

MODELS OF POLITICAL COMPETENCE

THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL NORMS
IN THE WORKS OF BURGUNDIAN
AND HABSBURG COURT HISTORIANS,
C. 1470–1700



By
MARIA GOLUBEVA

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Models of Political Competence

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INTRODUCTION

With a few exceptions, the history of political ideas in the West has tended to focus on a relatively limited series of texts generated by prominent writers whose work is supposed to have been more innovative than run-of-the-mill treatises by less daring contemporaries. The history of ideas systematically privileges contributions by individuals, and relegates texts generated by collectivities (such as the court of Burgundy) or institutions (such as regional Estates) to a marginal position. In as much as official historians, such as Chastelain or Molinet in the fifteenth century or Vernulaeus in the seventeenth century, strove to conform, in their texts, to the public function with which they were invested by their monarchs, their works automatically constitute objects of lesser interest to a modern historian of ideas than the 'spontaneous' contributions of writers such as Machiavelli or Philippe de Commynes, who are believed to have maintained a critical distance in their analysis of politics. While the study of deliberations of early political institutions, such as councils and Estates, has sometimes been undertaken in order to produce a more contextual interpretation of the ideas of some great thinker, the study of such documents as repositories of ideas *in their own right* is a more recent trend, exemplified by some works cited in this book.¹ For the most part, however, 'institutional' texts, including official histories of European ruling dynasties, have not been regarded as worthy of special attention from historians of ideas.

There are several good reasons to doubt the soundness of that approach. The first is that the mere fact that a text has been produced in order to justify institutional or dynastic interests does not automatically mean that the text will be conservative in terms of the ideas that it articulates. Arjo Vanderjagt has shown how the ideological discourses reproduced by the court of Burgundy at the time of Charles the Bold and Guillaume Hugonet echoed the trends of Renaissance civic humanism.² In that way they were

¹ E.g. Jan Dumolyn, 'Privileges and novelties: the political discourse of the Flemish cities and rural districts in their negotiations with the dukes of Burgundy (1348–1506)', *Urban History*, 35 (1), (2008).

² Arjo J. Vanderjagt, 'Qui sa vertu anoblist'. *The Concepts of Noblesse and Chose Publique in Burgundian Political Thought* (Groningen, 1981); Arjo J. Vanderjagt, 'Expropriating the past. Tradition and innovation in the use of texts in fifteenth-century Burgundy', in: Rudolf

no farther removed from the beginnings of modernity than were the individual impressions of politics articulated later by Commynes. The second reason to pay more attention to policy-related texts produced within political institutions is the tendency of institutionally generated texts to take greater notice of the structures and societal contexts in which political ideas were supposed to operate. Corporate actors of the fifteenth-century political stage (and their chronicler contemporaries, on whose texts this study is based) knew how to articulate their awareness of the complexity of local, regional and dynastic political interests. In sharp contrast to them, more innovative diplomats such as Commynes and, indeed, Machiavelli, sometimes reduced the complexity of politics to the interplay of individual characters, discarding as possibly boring for their readers the complex institutional contexts that were, for them, self-evident—but within which their contemporaries' understanding of political success and failure operated.

The work of official historians, on the other hand, contains frequent references to the institutional complexity of the pre-modern and early modern power structures, often expressed by presenting the processes of political communication to the reader's eye. Such is Molinet's description of the apology of the Four Members of Flanders to Maximilian I after the Bruges captivity, and such are the uniformly tedious descriptions of rituals surrounding combat in the memoirs of Olivier de La Marche. The former shows in some depth how the complex political interaction between regional institutions at various levels could be structured. The latter reveals the structures of communication of the power elite of a diverse ensemble of lands ruled by the dukes of Burgundy, which was in the process of becoming an early modern state—even though eventually it was divided between several other states. It is exactly the court historians' attachment to institutional narratives, expressed not only through political documents but also through accounts of symbolic interaction, which should make official histories interesting to a contemporary student of the history of political thought seeking a more 'grounded' reading of political ideas.

