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Foreword

The idea that knowledge is constructed jointly, through a collective effort, is an ancient concept that dates back to the classical age. It was, however, in the early modern age that it became the basis of a programmatic plan for a number of institutions, through the support of the powerful new instrument of printing. Throughout Europe academies, universities and symposia were engaged in intellectual debates regarding the epistemological characteristics of the subjects of study, and these discussions also extended to methodological approaches and concerned the hierarchy between disciplines.

The subject of this book is not the sites traditionally appointed to the promotion of knowledge, but the printing workshops and the various professional figures operating in the sphere of publishing who fostered the production of a particular type of collective knowledge in the early modern age: the collections of political precepts. The production of Renaissance political precepts is an extremely vast subject. The numerous studies that have addressed it to date have concentrated predominantly on the use of the precept as a vehicle for specific currents of thought, such as Neostoicism and Tacitism, or to circulate the

reflections of certain censured writers, foremost among them Niccolò Machiavelli.

However, an equally important aspect of these works, which is connected with their intrinsically choral nature, has been completely neglected. The true merit for the success of such collections resides with the editors, translators and publishers of the volumes, whose work gave rise to a fundamental cultural experience which played a decisive role, not only in the circulation of the texts but also in the political debate in general.

Indeed, the multiplicity of voices that characterises the anthologies of political precepts is found not only within the covers of the books, but in the context of their production as a whole, since it extends to all those involved in their making. In the print shops of the late 16th century, the publishers and their collaborators showed themselves to be attentive to the market but also to social change, to the extent that they intervened on the texts with the greatest freedom. They supplemented them with commentaries and guided the reader by providing explanatory tables and compendia, with the result that – and this is the most interesting aspect – at times their manipulations constituted works in their own right. In their reorganisation, their cutting here and adding there, they constructed new and original collections on political topics, both by reworking existing anthologies and by developing new ones. They did so with what would probably nowadays be considered a lack of due respect for the original texts and authors, selecting fragments of the writings of different thinkers and appropriating their words and ideas.

There is nothing odd about the fact that in their work – which at times resulted in a radical distortion of the original material – they acted as if they themselves were the authors. And that's not all: by drawing emblematic phrases from the writings of other thinkers, they transformed them too into precept writers: they were writers of maxims *malgré eux*, since they had at no point made a conscious decision to try their hand at the genre. Thus, in such anthologies we might find on the same page precepts by Fadrique Furió Ceriol and reflections by the editor

of the volume rubbing shoulders with maxims taken from the writings of, say, Paolo Giovio.

However many times the aphorisms were mixed and matched, changed hands and places, the aim of various editions continued to be the same: to furnish advice and instructions for government along with a new vision of politics. The lack of attention towards this extraordinary aspect of the cultural history of the early modern age can probably be explained by the fact that it is a 'concealed' collective production. Indeed, the persons involved – both authors and editors – do not act in the same place and contemporarily but in different social contexts and at different times. The common effort is bent to the same purpose, namely to elucidate politics, but it materialises in a vertical direction through a stratification of actions at the end of which only the finished object, the book, documents the participation of the various agents.

This study is devoted to a description of the main features of several texts and their editorial history, developing over a timespan stretching approximately from the end of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth. The phenomenon is too vast to permit a complete reconstruction. Consequently, the idea is to focus on a series of emblematic cases, mapping a symbolic route from the compilation of the first collections, through the codification of the genre by experts in textual production up to its gradual transformation and decline.

The first two sections of the book provide a general overview of the argument and the genesis of the precepts in Tuscany. One of the financial and economic powers of the time, Florence was also a place of great political changes. It had had a long history as a Republic, comprising innovative systems of political and social control, such as the civic militia. Equally out of the ordinary was the rapid rise and hegemony of the Medici family, richly entwined with internal intrigues and foreign relations. Among its more cultured citizens, the practice of government was an argument of absorbing interest, directly connected as it was with the business and the destiny of the various dynasties.

Consequently politics was frequently the subject of texts of different kinds, from treatises to humanist dialogues, and even notes in the *Zibaldoni*. And it was indeed in Florence that two works saw the light that were to provide an inspiring model for the editors of the anthologies of precepts, who used them to usher in a season of intense experimentation. These were the *Ricordi* by Francesco Guicciardini and *Gli avvedimenti civili* by Giovan Francesco Lottini, two writers who had very little in common in terms of education and career, but whose destinies were strangely linked by the great and often joint popularity which their precepts enjoyed in late-sixteenth-century Europe. Conceived for private use, these collections were the fruit of the writers' experience in their capacities as counsellors and ambassadors: their main subject is the rules of politics which are illustrated not *ex parte principis*, but rather addressed directly to his assistants, and to the political counsellors in particular.

