

UDC 340.12; 14 Аристотел; 141.7 Макијавели Н.

CERIF: S 115

DOI: 10.51204/Anali\_PFBU\_24104A

**Sava VOJNOVIĆ, LL. M.\***

## **METHODOLOGICAL PREDECESSORS OF CONTEXTUALIST POLITICAL REALISM**

*In order to gain a better understanding of contemporary political realism, as well as of the theories of two classical political philosophers, this paper argues that the methodological roots of a contextualist model of realism can be found, among others, in the writings of Aristotle and Machiavelli. It is argued that the methodological assumptions of contextualist political realism can be formulated through two main notions: 1) the experiential basis – analysis of politics through reliance on experience from political practice; and 2) contextualism – avoiding universal claims as much as possible, i.e., making claims about politics always within a socio-historical context. Using those lenses, the paper points out the methodological elements of Aristotle's and Machiavelli's political theories that are in line with this version of political realism, claiming both of them could be perceived as forerunners to a certain degree.*

**Key words:** *Political Realism. – Aristotle. – Machiavelli. – Methodology. – Political Theory.*

---

\* Junior Teaching Assistant, University of Belgrade Faculty of Law, Serbia, sava.vojnovich@ius.bg.ac.rs.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is realism as an approach within political theory, or more precisely, the common methodological elements of one type of contemporary political realism, along with the analysis of two classical authors who seem to have elements of “a realistic worldview”. Although the term political realism in fact refers to a theory of politics that arose in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is nevertheless not rare to consider certain classical and modern thinkers as political realists – given the similarities in the understanding of man and politics. Beginning with Thucydides, through Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, realism was founded as a pessimistic theory of politics, in which only selfish human interest rules. History and experience tell us that politics is a way of ruling and maintaining power relations, which are most often understood as a mere reflection of basic and natural human drives. Namely, in the substantive sense – politics is about power and conflict, while from the methodological perspective, real experience should be the source of knowledge.

It should be strongly emphasised in the beginning that it is difficult to pinpoint an explicit “realist methodology”, since there are various forms of it – mostly reducible to two main currents within political theory: structuralism and historicism (Walker 1987, 66). The former accepts certain atemporal and universal claims, while the latter is based on the premise of constant change through time. In this paper, an attempt will be made to draw assumptions that could be a connection between realists that lean toward historicism, which will be (for the purposes of this paper) called a “contextualist” model, mostly relying on the work of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, as two of the most prominent proponents (Philp 2012, 630; Rossi 2010, 504). Even in the case of substantive claims, it is difficult to say whether realism is a coherent line of thought in politics. Therefore, the paper will proceed with caution, both regarding the interpretation of contemporary political realism, as well as a retrospective reading of classical authors through contemporary lenses. Nevertheless, these restrictions do not seem to render such an endeavor meaningless.

Even though political realism can encompass a multitude of diverse views of the world and politics, the hypothesis of this paper is that we can find methodological roots of contextualist political realism in the works of Aristotle and Machiavelli, who both attempted to get closer to reality than other political philosophers of their time (and later). This statement should not be confused with the claim that the two of them are full-fledged realists in the contemporary sense, nor would it be fair to conclude that they are predecessors only if they fulfill the necessary criteria to the highest

extent. Also, this does not imply that they are the only ones who deserve to be assessed as possible candidates. The objective of the research is to gain a better understanding of possible methodological approaches of contemporary political realism, through a historical analysis of its roots, and of Aristotle's and Machiavelli's theories from a somewhat neglected perspective. It will be assessed whether these classical authors could be perceived as methodological forerunners, with the stated mitigations. Although we associate "Machiavellianism" with an ethical worldview almost opposite to that of the Greeks, the paper will try to show that, despite substantive differences, Machiavelli follows Aristotle's methodological assumptions. Precisely because of this connection, as well as because Machiavelli is usually perceived as the most prominent forerunner of political realism – these two philosophers have been chosen. It should also be noted that in this paper we are not going to delve into the question of whether Aristotle's and Machiavelli's views, or the views of contemporary realists are justified and how valuable their theories are in general.

The work consists of three parts. The first part will try to underline the main methodological assumptions within contextualist political realism. The second part of the paper will deal with Aristotle's theory, while the last will deal with Machiavelli's theory – from the perspective of those assumptions.

## **2. CONTEXTUALIST POLITICAL REALISM**

With the preceding remarks in mind, we can move on to explore what it means to be a contemporary political realist. Even though the methodological framework is what we are concerned with, firstly a few words will be said about the substantive aspects of political realism, since those two aspects cannot be separated too sharply. Also, as was noted, the focus will be on a contextualist form of realism that relies on the insights of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, who are considered to be some of the most influential authors in this field (Sleat 2010; Rossi 2010).

As is well known, political realists generally<sup>1</sup> start from the claim that the basis of all international relations is the struggle between nations that want to optimise their power, i.e., that concern for power optimization is a necessary and sufficient element of every policy (Fozouni 1995, 480). Every country has a natural geopolitical sphere of influence, which determines

---

<sup>1</sup> With regard to substantive claims of political realism – there is a stronger consensus among its proponents.

its foreign policy. If that influence is insufficient, then it will tend toward imperialism; if it is satisfactory, then it will strive to maintain it. Also, ideology is only an instrument of power – it is never an end in itself (Morgenthau 1948, 13). Therefore, it rejects both models of political moralism: both the enactment model, which emphasises politics as an instrument of morality, and the structural model, which considers that morality limits (creates a framework for) politics (Williams 2005, 2, 8, 77). In other words, being a realist traditionally means expelling morality from political relations. When talking about politics as “applied ethics”, it can at best mean that, through contact with reality, people try to find forms of action that suit them better and evaluate what is more or less good (Geuss 2008, 6). Therefore, political moralism is opposed to political realism, since the latter does not place morality prior to politics, while the former does (Galston 2010, 387).

Political philosophy is hence distinctive from other branches of philosophy (legal and moral) and uses specific concepts, such as power and legitimacy (Williams 2005, 3). Since morality is not prior to politics, the question of legitimacy cannot be answered in general, but comes from the practice of politics itself (Sleat 2010, 487). This is an important methodological point as well. Legitimacy as a category remains relevant, even in our understanding and interpretation of the past, but always in a given context (Williams 2005, 69). So, for Williams, the question of justification is not completely pushed out of the realm of politics. A government is legitimate and authoritative if it can be justified according to the dominant societal beliefs in a given period. This criterion is not the same as the claim that legitimacy depends on the effective support or acceptance of the government by the governed, although it usually overlaps (Sleat 2014, 327). This allows for the flexibility of realism and correspondence to the nuances of reality. The belief that our political decisions are a reflection of simple morality is illusory – everything is a consequence of a multitude of factors, which is dependent on the context (Philp 2012, 636; Rossi 2010, 509). When someone is in the minority (in a democratic order), e.g., when the opposing political position prevails, it does not mean that the other side is morally wrong – it just means that one side has lost (Williams 2005, 13).

When it comes to methodology, in the case of ancient thinkers, political realism is primarily reflected in the historical method of research, which is characteristic of authors such as Thucydides and Polybius. The functioning of states is understood through the real circumstances in which they are situated and developed, and theoretical claims about politics arise from historical examples (Polybius 2002). This is especially important when assessing Aristotle and Machiavelli.