The Object of Research

The object of this study is the changing model of political competence in the official histories of European rulers of one dynasty from the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth century.

Better-known theories of political competence, such as that of Bourdieu, do not engage with political competence historically: they limit their definitions of it to the modern age. In Bourdieu's approach, political competence is inextricably interwoven with the presumption that politics is a professional field: '[T]he political field is the site in which, though the competition between the agents involved in it, political products, issues, programmes, analyses, commentaries, concepts and events are created.'³ Political competence is, then, cultural capital in the field of politics, and by definition, an ordinary citizen has less of it than a professional politician. But can the same be said of a period when politics was not yet a mass market? Some historians have effectively extended a Bourdieu-esque understanding of competence to the later medieval period: Jacques Verger and Jan Dumolyn have argued that late medieval officers of princely administrations also acted as exponents of a specialised discourse of politics that they themselves developed and from which their decisions proceeded.⁴

On the other hand, today, political competence is not seen as an exclusive domain of politicians. Members of professional and business communities are sometimes ascribed their own special kind of political competence, relevant for the interaction between their professional field and the field of general politics.⁵ And, at least at the ideal level, citizenship education in developed democratic societies is supposed to endow every citizen with a modicum of political competence. While historians tend to agree that in the late medieval and early modern period the political field was more limited,⁶ nevertheless some groups of subjects, notably the

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 171–2.

⁴ Jacques Verger, *Les gens de savoir en Europe à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1997); Jan Dumolyn, 'Justice, Equity and Common Good. The State Ideology of the Councillors of the Burgundian Dukes', in: D'Arcy J. D. Boulton and Jan R. Veenstra (eds.), *The Ideology of Burgundy*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 145 (Leiden/Boston, 2006).

⁵ E.g. Joanne Rains Warner, 'A Phenomenological Approach to Political Competence: Stories of Nurse Activists', *Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice*, 4 (2), (2003), pp. 135–143.

⁶ Though not as limited as had once been postulated by Jürgen Habermas in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1989). For the best-known critique of Habermas on this point, see Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit. Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1994).

urban and regional elites embodied in territorial Estates, possessed their own competence for engaging in the political field.⁷

A question that may legitimately be posed at this stage is whether 'political competence' is not an artificial or anachronistic concept when applied to the political communities and the hereditary rulers of late medieval and early modern Europe. After all, competence may prove yet another of those 'universalist and essentialist concepts of political actions and institutions that set themselves above history', making impossible a proper reconstruction of the discourses and practices which would allow us to see the meaning-making structures of past societies.⁸ Is competence merely a badly fitting modern term for other concepts in force at the time, for instance, 'virtue' (and its derivatives) or 'honour'?

The answer lies, perhaps, in comparing what virtue and honour denoted for West European societies during the period in question, and what competence denotes in the discourses of politics of the modern age. First of all, it can be argued that semantically, neither 'virtue', nor, indeed, the Renaissance concept of *virtù* were a full equivalent of capacity to achieve political success. Quentin Skinner comes close to equating *virtù* in the works of Machiavelli with capacity to achieve success in government, especially in his recent shorter restatement of the concept.⁹ But, at an earlier point Skinner makes clear that the Renaissance republican concept of *virtù* means primarily 'a broad sense of public commitment'.¹⁰ Both *virtù* and honour could be seen primarily as public emanations of moral superiority (and only proceeding from that, as something to which noble and exalted personages had a special claim).¹¹ Neither is an equivalent of the modern

⁷ Jean Nicolas, Julio Valdeon Baroque, and Sergij Vilfan 'The Monarchic State and Resistance in Spain, France and the Old Provinces of the Habsburgs, 1400–1800', in Peter Blickle (ed.), *Resistance, Representation and Community, The Origins of the Modern State in Europe* (Oxford, 1997), p. 113; Dumolyn, 'Justice, Equity and Common Good' (see n. 4), p. 9.

⁸ Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, 'Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?', in: B. Stollberg-Rilinger (ed.), *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen* (Berlin, 2008) p. 13.