The third section of the book homes in on the print shops themselves, the places from where the Tuscan precepts were launched on their international adventures by a series of enterprising editors. One of them was the energetic Francesco Sansovino, whose editions of political maxims are striking for the astute choice of the extracts, the logical order of their presentation and the attentive overall organisation of the material. Using the collections of Guicciardini and Lottini as a basis, Sansovino and later editors in Italy and elsewhere in Europe then added their own thoughts, as well as fragments extrapolated from various other works. Although the collections are not restricted to Italian writers, they constitute a significant presence in the form of passages from the works of Giovanni Botero, Paolo Giovio and, above all, Niccolò Machiavelli. To a degree these were operations of censure, performed in order to sidestep ecclesiastical bans or royal prohibitions. But alongside interventions of this kind there was another *modus operandi* which stemmed from the common objectives of the editors of the anthologies. Their intentions were to raise the precepts to the role of theorems of political thought, in which the brief formula of the maxim drew on the particular languages of the jurist's *consilia*, the orders of

the military captain and the doctor's prescriptions. The inspiration to be drawn from the various literary genres that condensed vast areas of knowledge such as law, medicine and the art of war into brief and pithy aphorisms was essential in view both of the intricacy of the subject being dealt with – namely, politics – and of the particular character of the target audience.

The reader envisaged in the compilation of these collections was indeed the political counsellor, who at the end of the sixteenth century was a pivotal figure on the European cultural stage, absorbing the legacy and incorporating the characteristics of other crucial Renaissance roles such as those of the courtier, the humanist and the captain. The precepts addressed to him belong to the same fertile terrain that nurtured the reflections of Antonio Guevara on the education of the politician, and the thoughts of Scipione Ammirato on the theory of the waiver of power. The figure of the counsellor traced in the 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'. These anthologies, which drew unscrupulously on the works of many authors, and notably on those of the Tuscans Machiavelli and Guicciardini, ushered in a new phase in terms of both the concept and the conduct of politics, seen as embedded in the reasons of strength and of interests.

The fourth section addresses the multiple-level influence of Aristotle and Machiavelli in the anthologies, from subject-matter to logical structure and even language. Aristotle's *Politics* provides fragments or topics for the collections, but the precept-writers also draw inspiration from an approach that we might define as 'rhetorical', promoting it to the status of a logical method. Indeed, while the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* provide indications for political practice, the writers also draw inspiration from the *Rhetoric*: in this case, in their choice of the literary genre of the precept and the consequent manipulation of the texts. Like Aristotle, the mark that Machiavelli left on the precepts was less one of theme than of method, since his

fragments are complementary to the system of transmission of knowledge applied in the collections. In quoting entire passages from Machiavelli's works the anthologies reproduce the freshness of his language which becomes an instrument for underpinning the logical structure of the precepts. Concise punctuation and a simple vocabulary do indeed make it easier to discern the skeletal structure of the maxims, to follow the logic of the premises, examples drawn from experience and instructions for action.

The last section of the book focuses on the mature stage of the experimentation launched by the specialists of the publishing world. Although it would be excessive to say that the collections generated a political science in the strict sense of the word, these editors undoubtedly seized an opportunity and made the most of it. They left a significant legacy, which was then taken over again by the 'authors', all of whom were then able to draw in turn on the rich treasure of precepts that lived on in the collections of Robert Hitchcock and Eberhard von Weyhe, and even in the anthologies compiled by the Bohemian Jaroslav Shiřický and by Sir Walter Raleigh. The examples discussed in the last part of the book illustrate how the influence of the political maxims lived on up to the middle of the seventeenth century, despite the changing times and the distance from the Italian model. Finally, the case of the *Monita politico-moralia* by the Polish political thinker Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro offers a paradigm of the incessant transformation of the genre in response to the cultural climate. Fredro's collection too is conceived to furnish an example of the practice of power, the aim being always to offer guidance to those engaged in politics, as intuited by the very first editors of the anthologies. At the same time it also makes room for reflections on the moral sphere and for a display of erudition and encyclopaedic knowledge consonant with Baroque taste.

The work of the editors who assembled the aphorisms and drafted the anthologies is a fascinating chapter in the history of culture, underscoring the fact that the creation of knowledge is not the prerogative of academies and universities. Working behind the scenes on the volumes that bequeathed wisdom to posterity were a plurality of figures who sought to offer a sys-

tematic framework for the theory and rules of the practice of statecraft. Considering the phenomenon in a wider perspective, the collections of precepts undoubtedly deserve greater attention: the instructions they contain represent an eloquent barometer for observing the context of a significant phase in political reflection, prior to the consolidation of modern political thought in the seventeenth century.