Montesquieu tries to do a similar thing when writing about the relativity of the spirit of laws. For example: in cold climates, people are stronger and braver because of the cold air that tightens and shortens the fibers of the body and directs the blood to the heart, which further affects warfare, as well as the sluggishness of southern peoples who rarely and hardly change their customs, laws and traditions (Montesquieu 2011, 232). Or: “Many things govern men: climate, religion, laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, mores, and manners [...] Nature and climate almost alone dominate savages; manners govern the Chinese; laws tyrannize Japan [...] in Rome it was set by the maxims of government and the ancient mores,” while when he investigates the sources of slave ownership law, he explicitly says “the true origin [...] should be founded on the nature of things” (Montesquieu 2011, 310, 251). All of this points to experience as a source of knowledge of the causes of a social (even political) reality. David Hume moves in the same direction when he criticises reason as an uncertain guide and refers to practice and experience for solving social and moral problems (Hume 1994, 78–92, 208). He points out that the more repetitions and examples there are in experience, the more likely it is that they can be explained scientifically. He also offers a framework formula for the scientific study of the causality of social events. “What depends upon a few persons is, to a great measure, be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes: What arises from a great number, may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes” (Hume 1994, 58). In other words, individuals can be influenced by many, often contradictory factors, while mass movements are easier to follow.

As one possible consequence, experience from practice becomes a methodological basis that tends to avoid firm universal arguments. Geuss tries to underline this as a genuine “realist approach” to political philosophy:

First, political philosophy must be realist. That means, roughly speaking, that it must start from and be concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally (or ought “rationally”) to act, what they ought to desire, or value, the kind of people they ought to be, etc., but, rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances. [...] Second and following on from this, political philosophy must recognise that politics is in the first instance about action and the contexts of action, not about mere beliefs or propositions. (Geuss 2008, 9–11)

This much is probably in line with any intuition about political realism in general.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Geuss adds a third thesis as an important insight into his understanding of political realism, which is crucial for the variant of realism that is offered in this paper. Namely:

The third thesis I want to defend is that politics is historically located: it has to do with humans interacting in institutional contexts that change over time, and the study of politics must reflect this fact. This is not an objection to generalising; we don't even know what it would be like to think without generalising. Nevertheless, it simply turns out as a matter of fact that excessive generalising ends up not being informative. There are no interesting "eternal questions" of political philosophy. It is perfectly true that if one wishes, one can construct some universal empirical truths about human beings and the societies they form, e.g., it is correct that people in general try to keep themselves alive and that all humans have had to eat to survive, and that this has imposed various constraints on the kind of human societies that have been possible, but such statements, taken on their own, are not interestingly informative for the purposes of politics. [...] Such statements have clear meaning at all only relative to their specific context (Geuss 2008, 13–14).

For a realist, these statements imply the importance of avoiding universal claims that tend to be presented as applicable to any context, especially if they are devoid of empirical insights. In this sense, realism acknowledges a fragmented world in a constant flux of change, as opposed to idealism, which relies on universalities (Walker 1987, 79; Rossi 2010, 505). On the other hand, as Geuss states, such a methodology does not exclude general assessments (because that is most likely impossible), but tries to keep them to a minimum – only as a framework for the input of the facts and particular circumstances. It is compatible with Ludwig Wittgenstein's view of the world, which implies that we cannot judge and justify practices, but simply be in them; everything is a matter of practical action, and there is nothing abstract. One example of a "non-realistic approach" that ignores particularities and history is the discourse of human rights (Geuss 2008, 59). It is not a good starting position to assert that all humans evidently have rights, but rather one should ask, e.g., whether it is possible to organise a society based on universal rights, what are the benefits of it, or why do we

---

<sup>2</sup> Meaning: independently from different types of realism.

find human rights appealing (Geuss 2008, 68).<sup>3</sup> Different cultures obviously accept different rights as valid. Politics is about making decisions within a set of contingent and non-ideal circumstances that limit one's choice (Philp 2010, 468).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that such an approach does not exclude the epistemological possibility of truth,<sup>4</sup> but only requires particularization. Interestingly, Hans Morgenthau, as a proponent of a different kind of political realism, emphasises that political science should isolate truth from experience, giving it meaning (Molloy 2006, 80). Although he is aware of the complexity of such a task, he nevertheless did not give it up and held power to be the truth of politics (Morgenthau 1948, 13). A critical remark is evident:

If truth is socially conditioned by the perspective of the theorist, then surely the same applies to Morgenthau's version of the truth? Morgenthau, however, states that his truth is universal and valid for all times and circumstances (Molloy 2006, 81).

Morgenthau claims that realism lies somewhere between the fact that human experience and historical occurrences are always unique and the fact that there are similarities between them – caused by human nature which drives social forces (Morgenthau 1948, 4). In this sense realism seems to be torn between potentially opposing inclinations (Walker 1987, 79), neither of which excludes Aristotle and Machiavelli. On the other hand,

a weakness of approaches to politics through "intuitions" is that such intuitions present themselves at any given time as if they were firmly fixed, deeply rooted in the bedrock of human nature, and utterly unchanging, although even a minimal amount of historical (or ethnological) research reveals that many of the most politically significant of these intuitions are in fact highly variable and change in ways that seem to some extent to reflect other social changes (Geuss 2008, 91).

Having that in mind, the suggestion is to solve this problem in the following way: universal claims should be avoided as much as possible, and when they are necessary (as a framework for the input of context) – they should rely on

---

<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to compare this form of realism with pragmatism, however that is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the problematisation of the concept of truth in realism, see Molloy 2006.

experience (be “realistic”). Even if we do not want to give up the usual aims of theory, or science in general – to predict future events based on previous ones – contextualist political realism still adds caution to it, because context can always affect and disappoint our predictions. Hence, Horton (2010, 438) asserts that the general features of contemporary political realism are: anti-utopianism (negation of constant progressiveness and rejection of principles that are inapplicable in the world as it is), anti-universalism (even when there are valid general principles, they must be determined within a context), and the necessity of conflict (therefore the goals of politics are stability and order). Criticism of rational consensus could also be added to the list (Galston 2010, 394–400).

Now it is possible to move on to the analysis of the working hypothesis. The following *methodological* criteria of the contextualist model of contemporary political realism will be taken into account through the analysis of Aristotle’s and Machiavelli’s theories: 1) the experiential basis – the analysis of politics through reliance on experience from political practice, as well as in the case of classical philosophers, a comparative study of states in history; 2) contextualism – avoiding universal claims (allegedly applicable to any context) as much as possible, i.e., making claims about politics always within a socio-historical context. It is obvious how interconnected these elements are.

Of course, there are some other potential methodological candidates that could be taken into account as relevant criteria. One of them is descriptiveness, i.e., the ability to describe things as they are, with restrained use of normative claims (“what ought to be”). A problem encountered with such a criterion is the complication of the existence of different types of normative claims, such as instrumental (as is mostly the case with Machiavelli) and ethical (Aristotle) normativity. Another reason for avoiding this element is that most realists are aware of the strong connection between politics and action, which leads them to frequently use normative claims. Hence, the only thing they insist on is the aforementioned contextualisation, which encompasses the need for experience. Geuss tells us something in a similar manner:

The attentive reader will notice that I use the terms “political theory” and “political philosophy” [...] almost interchangeably, and that I do not distinguish sharply between a descriptive theory and a “pure normative theory” [...]. This is fully intentional, and indeed part of the point I am trying to make. I want precisely to try to cast as much doubt as I can on the universal usefulness of making these distinctions. Kantians, of course, will think I have lost the plot from the start; and that only confusion can result from failure to make these essential,



utterly fundamental divisions between Is and Ought, Fact and Value, or the Descriptive and the Normative in as rigorous and systematic a way as possible, just as I think they have fallen prey to a kind of fetishism, attributing to a set of human conceptual inventions a significance that they do not have. By doing this, in my view, they condemn themselves to certain forms of ignorance and illusion [...]. Politics allows itself to be cut up for study in any one of a number of different ways, and which cuts will be most illuminating will depend very much on the context, on what one is interested in finding out. There is no single canonical style of theorising about politics. (Geuss 2008, 16–17)

He then goes on to analyse the possible roles of political philosophy, by firstly pointing out the human need to understand how “the organised forms of acting together in a given society actually work, and to explain why certain decisions are taken, why certain projects fail and others succeed, or why social and political action exhibits the patterns it does”, as well as to evaluate things the world around us (Geuss 2008, 37–38). Besides understanding and evaluating, “it is often claimed that humans’ need for general orientation in action is at least as important” (Geuss 2008, 40). Meaningfulness leads to action and interaction, rather than theorising. And last, but not least, political philosophy might make a constructive contribution to politics by conceptual invention – combining normative, descriptive and analytical methodologies. Each step helps, because “people [...] can be at a loss what to do or fail to know what they want because they are confused about what is wrong or what the problem precisely is” (Geuss 2008, 43).

