

Valentina Lepri, *Layered Wisdom. Early Modern Collections of Political Precepts*, Padova: Cleup, 2015 (“La filosofia e il suo passato”, 59), pp. 225

In her latest book, Valentina Lepri builds on her previous research on collections of political precepts in early-modern Europe from an innovative point of view.¹ While the focus of her previous publications was the collections of precepts taken from Guicciardini’s *Ricordi*, this book, addressing a variety of case-studies, is innovative in that it not only deals with a rather neglected genre, but also because of its methodology. Lepri chooses to focus on printing workshops as places where books of precepts were literally assembled, seeing these books as the result of a collective effort during which the original text was often manipulated to match the requirements of different audiences. Editors, translators and publishers intervened in the texts, altering their original content but also providing them with explanatory tables and other compendia in order to guide the reader. Collections of precepts were thus shaped according to different political contexts, and printing workshops became influent agents in the transmission of culture as well as in the shaping of political ideas.

The ideal reader of these collections was the counsellor, a new figure who, around the end of the sixteenth century, incorporated “the characteristics [...] of the courtier, the humanist and the captain” (p. 11). The figure of the counsellor as it emerges from collections of precepts “appears to drive the discourse on the practice of politics towards a distinctly novel form of realism, a prelude to the political language that was shortly to emerge in a number of treatises devoted to the concept of the ‘Reason of State’” (ibid.). Realism is a key-word, as these precepts, while drawing from Aristotle as well as from other classical and more recent *auctoritates*, nevertheless aimed to influence the political debate and provide actual guidance. In other words, they were practical tools readily available to readers and political counsellors. As Lepri rightly points out, precepts were produced outside the official world of culture, i.e. academies and universities. As the example of Francesco Sansovino’s *Propositioni overo considerationi in materia di cose di stato* (1583) shows, the tradition and teaching of the classics ought to be blended with practical experience. This double approach was also reflected in the bibliographies of political writings that were produced especially in Germany, at a time when political studies were becoming increasingly crucial. Bibliographies distinguished between two main categories of texts: those falling under the umbrella of the *dissertatio de natura politicae*, i.e. “of a strictly academic type” (p. 27) and those that belonged to the field of the *dissertatio*

¹ V. Lepri, M. E. Severini, *Viaggio e metamorfosi di un testo: I Ricordi di Francesco Guicciardintra XVI e XVII secolo*, Genève 2011.

de studio politico ordinando. This latter included texts revolving around the idea of *prudentia*, and were thus more heavily grounded in political practice. Prudence, or the ability to govern according to changing times and circumstances, soon became a fundamental category, and bibliographies were written that included only works devoted to this elusive concept.

Books of precepts met the taste and the needs of a vast public increasingly interested in politics. This public included “the academic world, the legal sphere and the courts through to both diplomatic and military circles” (p. 40), but it also stretched to reach mercantile circles. Within the vast array of available texts on politics, books of precepts soon gained a considerable share of the book market thanks to the skilled work of printers and editors. As Lepri stresses, the physical appearance of these books was fundamental in securing their success: “the external appearance of the volume ought indeed to foster understanding of the contents, underscoring their importance through clear graphics, while a well-defined structure helps to identify the breakdown of the argument even before starting to read it. The maxims presented tend to be short. [...] Completing what we might call the editorial framework is the table of contents and the preliminary matter” (pp. 40–41). This passage eloquently shows one of the merits of Lepri’s volume, that is the ability to couple the reconstruction of cultural contexts and of the theoretical content of the works studied with a methodology derived from the history of the book. This allows the author to shed light on a number of features that help to explain the relevance that these texts came to have in the European context between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

The spread of Tacitism and the publication of anthologies of precepts taken from his works might in some cases have influenced collections of precepts. Nonetheless, these are a recognizable genre, with peculiar features, such as the prominent part they assign to Italian thinkers and the structured and logical organization of the subject matter into headings and sub-headings, oriented more “towards the practice of statecraft” than towards “the definition of the matter of politics” (p. 44). Given the peculiarly Italian origin of collections of precepts, chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the reconstruction of what could be defined the “pre-history” of the genre. Francesco Guicciardini’s *Ricordi* should be considered the root from which later collections sprang. The origins of the genre were in fact Tuscan and Florentine and must be reconnected to the Florentines’ participation in politics since the Communal Age. Guicciardini was acquainted with a long-lasting tradition of studies in the field of politics and was himself a diplomat. The first of the three versions of his *Ricordi* in particular had a practical dimension to it, touching on administrative and military matters. What is more, Guicciardini had been trained in jurisprudence, and could have been acquainted with the medieval tradition of the *consilia sapientis*, “opinions that the judges request from the legal experts” (p. 67). This tradition,

alongside the peculiarly Florentine tradition of *zibaldoni* and *libri di famiglia*, in which advice in the form of short sentences was collected and handed down from generation to generation, can be seen as the ideal background for the *Ricordi*. Guicciardini's own *libro di famiglia* should be considered as "a sort of workshop" (p. 74) for books of political precepts. Given the pioneering role of Guicciardini, it is no wonder that many of his precepts were included, anonymously, in another early collection of precepts, the *Avvedimenti civili* by Giovan Francesco Lottini (1574), containing 563 precepts. As Lepri shows, Machiavelli is also often quoted in Lottini's commentary to the precepts: as a matter of fact, books of precepts proved an effective tool for the circulation of the otherwise prohibited ideas of the Florentine secretary.