⁹ Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000), p. 40.

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols., (Cambridge, 1978), ii, p. 175.

¹¹ For a profound analysis of the notions of virtue, nobility and honour in the fifteenth-century Burgundian context, see Vanderjagt, '*Qui sa vertu anoblist*' (see n. 2). For notions of honour in the early modern period and their implications for the process of state-building, see Ronald G. Asch, "Honour in All Parts of Europe Will be Ever Like Itself". Ehre, adlige Standeskultur und Staatsbildung in England und Frankreich im späten 16. und 17. Jahrhundert: Disziplinierung oder Aushandeln von Statusansprüchen?, in: Ronald G. Asch, Dagmar Freist (eds.), *Staatsbildung als kultureller Prozess* (Cologne, 2005), pp. 353–380.

notion of competence, since competence, in our understanding today, denotes qualities necessary in order to achieve something,¹² whereas virtue, *virtù* and honour were seen as important *per se*.¹³ Let us look at some examples to illustrate the point.

Around 1465, the Burgundian courtier Jean de Lannoy, writing instructions to his son on the matter of family honour, says: '... He who is just, is loved; who is loved, has friends; who has friends, is praised; who is praised, is honoured; who is honoured, is served and commended by all men, who pray for him, by which he comes to peace, joy and honour in this world, and acquires good fame after his death, and hope to arrive at true eternal glory.'¹⁴ The virtue of justice, here, is seen primarily as a vehicle to achieve honour and salvation, though success in earthly affairs may also come from it. A little earlier in the same text, in accordance with the Renaissance concepts of nobility, Lannoy connects virtue and the right to govern: 'without it (virtue) no one can be held to be noble... nor worthy of lordship, or of governing anything'.¹⁵ Virtue, then, ensures that one is eligible to rule—but it does not guarantee success in doing so. At best, it is a synonym of moral competence.

Two hundred years later, the Habsburg court historian Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato writes about Oliver Cromwell: 'And let it be noted from his extraordinary example, that not the nobility of birth, nor riches... qualify one for high office, as it usually solely happens, but that it is opportunity that... wakes up the spirit, and sharpens the mind.'¹⁶ There is not a word here about virtue or, indeed, honour—yet certain mental qualities are believed to qualify a man for political office and political success. The fact that Priorato later piously adds a sentence concerning the nothingness to

¹² According to the Oxford English Dictionary, competence is 'Sufficiency of qualification; capacity to deal adequately with a subject (OED, Second Edition, 1989, 'Competence', 4.a.).

¹³ The notion of virtue in itself possessed several levels of meaning in accordance with the late medieval taxonomy of virtues that distinguished between theological and civic virtues. This distinction was operationalised through the Renaissance concept of nobility of spirit as a primary quality that made one eligible for political office. Arjo Vanderjagt, '*Qui sa vertu anoblist*' (see n. 2), pp. 64–8.

¹⁴ Translated from 'Lettres envoyées par Jehan seigneur de Lannoy a Loys son filz', quoted in Bernhard Sterchi, 'The Importance of Reputation in the Theory and Practice of Burgundian Chivalry: Jean de Lannoy, the Croÿs, and the Order of the Golden Fleece', in Boulton and Veenstra (eds.) *The Ideology of Burgundy* (see n. 4), p. 103.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101, Footnote 12.

¹⁶ Translated from Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato, *Vite et azioni di personaggi militari, e politici*, 2nd edn. (Vienna, 1674), p. 245.

which Cromwell's glory came after his death does not change much in the way of perception of political competence that he ascribes to Cromwell.

While admittedly anachronistic, this little comparison has its benefits. It shows that if we ask the question "Which approaches to statecraft were viewed as successful, and what qualities were ascribed to political actors who applied, or failed to apply, those approaches?" we must cast our net wider and search historical sources for notions that go beyond the conventional parlance of virtue and honour. Other notions beside these contributed to the narrative of competence.