Therefore, in a society, understanding, evaluating and orientating are all wanted and needed human activities. They sometimes imply a descriptive approach, but other times – a normative one. In other words, different methods may be appropriate for different kinds of questions (Williams 2005, 155). However, Williams notes that some remarks are nevertheless generally important, such as the danger of “wishful thinking” and, Geuss would add, the danger of generalising. This is why these two points seem to be the only plausible common methodological denominator for this model of realism – which will be used in the following chapters as lenses for examining philosophers who might be seen as their forerunners.

### 3. ARISTOTLE

As stated in the introduction of the paper, Aristotle was chosen because Machiavelli appears to show similarities to Aristotle's historicist method of studying politics, despite the fact that their substantive claims differ. Aristotle is one of the paradigmatic examples of an author who built their theory (explicitly) through the critique of the idealism that immediately preceded it as the dominant discourse – Plato's in this case.<sup>5</sup> Given that the work focuses on the issue of realism in political philosophy, there is no space for a detailed consideration of realism in other areas of philosophy, within which Aristotle has much to say. Accordingly, here it is only necessary to recall that Aristotle's ontology denies the transcendental world of ideas, returning Plato to the framework of the sensory experience. However, as a creator of logic and practical reasoning, he also relies heavily on the power of the human mind (which is usually the main characteristic of idealism), but takes a more moderate view of the world than his predecessor.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle's worldview is very layered and it is not easy to see it through the lenses of contemporary political realism, although the paper will try to argue that his *political methodology* indeed shows a realist tendency. In that sense, Aristotle's ethics are usually seen as idealistic, especially when compared to Machiavelli's instrumentalism and pragmatism, while there are many possible ways to interpret his theory as a whole.

Before going into the analysis of politics, it is important to briefly highlight some important points of Aristotle's general methodology and his schematization of knowledge. First of all, Aristotle is generally convinced that the facts about the world determine the truth of statements (Irwin 1988, 5). Secondly, truth is arrived at in several ways: through scientific knowledge, intellect, practical wisdom, and wisdom (Aristotle 2000, 1139b). All knowledge is based on the so-called primary/first principles, which represent universalities that are not based on anything other than themselves (Aristotle 1997, 100a–100b). They should not be questioned as to why they are what they are, but it is enough to determine them (Aristotle 1997, 100b) inductively or deductively, using intellect (Aristotle 2000, 1139b, 1141a). For example, the first principle of free action is man as a being, and the first principle of ethics is happiness (Aristotle 2000, 1102a, 1139b). Scientific knowledge refers only to claims that cannot be different, i.e., to the

---

<sup>5</sup> Although there are indications that the methodology used by Plato in the *Phaedrus* is not alien to Aristotle, especially with regard to the concept of *technē* (Schütrumpf 1989, 209–218).

<sup>6</sup> More about that: Tweedale 1988, 501–526.

eternal and unchanging that cannot be discussed (*episteme*, Aristotle 2000, 1139b), as is knowledge about the cosmos, god, and mathematics. It implies a true understanding of first principles, i.e., the state of demonstration – when conclusions are drawn by logical deduction starting from necessary true premises (first principles). Therefore, reasoning based on debatable first principles (as is the case of practical wisdom) cannot be scientific knowledge, although this does not mean that it is completely devoid of any truth (Aristotle 2000, 1140b).

Consequently, there is also a special type of deduction: dialectical deduction, which searches for conclusions starting from positions that are considered acceptable (*endoxa* – founded beliefs) – either to everyone, to the majority, or to the wise – without being paradoxical at the same time (Aristotle 1997, 100a–100b, 104a). If even just one wise person (philosopher, authority) disagrees with a claim, then it is not an unproblematic one. It is important to emphasise that both types of starting premises (those that are true in themselves and those that are conventionally accepted) are universal, and that dialectics for Aristotle is a logical method based on probable premises. A dialectical problem is a speculation aimed at a decision or knowledge about which people have no opinion or the majority think differently than the wise, where the dialectical process itself (examination of the opinions of both sides) helps to arrive at the truth and purify the *endoxa* (Aristotle 1997, 104b). In other words, in such a process, one can come to the rejection of one of the accepted opinions that seemed true at the beginning, which is why Aristotle most often starts from the positions that his predecessors had on a certain issue, as well as often taking a position between two opposing sides. It can be particularly useful when assessing certain first principles, by questioning the *endoxa* about them (Aristotle 1997, 101b). Empirical inquiry (*historia*) begins with the appearances (which include the *endoxa*), while experience should be a criterion for the appearances that are “proper” (*oikeia*) (Irwin 1988, 31–32). Thus, the true “puzzles” about our knowledge of things are discoverable through experience.

Practical wisdom, on the other hand, implies the concept of good and concerns human relations (ethics, politics, economics) and useful actions. Every action is directed toward a certain goal or good (Aristotle 2000, 1094a). Since every goal relies on some other goal (value), the infinite regress stops at the greatest good, and the point is to make some kind of voluntary decision. The path to first principles within practical wisdom is inductive, i.e., it goes in the opposite direction of science: from particularities

(factual human relations) to universals<sup>7</sup> (Aristotle 2000, 1143b). Therefore, it is aimed at action and cannot be scientific knowledge, because it implies deliberation (dialectical process). It starts from particularities (experience), and regards what could have been different (Aristotle 2000, 1140a). Since it deals with action, its focus is on the last point of the cognitive process, which is something that Geuss also points out. Practical wisdom is strongly interwoven with political “science”, although they are different beings. Political science is part of practical wisdom that deals with particularities and concerns the community (Aristotle 2000, 1142a). This is the crux of the argument in favor of realism – inferences concerning politics are not universally binding, i.e., they have to start off from real cases that differ between themselves. On the other hand, people who know how to consider and discuss what is good and useful for life as such are practically wise (Aristotle 2000, 1140a). Therefore, a practically wise person discusses first and foremost the universal and only afterward the particular (such as what would be beneficial for health). Besides practical wisdom, there are skills (medicine, shipbuilding, agriculture, arts, etc.) and theoretical sciences (first philosophy, mathematics, and natural sciences, such as astronomy).

The key difference between theoretical and practical disciplines is that the former deal exclusively with universal things and scientific knowledge (that which is immutable), and the latter with practical and mostly particular (Aristotle 2000, 1095a), which makes politics dialectical and difficult to fit into formulas. Judgment about particularities depends on perception, and not everyone’s perception is the same, in addition to there being an infinite number of individual cases. Thus, politics is directly aimed at experience and therefore has first principles that could be different.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the subject of Aristotle’s political research is political practice, with the goal being to analyse the stability of a political order, which is a methodological approach uncommon for the (in the rough sense) idealistic tradition.<sup>9</sup> The entire *Politics* is imbued with the issue of the stability of different political orders, while the fifth book (Aristotle 1998, 1301a–1317a) is fully and directly dedicated to this: “for a legislator, however, or for those seeking to

---

<sup>7</sup> Which should not be confused with scientific statements that are unchangeable. Universals are just general claims.

