of the ends to be pursued: every prince must seek to maintain his state and obtain glory for himself. But he objects that if these goals are to be attained, no ruler can possibly possess or fully practise all the qualities usually ‘held to be good’. The position in which any prince finds himself is that of trying to protect his interests in a dark world filled with unscrupulous men. If in these circumstances he ‘does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done’ he will simply ‘undermine his power rather than maintain it.’⁴³

⁴² See about it: Romuald Piekarski, *Koncepcja cnót politycznych Machiavellego na tle elementów klasycznej etyki cnót* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2007); Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁴³ Skinner, *Machiavelli*, 42.

This concise comment by Quentin Skinner brings us back to what is much more important than the question: what virtues should a ruler possess? To the key division: “is” and “should”.

End

To sum up: if we were to indicate the “philosopher’s stone” that Machiavelli found, it would certainly be the aforementioned division, and Machiavelli ends Chapter XV in the spirit of the assumptions presented earlier:

And I know that everyone will confess that it would be a very praiseworthy thing to find mentioned qualities that are held good. But because he cannot have them, nor wholly observe them, since human conditions do not permit it, it is necessary for him to be so prudent as to know how to avoid the infamy of those vices that would take his state from him and to be on guard against those that do not, if that is possible; but if one cannot, one can let them go on with less hesitation. And furthermore one should not care about incurring the fame of those vices without which it is difficult to save one’s state; for if one consider everything well, one will find to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and wellbeing.⁴⁴

Concerning the above passage, one can say that politics has its own rules, but there seems to be more to it. The foundation of governance is to rule, and in order to govern, one must effectively remain in power. The question of relating to principles in this situation has a secondary nature. As Machiavelli notes in one of the following chapters of *The Prince*, a ruler must be *uno mezzo bestia e mezzo uomo*,⁴⁵ “half a beast and half a man.” Therefore, the only factor beyond our control in this situation is fate – fortune, which is fickle and capricious like a woman to use Machiavelli’s metaphor. Everything else is the question of effectiveness, and it dictates the actions of the ruler.

⁴⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 62.

⁴⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, in: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le Opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze: Bompiani, 2018), 868.

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Abstract

The article is devoted to various aspects of Machiavelli's deliberations that can be found in the 15th chapter of his famous work *Il Principe*. The first part of the article addresses the question of the legitimacy of translating the Italian "Il Principe" into the Polish term "Książę". This issue is presented against the background of the entire history of the Polish translation of this work. The following parts of the article are devoted to the analysis of Chapter XV of *The Prince*. Focusing on this fragment of the philosopher's work is justified by the thesis that constitutes the most philosophical and, consequently, the most important part of his work. The conclusions that can be drawn from his analysis allow us to understand what were the basic assumptions of Florentine's political philosophy.

Keywords: Machiavelli, political realism, *The Prince*, fifteenth chapter