Was there a need for such a narrative? As pointed out by Andreas Gestrich, also in the days when theories of sacred nature of monarchy still ensured general public acceptance of the principle of hereditary personal rule, this did not diminish the need for the rulers to make efforts to demonstrate the conformity of their actions to accepted norms—that is, to demonstrate that their actions were directed towards common good. The issue of trust, as Gestrich puts it, depends on knowing something about the one who is to be trusted, and it is here that one finds the need for detailed information about the actions, aims or competence of the ruler and/or his advisers.¹⁷ In other words, success in ruling is always defined by the 'terms of reference' that a given society provides. Thus, while a proof of successful economic policy was not always required by the audiences for which court historians were producing their works in the fifteenth, sixteenth or seventeenth century, a proof of prudent and effective military leadership was desirable, and so, after the 1520s, was a proof of the confessional soundness of a prince's policies.

In order to confirm or reconstruct these terms of reference, official histories, along with other texts, provided their readers (and the rulers who often commissioned them) with models of political competence. These were not the same thing as exempla¹⁸ (though they may have made ample use of exempla). Models of political competence in the context of this study can be defined as normative models of practical statecraft which are used as reference in narratives of political events (in texts that are not

¹⁷ Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit* (see n. 6), pp. 26–7.

¹⁸ The easiest definition of an exemplum can be found in Franz Bücher, *Verargumendierte Geschichte. Exempla Romana im politischen Diskurs der späten römischen Republik*, Hermes Einzelschriften 96 (Stuttgart, 2006), p. 154: An exemplum is 'was aus der Vergangenheit, zum Zwecke gegenwärtiger Überzeugungsarbeit eines Redners herausgenommen wird'—thus making any example from the past used for rhetorical purposes an exemplum.

primarily preoccupied with creating ideal models as such). Their function is twofold: to bind the rulers and the ruled to a certain understanding of what in modern terms can be described as competent political action, and to persuade diverse audiences that the ruler in question corresponds to the given understanding of competence. It is this second function that places them outside the domain of political philosophy and more or less inside the domain of what Jan Dumolyn (after Charles Taylor) has called 'middlebrow ideology': a discourse of the principal actors in the nascent modern state.¹⁹

It is not by chance that this study looks to works of history produced by official historians or by historians working at court to shed light on the contemporary understanding of political competence. The authorship of late medieval and early modern discourses of politics and the state was, of course, collective, and one could easily include several overlapping classes of individuals among those who shaped the models of political competence. Jacques Verger, updating the studies on the 'intellectuals of the Middle Ages', was the first to introduce the Gramscian term of 'organic intellectuals' into discussion of the forms of knowledge and conceptual frameworks shared by educated servants of the state in late medieval and early modern Europe.²⁰ Later Jan Dumolyn pointed out, quite rightly, that superior officers of state administrations before 1500 already made their decisions in conformity with a certain abstract discourse of the state and politics.²¹ Such organic intellectuals were the authors of contemporary models of political competence, shaping the understanding of commonwealth and statecraft in late medieval and early modern states. Or rather, as Dumolyn puts it, 'Armed with old theories the officers constructed a new kind of state and a new sort of society'.²²

Official historians, thus, are not the only 'suspects' whose works may be studied in search of the models in question. Yet it was they who showed those models in action—that is, set in contemporary social contexts, challenged by the realities of politics, and under stress. Even the most archetypal histories wrought with clichés borrowed from classical authors have something to say about the political problems of the period they describe, and on the manner in which those problems were solved. Besides, taking

¹⁹ Jan Dumolyn, 'Justice, Equity and Common Good. (see n. 4), p. 2.

²⁰ Jacques Verger, *Les gens de savoir* (see n. 4), pp. 128–9.

²¹ Jan Dumolyn, 'Justice, Equity and the Common Good' (see n. 4), pp. 17–18.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

into account the changing nature of political communication between the 1470s and the 1700s (the period covered, although with a long break between c. 1530 and c. 1640, by the history texts analysed for the present study), it can be argued that no other category of sources offers a more solid basis for tracing the changing model of political competence than do the works of official historiography, as a fairly conservative genre.