<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, he often refers to human nature when reasoning about politics, while in doing so resting on a mixture of empirical and ethical claims (Irwin 1988, 358).

<sup>9</sup> Here we mean the usual normativist and universalistic perspectives of politics assumed by authors such as Plato, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Hegel, Kant, etc. This could also encompass Hobbes’ theory of social contract and state, although he shows strong substantive elements of realism.

establish a constitution of this kind, setting it up is not the most important task nor indeed the only one, but rather ensuring its preservation” (Aristotle 1998, 1319b).

As an example of Aristotle’s integration of experience into the analysis of political stability, we can first point out that he begins the second book of *Politics* by rejecting the idealistic possibility of unity in Plato’s state. The pursuit of complete unity must lead to the disintegration of the state, since by the nature of things it implies some kind of pluralism (Aristotle 1998, 1261a–1261b). It is not only about the pluralism of people, but also their characteristics, i.e., types of persons. Further, building on the Platonist thesis about the necessity of common property of all members of a state<sup>10</sup> (including the sharing of wives and children), as conditions for factual equality – Aristotle responds in a similar manner. He refers to practical circumstances that would undermine the possibility of establishing such an idealistic society, arguing, for example, that there must be a problem of unequal income according to merit. He asks – what if someone works less and gets disproportionately more? (Aristotle 1998, 1263a) Selfishness is in human nature, so the absence of private property could hardly be truly accepted. It is illusory to consider private property as the cause of private disputes, since we can see in practice that disputes arise primarily among the poor classes, and not according to the form of property (Aristotle 1998, 1263b). The layering and compromise of his worldview are also shown to be a reflection of realistic moderation that rejects black-and-white divisions. Jumping a bit forward: we will see that even when searching for an ideal constitution, Aristotle tries to find how each type of political system should be organised to reach its best condition<sup>11</sup> (Irwin 1988, 355).

Aristotle also relies on the comparative method in studying the constitutions of his time (such as Sparta, Athens, Crete, etc.) and all possible forms of states, which he analyses according to the circumstances that are necessary for each of them to survive individually.

Since, then, our predecessors have left the question of legislation unexamined, it is presumably better that we study it and the question of political systems in general, so that our philosophy of humanity might be as complete as possible. First, then, if any part of what has been said by those before us is plausible, let us try to go through it. Then, in the light of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Which, coincidentally, is a misquote of Plato, bearing in mind that the absence of private property only concerned the governing and guardian class.

<sup>11</sup> More on this in the following chapter.

political systems we have collected, let us try to consider what sorts of things preserve and destroy cities and each type of political system, and what causes some cities to be well run, and others badly run. For when these issues have been considered, we shall perhaps be more likely to see which political system is best, how each must be arranged, and what laws and habits it should employ. Let us, then, discuss these matters from the beginning (Aristotle 2000, 1181b).

The general rule for Aristotle is that one must take into account the characteristics of people (according to virtue and wealth), i.e., the structure of society, leading us toward contextual claims of political realism.

For what is by nature both just and beneficial is one thing in the case of rule by a master, another in the case of kingship, and another in the case of rule by a statesman (Aristotle 1998, 1287b).

It is not good to establish a kingship where there is factual equality and similarity between people, but rather where one family spontaneously stands out by its virtue (Aristotle 1998, 1288a). Also, the aristocracy is subject to the people who, by the nature of things, can bear the power “worthy of free men”, while militant peoples are suitable for the *politeia*.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the quality of a political order depends on the actual context, i.e., constitutions must be adapted to different types of people and cultures. Similarly, the realism and nuance of his approach are expressed when he talks about the differences in the natural qualities of descendants belonging to different natural classes (free people, slaves, and foreigners), because he reminds us that there are always exceptions (Aristotle 1998, 1254b–1255b, 1283a).

Also, for Aristotle the conflicts between the rich and the poor are the most important basis for understanding politics, since different interests are formed according to social status – which can be confirmed throughout history. Interestingly, Polybius, Machiavelli, and Hume also believed that conflicts in general, and especially between plebeians and patricians, were inevitable in any society, with the addition that they were even sometimes desirable (Whelan 2004, 63). Each pull to his side, Aristotle continues: some emphasise equality in numbers, others equality in merit or value as relevant,

---

<sup>12</sup> *Politeia*, in this context, is a form of government that represents a combination of oligarchy and democracy, although Aristotle uses the term both for proper democracy and legal order.

according to what suits them. The pursuit of happiness shows itself as the cause of conflict. However, “it is a bad thing for a constitution to be organised unqualifiedly and entirely in accord with either sort of equality” (Aristotle 1998, 1302a). So, practice is again referred to as a crucial factor of evidence, along with moderate normative judgments that rely on historical research.

Another interesting insight regarding his methodology could be given by the fact that he gives an equal place (importance) to the analysis of bad orders, and even to ways of preserving them. This seems like a clear indication of his effort to view politics in its reality and in a non-idealised way. He says that tyranny is a perverted form of monarchy, because the rule of one man that is not in the general interest, but rather exclusively in the interest of that individual (Aristotle 1998, 1279b). It is absolute despotism that is not based on law, but only on the will of the tyrant (Aristotle 1998, 1295a), and despite this – he pays attention to the issue of its preservation. One of the rules for the survival of tyranny is to remove prominent people and people of strong character, to prohibit association and schooling, more precisely everything that could somehow bring people together (Aristotle 1998, 1313b). Furthermore, it is necessary to constantly keep an eye on the citizens, give them as little independence and privacy as possible, sow discord, slander, impoverish, and do everything else that a realistic attitude toward politics can dictate. Power is the foundation of tyranny, and to provoke rebellions as little as possible, the tyrant must take care of how he presents himself to the people and convince them that his rule is beneficial for everyone (Aristotle 1998, 1314b). So, although it is clear that this way of ruling is wrong and that politics, according to Aristotle, must not be seen as an instrument of personal interest or a mere power relationship – he still goes into describing the practical prerequisites for preserving such power.

On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that Aristotle’s ethics correspond to a large extent to the view of the world that is characteristic of the time in which he lived. He uses full-fledged normative claims that often have a universalistic connotation to them, which undoubtedly points toward his “non-realist” side. The brief analysis of the substantive notions in Aristotle will only be conducted in regard to the main subject of the paper, i.e., his methodology. Nevertheless, the paper will attempt to show that even such statements do not undermine his methodological realism when approaching politics.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> The metaethical questions of the origins and nature of moral claims are not of great importance for this topic, since realists do not delve around such quandaries. Whether or not there are objective moral values does not affect the approach a realist takes.

Aristotle says that an individual should have civic virtue, which can only be realized through participation in political life and concern for the common good (Held 1987, 17). The state represents an entity that exists by the nature of things, as the end product of man as a community being, i.e., a political animal. When asked why the state is formed, he answers that the ultimate goal is a happy and noble life (*eudaimonia*, Aristotle 1998, 1278b, 1281a), and that the good is an ultimate goal of all practical “sciences” (Aristotle 1998, 1282b). As noted at the beginning of this chapter, in Aristotle, ethics and politics are directly linked through practical wisdom, so one cannot be achieved without the other. Happiness is an activity by virtue, while intellect is the most divine human asset (Aristotle 2000, 1177a). Aristotle asks himself what the best choice of life for each person and states is, so that the conclusions for individuals can also be transferred to states (Aristotle 1998, 1323a). The virtues of the soul are incomparably more valuable than the possession of material things, and happiness depends on virtue, practical wisdom, and action.<sup>14</sup> States are good to the extent that their citizens are happy, and in order to arrive at the best constitution, statesmen must understand what happiness is (Aristotle 1998, 1323a–1324a). Consequently, states must be brave, just, and wise, and a good economic condition, as well as good state regulation, is a prerequisite for that.