It is important to stress how in presenting each of the collections of precepts she deals with, Lepri builds short and yet exhaustive portraits of their authors and of their cultural context, establishing often illuminating connections between different works by the same author. This becomes evident in chapter 3 (*The Bustling Print Shop*), where the author deals with the first editions of precepts taken from Guicciardini's works, and particularly those edited by Jacopo Corbinelli, Remigio Nannini, and Fra Sisto. In all cases, the *Ricordi* are manipulated, altered, split or fused together, arranged into thematic sections. Not only did the authors turn to the *Ricordi*: some, such as Tommaso Porcacchi and Remigio Nannini, derive teachings from the *Storia d'Italia*. Especially significant is the section dedicated to Francesco Sansovino, whose editorial activity is reconstructed and set in the context of the cultural programme of translations peculiar to the Paduan Accademia degli Infiammati. Sansovino was the author of two collections of precepts: the first one is entitled *Concetti politici, raccolti dagli scritti di diversi autori* (1578, 802 maxims) and relies heavily on Guicciardini and Machiavelli. The second collection is the *Propositioni overo considerazioni in materia di cose di stato* (1583) and includes "Guicciardini's *Ricordi* in the 1582 edition by Fra Sisto that also includes the *Considerazioni* of his fellow friar Nannini, reworked by the publisher. This is followed by the maxims of Giovan Francesco Lottini, his *Avvedimenti civili*, and once again by Sansovino's aphorisms" (p. 126). This kind of multi-layered edition helps to shed light on the title of this book: "layered wisdom." Collections of precepts grew one from another and every new editor added or manipulated something: "every edition of these books represented a new input into the process of layered political wisdom" (p. 209).

The fourth chapter, *The Epistemology of Precept*, explores the peculiar nature of this genre. In particular, Lepri shows how precepts were able to bridge the gap between *otia* and *negotia*. Late sixteenth-century princes and rulers simply had no time to study politics and history. Advice had to be taken through short, aphoristic texts. Precepts responded to this need. Authors of precepts could rely on comparable genres, starting from the already mentioned *consilia*, through medical literature, to the

then-flourishing military texts, especially the many books addressing the shaping of the ideal captain, often replete with precepts. As Lepri writes: “Mingling and synthesising the languages of law, statecraft, war and medicine, the authors of the collections of precepts were evidently all driven by the same aim: to transform political praxis into a precise science: the science of action”; and, again: “the precepts aspire to become ‘maxims’: that is, universal judgments and definitions like those of logically-demonstrated knowledge” (p. 141). How and to what extent this was possible according to Aristotelian rules on *gnome*, is thoroughly discussed in the light of the distinction between demonstration and persuasion. The author maintains that “in the case of the collections of political precepts [...] the dividing line between ways of demonstrating and ways of persuading is far from distinct” (p. 155). Finally, from the linguistic point of view, precepts are deeply influenced by Machiavelli’s prose. The freshness of the images, concise sentences, simple terminology, recourse to metaphors, are all characteristics that can be found in Machiavelli. Thus, it can be affirmed that Machiavelli and Aristotle had a preponderant impact on collections of precepts. In their search for universality and invariability peculiar to scientific propositions, Aristotle and Machiavelli conferred upon precepts the rigour and the clarity necessary to turn them into a discipline.

The last chapter – *The Destiny of the Collections* – is a remarkable picture of the spread and influence of collections of precepts in Europe (especially in France, Germany and England), in some cases paving the way for future research (as regards, for example, their diffusion in Spain, research that “has yet to be commenced”, p. 184). This chapter shows how the editors and authors of collections of precepts were often actively engaged in politics, belonging to the diplomatic or military worlds. The last part of this chapter is dedicated to the interesting case-study of the *Monita politico-moralia* (1664) by the Polish noble Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro. A philosopher and polymath, Fredro travelled widely across Europe. His collection of 374 precepts are inspired, among others, by Machiavelli, Paolo Giovio and Guicciardini, while classical sources are filtered through Justus Lipsius’ works. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth experienced a partially republican order comparable to that of Venice and Florence: this accounts for Fredro’s attention to Italian political thought. From Guicciardini’s writings he seems to derive his peculiar stress on the notion of dissimulation. The image of the politician emerging from Italian collections of precepts, “displaying the features of both the diplomat and the military captain” (p. 199), was particularly appealing to the Polish nobility. The purpose of Fredro’s book is to “advocate the author’s vision of an ideal political system” (p. 205). This latter is based on the idea of government as the result of the common decisions of a restricted élite of wise individuals. In a time when Poland was under threat from Russia and Sweden, this would have assured the survival of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The fickle multitude which Italian

writers identified as the common people, who had to be excluded from the *arcana imperii*, coincided in Fredro's thought with the members of the National Diet, members of the Polish nobility which included Fredro himself. Thus, Italian precepts could be used "to defend the borders of Poland itself as it faced challenges from both the East and the West" (p. 206).

To conclude, this is a most useful and well-researched book that opens the path for new research that will allow us to better understand the nature of political debate in the early modern world.

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