Narratives of competence are narratives of success and failure, involving a certain interpretation of the given political circumstances. Since court historians needed to prove that the rulers they served were competent and successful in a particular given context, they had to go at least a little into the nitty-gritty of government and war, in order to prove their point.²³ At the same time, the narratives of success and failure often involved a certain interpretation of political virtue, and a certain normative understanding of politics. For instance, while for the chancellor of Emperor Charles V, Mercurino of Gattinara, writing in the 1520s, competent political action primarily included serving the Catholic Church,²⁴ Protestant historian Gottlieb Eucharius Rinck two centuries later envisaged competent political action that was above confessional loyalty.²⁵ Proceeding from this distinction, one can see that these respective models of political competence stress different qualities or indeed different kinds of competence—for Gattinara, confessional competence is the primary pre-requisite of political success, while for Rinck, a competent leader can be either Catholic or Protestant, but should always possess other sets of attitudes and skills that Rinck himself deems essential.

The Choice of Historical Period and Scope of the Study

This study began as an endeavour to identify models of secular political competence in the official representation of early modern rulers shortly before the legitimacy of monarchs came to be tested by the ideas that

²³ This is not true of the type of dynastic histories constructed entirely around generic exempla (like the works of Vernulaeus, analysed in Chapter III of this book). However, even in those works the way the exempla were arranged and introduced, as well as the emphasis on particular virtues, betrays the topical attitudes of the time when the history is written.

²⁴ A. Mercurino of Gattinara, *Memoirs*, ed. Ilse Kodek, *Der Großkanzler Kaiser Karls V. zieht Bilanz. Die Autobiographie Mercurino Gattinaras aus dem Lateinischen übersetzt* (Münster, 2004), pp. 198–9.

²⁵ Gottlieb Eucharius Rinck, *Leopolds des Grossen . . . wunderwürdiges Leben und Thaten*, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1713).

gained currency during the Enlightenment. The purpose was to see how, if at all, the competence to rule was discursively separated from moral and religious legitimacy in the texts presenting the actions of early modern rulers for various audiences. The initial choice to focus on the Austrian Habsburgs, however, presented this author with a problem. The Habsburg Monarchy in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was not exactly a hub of political or intellectual innovation in Europe. The essence of a Habsburg emperor's task c. 1700 was described by the dynasty's apologists, whether secular or religious, as a permanent endeavour to preserve the *status quo*—both at home in Austria and in the Empire.²⁶ This did not preclude change: in the face of current political needs, new political solutions were sought for and implemented. Nevertheless, official narratives from which we can glean some references concerning the contemporary understanding of successful (competent) or less successful (incompetent) handling of political affairs avoided engaging with the notion of change. Or, at least, they did not engage with change as a fundamental category of social and political reality.

The seemingly conservative nature of the texts presenting the actions of the Austrian Habsburgs and their officials to various audiences in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century means, among other things, that these texts rely heavily on dynastic exempla. These exempla are often derived from the works of court historians and other intellectuals that served earlier generations of the dynasty, and thus create an illusion of perfect continuity. The message, however, differs considerably according to the political context of a given reign, as does the discursive framework within which the stereotypical dynastic virtues are discussed.²⁷ The illusion of continuity remains exactly that—an illusion. A new approach, when expedient, could ultimately be presented as established and traditional.²⁸ Only a careful analysis taking into account the earlier texts of the same dynastic tradition and the texts that influenced that tradition can reveal the change.

²⁶ Robert A. Kann, *A Study in Austrian Intellectual History. From Late Baroque to Romanticism* (London, 1960), p. 5.

²⁷ See especially Jutta Schumann, *Die andere Sonne. Kaiserbild und Medienstrategien im Zeitalter Leopolds I* (Berlin 2004).

²⁸ On a similar phenomenon in the political discourse of late medieval urban communities in the Burgundian Netherlands, see Jan Dumolyn, 'Privileges and novelties: the political discourse of the Flemish cities and rural districts in their negotiations with the dukes of Burgundy' (see n. 1).