Aristotle believes that there are right and wrong answers to the question of what is good, whereby those who achieve practical wisdom will be able to reach the right answer (McDowell 1995, 202; Williams 1995, 16). Although he does not ignore the context (not even when analysing ethics), it can still be said that for him there are virtues that should be cultivated independently of our habits, nature, or feelings – just as moderation is shown to be always good (Aristotle 2000, 1109a). For example:

Actions done in accordance with virtue are noble [...] So the generous person will give for the sake of what is noble and in a correct way – to the right people, in the right amounts, at the right time [...] And this he will do with pleasure (Aristotle 2000, 1120a).

At the same time, Aristotle holds that moral concepts cannot be comprehended without external experience, or more precisely without the exposition to a range of different situations and actions (Everson 1995, 197). In that sense, there is a good to be known, but the process is

---

<sup>14</sup> He finds confirmation of this in a god as a perfect being who derives his satisfaction from himself.



not transcendent (Aristotle 2000, 1095a). So, when he claims that a good person is the measure of what is good, it is generally accepted that he does so differently than Plato or Protagoras (Charles 1995, 136).

The nature of Aristotelian ethics itself shows why more detailed empirical study is needed. Ethical argument should rest on facts about human nature; when it is extended into political theory it should rest on further facts about human nature, and about human beings in relation to each other and to external circumstances. Appreciation of these circumstances shows us why a community with specific institutions is needed to realize the human good (Irwin 1988, 355).

On top of that, despite distinguishing between natural and legal justice (the former has the same force everywhere, the latter does not), he nevertheless claims – once again in a complicated way – that in the human world, even natural things can be changeable<sup>15</sup> (Aristotle 2000, 1134b). As he says, “[f] or we each have different natural tendencies and we can find out what they are by the pain and pleasure that occur in us” (Aristotle 2000, 1109b), as well as that things just by nature are the constant in the highest number of cases (Fassò 2007, 62). Human experience, therefore, can influence the nature of things in the domain of politics and ethics, where justice is a political issue, i.e., it concerns the organization of the state community (Aristotle 1998, 1252a). In this regard, when discussing the preservation and decay of the political order, Aristotle reminds us of the relativity of justice and the causes of political change. Everyone has their interpretation of who is considered equal and who is unequal, with factions arising when one group feels that it is not getting what it (according to its assumptions) is justly due (Aristotle 1998, 1280a, 1301a–1301b). It is interesting to point out that such an interpretation of justice in a certain way reflects the place of practical sciences in the system of knowledge. Namely, just as one can arrive at a universal formula for justice, but never separate it from the real circumstances against which it is interpreted – in the same way, political science can rely on the universal claims of ethics, but never free itself from particularity.

In that sense, Aristotle gives us a practical illustration of his methodology with regard to the question of the best constitution:

---

<sup>15</sup> As the nature of things is that one hand is dominant, yet a person can become ambidextrous.

What the best constitution is, that is to say, what it must be like if it is to be most ideal, and if there were no external obstacles. Also which constitution is appropriate for which city-states [?] For achieving the best constitution is perhaps impossible for many; and so neither the unqualifiedly best constitution nor the one that is best in the circumstances should be neglected by the good legislator and true statesman. Further, which constitution is best given certain assumptions [?] For a statesman must be able to study how any given constitution might initially come into existence, and how, once in existence, it might be preserved for the longest time. [...] Besides all these things, a statesman should know which constitution is most appropriate for all city-states. Consequently, those who have expressed views about constitutions, even if what they say is good in other respects, certainly fail when it comes to what is useful. For one should not study only what is best, but also what is possible, and similarly what is easier and more attainable by all (Aristotle 1998, 1288b).

Then he continues by saying that the best constitution, from the general perspective, is the one governed by people distinguished by wealth and virtue, i.e., where the citizens are also good people (Aristotle 1998, 1288a, 1293b).<sup>16</sup> It is evident why such a general claim does not fit into realism. However, Aristotle does not allow himself to drift into unattainable ideals and soon warns that such an order is rare, because education requires a natural gift and fortunate circumstances, meaning that virtue eludes ordinary people (Aristotle 1998, 1295a). This is why he further asks what kind of

---

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between virtue in people, citizens, and rulers. Namely, citizens have the task of taking care of the community in which they live, and the community is reflected by the state system, so their virtue must correspond to the system itself (Aristotle 1998, 1276b). Since there are many different political arrangements, then there must be as many different virtues of citizens (political wisdom), while a good man (non-citizen) possesses a complete (one) virtue. Therefore, a person can be a good citizen (politically wise) and at the same time a bad person. Likewise, the virtues of citizens in a community can differ according to the differences that exist between them (according to the social status and role they have) – just as bravery is evaluated differently according to sex, for example. However, it is the ruler who must be both a good man and a good citizen, while citizens do not have to fulfill the first condition, but should know how to obey and rule (Aristotle 1998, 1277a). Of course, the best option is for a good citizen to be a good person at the same time, and for the virtues to complement each other. This is required in the best constitutional order (Aristotle 1998, 1277b, 1288a), whereby this description gives reason to nearly equate civic virtue with skill (Mulieri 2021, 505).

arrangement can be accepted by the majority of states in real circumstances, in which the majority of people can take part. He then adds that states must rest on a strong and broad middle class,<sup>17</sup> because then there is the least envy and conflict, as well as because the division of strata into the rich, poor, and middle class is common to all contexts (Aristotle 1998, 1295b). This is where his reliance on experience is explicitly shown, given that the rich/poor dichotomy plays a large role in his reasoning – which is experientially based. A country with great differences in wealth is a state of economic-slave relations, which entails contempt, not friendship and freedom. Therefore, the best order is one in which both the rich and the poor are satisfied, so that everybody rules, but the most competent actually make decisions (Aristotle 1998, 1309a).

This paradox is resolved, in his opinion, by the fact that the rich (who are often the most competent, because they are more educated) would have the actual decision-making power, but would have to be accountable to the people for their actions, while the people would make judgments and sometimes choose officials (Aristotle 1998, 1318b). The best citizens (he actually refers to the poor) are those who are engaged in animal husbandry and farming, and live far from the city, which enables them to have very little involvement in politics. They are satisfied with their work and the opportunity to supervise the work of the government, while at the same time having no incentive to be in the government – since public service should not be paid. A practical way to achieve the aforementioned balance between the classes is for the rich and the poor to decide together, but for the rich to have a plural vote, so that the votes of the few rich have the same value as the votes of the many poor. If they vote differently, the will of the group that has more property in total should prevail (Aristotle 1998, 1318a). The groups would be made up of part rich and part poor, depending on the results of the vote. Of course, with such a solution, Aristotle made equality only apparent because the majority of citizens were, due to living conditions and lack of interest, detached from the assembly. Consequently, the lack of their presence in voting leads to the predominance of the rich.

Although the main argument in favor of such a suggestion lies in his struggle to find a solution for a virtuous polity in general, it still retains realist elements. Virtuous political communities have shown themselves to be more stable throughout history, which makes them better. In order to achieve a virtuous polity, quality people are needed, and reality shows us that having a good education and enough free time amounts to having

---

<sup>17</sup> We should add to this the necessity to respect quality laws, as well as invest in moral education, since virtue is acquired throughout life, not by birth.

better odds. Therefore, the rich, i.e., those who fulfill such conditions, are more likely to be virtuous and should have more power. In other words, on the one hand – Aristotle is searching for generally applicable solutions (contrary to our understanding of contextualist political realism), but on the other – he is trying to do so within realistic circumstances, i.e., within the most common context of human societies. As we have seen, different types of peoples are suited for different types of political arrangements, so the universal in Aristotle is only universal in the sense of what is most common.

What can be concluded from this? The layeredness of Aristotle's worldview cannot be neglected, although he shows strong realist efforts in the methodological sense. First, in his system of sciences, experience plays an important role, although the knowledge of the first principles of science can also take place beyond it. Regardless, politics is a part of practical wisdom, and it does not concern scientific knowledge. The goal of politics is action and deals with particularities, which directly refers to the experience from practice (the comparative-historical method). Considerations of the best polity take into account power relations in a society, as well as the natural aspirations of different classes and cultures, while no theoretical solution for the generally best order is ever fully achievable for every context. This enables a nuanced understanding of social reality. Nevertheless, Aristotle often expresses universalistic claims – especially since he does not view politics as a sphere independent of ethics, within which there are answers to what is right in general. On the contrary, for him, these two elements are inevitably united, since a quality state organization is directly dependent on the virtue of the people. Despite that, his

[e]mpirical analysis seeks to understand the varieties and structures of cities and their constitutions, and the sources of change and stability; and, in Aristotle's view, we understand these things best from the correct conception of happiness and justice. Different cities pursue happiness and justice in different ways; and they are stable or unstable partly because of their degrees of success and failure in achieving justice and happiness. A correct ethical theory, as Aristotle understands it, will describe the psychological and social effects of the different virtues and vices and in doing so will allow us to form new causal hypotheses that we can test against the empirical evidence (Irwin 1988, 355).

From all of these insights, we can draw the conclusion that the most plausible way to interpret potentially conflicting elements is the following: some general arguments regarding the best polity could be drawn from

the common denominators of every society (happiness, virtues, and the relationship between different social-economic classes and the goal of stability), which can be complementary with and should take into account all other contingent facts that concern cultural, moral, historical and geographical determinants. It could be said that certain truths can be arrived at, but that they do not apply in the same way to every context. Do Aristotle's ethics and general suggestions within politics alienate him to some degree from our methodological assumptions? Of course they do. Do they do it to a high degree and prevent us from calling him a predecessor? This paper tries to argue otherwise – he is aware that general claims, neither in the domain of ethics nor of politics, cannot fully suffice for our need to orientate in action (as Geuss would state it). Hence, even though we can safely say that Aristotle does not keep universal claims to a minimum – which would mean something that could be referred to as a strong notion of contextualism – his methodology still seems to qualify him to some extent as the predecessor of contextualist political realism.

#### 4. MACHIAVELLI

Now we can turn to Niccolò Machiavelli and look at his resemblance from a methodological perspective. It is a well-known fact that Machiavelli, the sixteenth-century Florentine writer, became famous precisely for his steadfast pragmatism and realism, which he first exhibited in *The Prince*, therefore radically breaking the thread of the previous political philosophy and paving the way for modern thought. On the other hand, in his work *Discourses on Livy*, his strong and enthusiastic republican spirit comes to the fore, providing a basis for the layered understanding of his theory, although this paper argues that it does not make it incoherent.<sup>18</sup>

For Machiavelli, as was also the case for Aristotle in most respects, politics is a practical discipline where experience and context determine outcomes, or rather where there are no *a priori* rules. “[...] it is very difficult to generalise [...] since men and circumstances vary” (Machiavelli 2019, 72), and our best predictions can only rely on historical experience as a guiding thread, which can be indirectly and directly acquired. It is acquired indirectly by studying the past, and directly by engaging in politics, while Machiavelli experienced both types (Simendić 2022, 14). He speaks primarily to people of action, but also to others who are trying to understand how the world functions.

---

<sup>18</sup> This is especially the case bearing in mind that both works were written approximately at the same time, although both were published after his death.

Therefore, his teaching combines both practice and general knowledge, but also takes particularities (experience) as the starting point, which should provide the necessary nuance in understanding general things (Strauss 1958, 233). It closely resembles Aristotle's method of study in the domain of practical wisdom. For Machiavelli, conclusions about politics must contain something normative, that is, they must be of practical use. He does not contrast the descriptive with the normative, but the wrong normative with the right (achievable, experiential, "realistic") one (Strauss 1958, 234). In other words, *The Prince* is imbued with just such practical instructions for ruling based on experience, not abstracted solely by the principles of the mind. For example, when discussing the building of fortresses, Machiavelli says:

Rulers have been accustomed to build fortresses to strengthen their power. These serve as a bit and bridle for those who might plot against them [...]. I praise this practice, because it has been used since ancient times. Nevertheless, in our own times, Niccolò Vitelli destroyed two fortresses in Città di Castello, so that he could maintain his rule over it. [...] Fortresses are sometimes useful, then, and sometimes not; it depends on the circumstances. Moreover, if they help you in some respects, they will be harmful in others (Machiavelli 2019, 73).

Likewise, in the chapter on the praises and commands of the ruler, he explicitly states his view on politics:

But having the intention to write something useful to anyone who understands, it seems to me better to concentrate on what really happens rather than on theories or speculations. For many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist. Because there is such a great distance between how we live and how we ought to live, anyone who sets aside what is done for what ought to be done learns more quickly what will ruin him rather than preserve him, since a man who wishes to make a profession of doing good in all things will come to ruin among many who are not good (Machiavelli 2019, 53).

All relevant epistemological assumptions can be observed in the given passage. First, the emphasis on reality, i.e., the state of things as they are ("what really happens", not "theories and speculations") – through the study of past and present experiences. This leads to a nuanced understanding of the world, which has the effect of viewing morality instrumentally and

pragmatically (“a man who wishes to make a profession of doing good in all things will come to ruin”), as well as avoiding universal claims. According to Machiavelli, any faith in practical rationality leads to illusions and bad government.<sup>19</sup> The part on the perishing of those who live driven by an *ought* that has seceded from reality is exactly the aforementioned wrong normative approach. Being loyal to reality seems to present itself as a core value, along with the general idea of success (in this case – of the ruler), which leads him to establish a fundamental relation between the two.

As was pointed out in the beginning, one of the frequent substantive claims of realism that is grafted onto such methodological assumptions is anthropological pessimism, as a response to the actual state of affairs. In that sense, it is worth briefly mentioning Machiavelli’s take on that:

For this may be said of men generally: they are ungrateful, fickle, feigners and dissemblers, avoiders of danger, eager for gain. While you benefit them they are all devoted to you (Machiavelli 2019, 57).

People see only the short term and do not deal with political issues, because they are superficial and evil beings who will betray you as soon as they get the chance – “men never work any good unless through necessity” (Machiavelli 1996, 15). It is obvious that Machiavelli is more insistent, blunt and “realistic” compared to Aristotle when it comes to human nature, although both share the opinion that good laws and religion are needed to restrain men and teach them good behavior. In other words, the experientially determined evil human nature, which comes to the fore again and again throughout history, is additional support for all his normative views. Pragmatism and adaptation, therefore, are the only options. Although these claims about human nature are universalistic in essence and Machiavelli shows us that he is not immune to the trap of neglecting that everything can change and changes (Walker 1987, 79), they are nevertheless experiential and treated as a framework for particularities. Unlike, for example, Hobbes, who builds his political philosophy on universal claims about human nature, which serves as a first deductive point, from which he concludes almost everything about the duties and rights of the sovereign and the people.

On the other hand, Machiavelli’s anti-idealism and cruelty do not mean that one should always be evil, selfish, or corrupt in politics. On the contrary, political circumstances are so complex and unpredictable that behavior according to predetermined patterns is never desirable:

---

<sup>19</sup> The goals of governance will be discussed shortly.

A ruler, then, need not actually possess all the above-mentioned qualities, but he must certainly seem to. Indeed, I shall be so bold as to say that having and always cultivating them is harmful whereas seeming to have them is useful; for instance, to seem merciful, trustworthy, humane, upright, and devout, and also to be so. But if it becomes necessary to refrain, you must be prepared to act in the opposite way, and be capable of doing it (Machiavelli 2019, 60–61).

It is best, in fact, for the ruler to be feared and loved at the same time.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, there were popular writings that belonged to the genre of “mirrors for princes” and aimed to show and describe how a good ruler should appear and behave (Simendić 2022, 16). Drawing on the Christian tradition and the Roman moralists, these writings recommended piety and four essential virtues to rulers: prudence, justice, courage, and moderation. A virtuous ruler was supposed to be a role model for others and show them the way to Christian salvation. In this sense, *The Prince* remains within the framework of the given genre only insofar as it describes the desirable qualities of a ruler that lead to a good outcome – as a response to the challenges of fate (i.e., changing political circumstances). Neither desirable traits, fate, nor a good outcome have their usual meaning in Machiavelli – *The Prince* is “the science of adapting character to circumstances” (Simendić 2022, 16, translated by author). In that context, Machiavelli criticises the widespread opinion at his time, and even beforehand, that everything is in God’s hands and depends on fate – which a person cannot change. He believes that there is free will, although he does not reject that fate plays a role, but only a partial one (Machiavelli 2019, 82). Fate exerts great power where it meets no resistance, and it can also randomly reward people. Although moderately, Machiavelli shows a certain degree of faith in fate and astrology, which represents a departure from the experiential method characteristic of realism (Whelan 2004, 55). He also believed that human character strongly limits free will, as well as social position (Vujadinović 2014, 51).

The virtues he is alluding to are often qualities that were usually considered unworthy of a man, and the desired outcome of ruling is to remain in power as long as possible and achieve fame. Both substantive claims derive from his epistemological tendencies to see the world as it is.

If a ruler, then, contrives to conquer, and to preserve the state, the means will always be judged to be honorable and be praised by everyone. For the common people are impressed by appearances and results (Machiavelli 2019, 61).



A good ruler is one who adapts to time and circumstances and manages to find a balance between peacefulness and ferocity, in order to please both the people and the army – he “must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means” (Machiavelli 2019, 60). The virtue of a ruler is that he knows how to be both a fox and a lion at the same time, in order to recognise traps and scare wolves. As we have seen, he even says that it is dangerous if the ruler is truly endowed with classical virtues, but also useful if he knows how to pretend to possess them (Machiavelli 2019, 60). The ruler must be careful that what he says conveys the impression of “pure” gentleness, trustworthiness, and piety. Therefore, the context determines how he should behave, although experience shows that there are common incentives for ruling. As noted previously, normative claims are not necessarily “non-realist” – it is only important to make them as empirical and non-universal as possible. Machiavelli’s advice for rulers, which implies contextual adaptation, shows how he sees such a connection between reality and normative claims.

On the other hand, like Aristotle, he does not shy away from using concepts like “good deeds” or “good behavior”, meaning moral concepts in general. Their use implies knowing what is the concept of good, although it could rather be said that for Machiavelli this concept is closest to the idea of utility (instrumental normativity). For him, morality certainly has no metaphysical basis, but stems from the need for survival (Mulieri 2021, 502). Therefore, it could be said that he uses moral concepts that are socially accepted, without deeper philosophical refinement. Be that as it may, it is interesting to point out Machiavelli’s simultaneous criticism of the criminal way of coming to power (using the example of the tyrant Agathocles):

Yet it cannot be called virtue to kill one’s fellow-citizens, to betray one’s friends, to be treacherous, merciless and irreligious; power may be gained by acting in such ways, but not glory. If one bears in mind the ability displayed by Agathocles in confronting and surviving dangers, and his indomitable spirit in enduring and overcoming adversity, there is no reason for judging him inferior to even the ablest general. Nevertheless, his appallingly cruel and inhumane conduct, and countless wicked deeds, preclude his being numbered among the finest men. (Machiavelli 2019, 30).

We can see a similar type of condemnation in *Discourses on Livy*, where Machiavelli’s humanism comes to the fore when he states that those who destroy order, religion, art, or anything that serves humanity are worthy of contempt (Machiavelli 1996, 31). His republican spirit is strong, i.e., the

elevation of freedom as a value, which does not diminish his analytical and historical approach in his works (Machiavelli 1996, 16). As pointed out, the fact that the concepts of humanism or the common good are mentioned should not mislead us into thinking that this is an idealistic excursus, at least not from the perspective of the ruler. The goals of governing are clear, and the moral qualities of the ruler, which are necessary for a high-quality order, act primarily instrumentally. The desired outcome for every political actor is not Christian salvation, but the attainment of human glory – and no such thing can be achieved without maintaining the state, order, and personal political success, which directly depends on the satisfaction of those who are ruled. In other words, the personal (well-recognised) interests of the ruler and the common interest are not in conflict. But again, our concern for ethics is only relevant to the extent of its connection and influence on methodology. The point here is that Machiavelli also does not seem to keep general conclusions about politics to a minimum, although his approach still offers substantially more contextualisation compared to other philosophers.

Based on previous points, it seems clear why a republic based on good laws is a meaningful choice for rulers in general: it allows for stability and less conflict, and therefore longer-term rule (Whelan 2004, 41). Similarly:

if a ruler is more afraid of his own subjects than of foreigners, he should build fortresses; but a ruler who is more afraid of foreigners than of his own subjects should not build them. Hence, the best fortress a ruler can have is not to be hated by the people: for if you possess fortresses and the people hate you, having fortresses will not save you (Machiavelli 2019, 73).

Thus, the favor of the people is a means to an end. For the prince, everlasting glory is more important than his current reputation, and whoever collapses the state with his incompetence should be ashamed of it. In line with this is the definition of a republic, in the broadest sense of the word, as a positive order aimed at protecting the common good, and in a narrower, formal sense – as a mixed order, which Machiavelli considers to be the best since there is a balance between the three forms of government (Machiavelli 1996, 13; Simendić 2022, 21). The ruler should also ensure freedom and privacy (primarily private property) to the people, as well as protection from enemies.

On the other hand, as has been emphasised, none of these general conclusions and suggestions by Machiavelli have their full weight without a context in which they are set. Just as Aristotle offers a general solution for a good constitution, but then moves on to what is applicable to most circumstances – as a consequence of studying many contexts and experiences

– so too does Machiavelli handle universalistic claims. He proceeds with caution, uses them as a framework, and reminds the reader of the complexity of human affairs, even sometimes seeing conflicts as a condition for the realization of civil/state greatness (Vujadinović 2014, 54). A wise ruler must not keep his word if it does not benefit him or if the circumstances in which he made the promise have changed, i.e., he should be duplicitous because people “turn as the wind blows”. Unlike Hobbes, who strives to abandon change, Machiavelli endorses it – he does not try to solve “eternal questions of political philosophy” (Walker 1987, 74). He rather provides a thorough overview of historical examples regarding questions that concern him and those to whom he is writing. Cunningness is a necessary trait of a ruler, because history shows that great things were accomplished by those who did not pay attention to their promises and who knew how to skillfully deceive people (Machiavelli 2019, 59). So, his line of thought seems to be analytical enough: practice shows that the ruling position is seized with the aim of conquering and gaining power, and there is no such thing without the maintenance of the state – which further depends on the satisfaction of those who are ruled. Thus, observed human nature and history teach us how politics unfold, which in the end brings us to some sort of framework about what should be done, but only after an assessment of concrete circumstances. This truly resembles Aristotle to a degree.

In the introduction, it was stated that Machiavelli’s methodology harmoniously builds on Aristotle’s, which is why they are discussed together. In this respect, it would be good to also emphasise their substantive links and compare them a bit more. Firstly, Machiavelli accepts the shifting of political orders from Polybius, as well as the six forms of government from Aristotle (Machiavelli 1996, 10). As noted, Machiavelli also accepts the position that conflicts between the rich and the poor are inevitable, and it is precisely the mixed rule that should resolve the conflicting interests. The position and strength of social groups are shown to be one of the main elements of his analysis, as well as the stability of government, which is a legacy of Aristotle’s political philosophy. Although Machiavelli does not identify the personal and the general in the way the Greeks did, but rather, in the search for compromises, he somewhat separates the perspective of the people from the perspective of the ruler. It seems that with him those two points of view (the personal and the common) overlap in the abovementioned magnificence of the state. Machiavelli took pragmatism to a higher level, with a more pronounced pessimism about human nature, turning tyrannical cunningness into general advice for governing.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, he does not see moral

---

<sup>20</sup> With all of the given mitigations and nuances.

virtue as the ultimate goal of political life – he completely denies Aristotelian teleology by emphasizing that people join together for the sake of survival and that this happens for practical reasons. All values arise as a response to the challenges of survival (Mulieri 2021, 502). This takes him quite far from Aristotle's good and practically wise ruler. Nevertheless, although they adopt quite different ethical standpoints, Machiavelli follows Aristotle in his striving for experience-based inferences, which imply a combination of contextualist, comparative-historical and order stability analyses. Such a methodological approach is not common for other philosophers of the time, such as Plato, Cicero, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Marsilius of Padova, etc., nor was it prevalent after the Middle Ages (apart from the mentioned exceptions, such as Montesquieu and Hume) when universalistic and non-experiential claims were dominant.

From all that has been said, Machiavelli appears to possess both methodological elements of contextualist political realism to some degree. He starts from experience in reasoning, creating a nuanced and contextual picture of politics, which does not allow too many generalisations and fantasies, while at the same time seeing normative statements as a necessary reflection of the practical nature of politics. With the exception of the values of freedom and the magnificence of the state, morality is mostly instrumental for Machiavelli. Context forces people to adapt and practice shows that the ruling position is seized with the aim of conquering and gaining power, which for him implies that almost everything is permitted for the sake of preserving that same position. In order to do so, one must take into account all relevant obstacles and potential threats to the stability of the state in the given circumstances. There are no a priori solutions – politics rests on attempts to level the potential conflicts of different interests, although conflicts are at the same time not always bad. In a similar way to Aristotle, he deviates from strong contextualism because experience teaches us that history repeats itself, thereby expressing something universal within human affairs. Nevertheless, Machiavelli seems to express a higher awareness with regard to contextualisation than Aristotle.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

What is to be asserted from this complex input? It appears that we can safely conclude the following: both philosophers fulfill the experiential condition of a realist methodology, but both have divergences from contextualism, since they often reach general conclusions about the best ways to do things in politics, although bearing in mind that those claims are not fully fruitful without the context.

On the other hand, as was noted in the introduction – it also seems reasonable to state that being characterised as a forerunner of a line of thought within political theory calls for somewhat mitigated criteria of identification. Perhaps such criteria could be expressed within Aristotle's and Machiavelli's theories through contextualism in a weaker sense: there are general advice, requirements, and principles regarding politics but their proper application requires sensitivity to the context and particularities of the situation. This still distinguishes them from most of the political philosophers of their time, as well as subsequent ones.

On top of that, it is reasonable to say that Machiavelli expresses a deeper realist tendency than Aristotle, especially in the substantive aspect. Nevertheless, this does not imply that Aristotle should be left out of the picture, nor that the importance of his methodology should be neglected. Lastly, it is up to the reader to decide to what *degree* the approaches of these two classical thinkers overlap with each other and fit the assumptions, as well as what is the extent required for the title of predecessor.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle. 1998. *Politics*, translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- [2] Aristotle. 2000. *Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Aristotle. 1997. *Topics: Books I & VIII* (Translated with a commentary by Robin Smith). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [4] Charles, David. 1995. Aristotle and Modern Realism. 135–172 in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, edited by Robert A. Heinaman. San Francisco: Westview Press.
- [5] Everson, Stephen. 1995. Aristotle and the Explanation of Evaluation: A Reply to David Charles. 173–201 in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, edited by Robert A. Heinaman. San Francisco: Westview Press.
- [6] Fassò, Guido. 2007. *Istoriya filozofije prava* [*Storia della filosofia del diritto*], translated by Dragan Mraović. Podgorica: CID.
- [7] Fozouni, Bahman. 1995. Confutation of Political Realism. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 4: 479–510.
- [8] Galston, William. 2010. Realism in Political Theory. *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4: 385–411.

- [9] Geuss, Raymond. 2008. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- [10] Held, David. 1987. *Models of Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [11] Horton, John. 2010. Realism, Liberal Moralism and a Political Theory of Modus Vivendi. *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4: 431–448.
- [12] Hume, David. 1994. *Political Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Irwin, Terence. 1988. *Aristotle's First Principles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [14] Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1996. *Discourses on Livy*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [15] Machiavelli, Niccolò. 2019. *The Prince*, translated by Russel Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [16] McDowell, John. 1995. Eudaimonia and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics. 201–218 in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, edited by Robert A. Heinaman. San Francisco: Westview Press.
- [17] Molnar, Aleksandar. 2001. *Rasprava o demokratskoj ustavnoj državi – 2. Klasične revolucije: Nizozemska–Engleska–SAD*. Belgrade: Semizdat B92.
- [18] Molloy, Sean. 2006. *The Hidden History of Realism. A Genealogy of Power Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [19] Montesquieu, Charles. 1989. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Morgenthau, Hans. 1948. *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- [21] Mulieri, Alessandro. 2021. Machiavelli, Aristotle and the Scholastics. The origins of human society and the status of prudence. *Intellectual History Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4: 495–517.
- [22] Philp, Mark. 2010. What is to be done? Political theory and political realism. *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4: 466–484.
- [23] Philp, Mark. 2012. Realism without Illusions. *Political Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 5: 629–649.
- [24] Polybius. 2002. History: Book VI, 349–387 in *The Histories of Polybius*, translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. Ontario: In Parentheses Publications.

- [25] Rossi, Enzo. 2010. Reality and imagination in political theory and practice: On Raymond Geuss's realism. *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4: 504–512.
- [26] Schütrumpf, Eckart. 1989. Platonic Methodology in the Program of Aristotle's Political Philosophy: Politics IV. 1. *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974–2014)*, Vol. 119: 209–218.
- [27] Simendić, Marko. 2022. *Aspekti istorije moderne političke misli*. Belgrade: Fakultet političkih nauka.
- [28] Skinner, Quentin. 1998. *Liberty Before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [29] Sleat, Matt. 2010. Bernard Williams and the possibility of a realist political theory. *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4: 485–503.
- [30] Sleat, Matt. 2014. Legitimacy in Realist Thought: Between Moralism and *Realpolitik*. *Political Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 3: 314–337.
- [31] Slomp, Gabriella. 2009. *Carl Schmitt and the Politics of Hostility, Violence and Terror*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [32] Strauss, Leo. 1958. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Glencoe: The Free Press.
- [33] Tweedale, Martin. 1988. Aristotle's Realism. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 3: 501–526.
- [34] Vujadinović, Dragica. 2014. Machiavelli's Republican Political Theory. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol 40, No. 1: 43–68.
- [35] Walker, R. B. 1987. Realism, Change and International Political Theory. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1: 65–86.
- [36] Whelan, Frederick. 2004. *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought*. New York: Lexington Books.
- [37] Williams, Bernard. 1995. Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts. 13–24 in *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, edited by Robert A. Heinaman. San Francisco: Westview Press.
- [38] Williams, Bernard. 2005. *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Article history:

Received: 5. 10. 2023.

Accepted: 29. 11. 2023.