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John Watts

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[More information](#)

I

INTRODUCTION

This book has two main aims. The first is to write about the later middle ages in language other than the prevailing currencies of ‘waning’, ‘transition’, ‘crisis’ and ‘disorder’. That, perhaps, is pushing at an open door – few of today’s late medievalists really see their period in these terms – but, for reasons to be explored below, they continue to be the terms in which textbook literature is written. The second aim, which may be more ambitious, is to provide an analytical account of the politics of the period, explaining what those politics were about, where they came from, and how they developed over time. When we turn to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we enter a period with no meaningful political and constitutional narrative. True, there is a general sense that the nascent kingdoms of the thirteenth century plunged into ‘crisis’ in the fourteenth and entered ‘recovery’ in the later fifteenth. There is also the familiar story of the decline of the universal Church from its zenith under Innocent III to the disaster of 1517. More recently, there is an account of the ‘origins of the modern state’, in which the expanding fiscality of our period plays a central role. And there is Bernard Guenée’s perceptive summary, which proposes that the development of royal bureaucracies was thwarted from the 1340s onwards by war, chivalry and democracy, to be resumed in the later fifteenth century when these volatile forces had burned themselves out.¹ But these narratives do not explain or even,

¹ B. Guenée, *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe*, trans. J. Vale (Oxford, 1985), pp. 207–8.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

for the most part, deal with the general course of politics across the continent. 'Crisis' and 'recovery' are too big and vague to account for what was going on: these terms have become substitutes for analysis rather than ways of framing it. The history of the Church benefits from a rich historiography, but the tendency to treat it as a specific kind of institution, in dialectical tension with 'the state', has placed unnecessary limits on what it can tell us about politics in general. Narratives of state growth, meanwhile, have little to say about the course of events; they tend to neglect the frequent and dramatic collapse of central authority in this period, to give undue solidity to the pretentious, diverse and halting efforts of rulers, to understate the complexity of the world in which institutions operated, and to ignore the less state-like power structures that also held sway across Europe. Even Guenée's rather brilliant sketch shares some of these flaws, and its three phases are set out in little more than a page.

Against this background, the politics of the continent remain opaque: they were 'a mass of undignified petty conflicts' according to one historian.² Another writes perceptively that 'the actors in this European drama were seldom in possession of the plot', indeed that 'there was not one plot but many', but although select details of the plot(s) are duly recounted in these and other works, their inner dynamics go largely unexplored.³ To Jacques Heers, writing vividly about the political life of medieval Italian cities, it almost seemed that a political history could not be written. His words could stand just as well for the politics of later medieval Europe as a whole:

To establish a simple chronology...would seem to be a terribly tedious and futile exercise. To disentangle the astonishing confusion, the skein of multiple relationships, bound together with flexibility and striking fragility, of alliances between political groups and individuals, between towns or even between sovereign powers would be a monumental enterprise. The analyst moved at the outset by the noblest of motives feels himself in the long run seized by an irresistible desire to abridge and simplify...Every remotely clear presentation of events, ordered, selected, tied to well-defined causes, provoked by a logical chain of events, thus seems to be in some degree an artificial construction.⁴

² G. Holmes, *Europe: Hierarchy and Revolt, 1320-1450* (London, 1975), p. 12.

³ D. Hay, *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, 2nd edn (Harlow, 1989), pp. 25-6.

⁴ J. Heers, *Parties and Political Life in the Medieval West*, trans. D. Nicholas (Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 1-2.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79664-4 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300-1500

John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

Small wonder, thought Heers, that historians had taken refuge in recounting the more manageable history of institutions, even if this made it impossible 'to grasp the realities of political life from the social point of view'. Like many of the writers of his time, and since, Heers thought that the answers might lie in prosopography – detailed collective biography of the political actors of the age and their myriad interconnections. This book proposes another approach, one that notes the consonances and shared patterns – the structures – of European political life and aims to trace their interactions and developments. Let us begin with some examples of structured political behaviour.

On 12 July 1469, the duke of Clarence, the archbishop of York and the earl of Warwick rose up against the government of King Edward IV of England (1461–83), indicating in an open letter that, for 'the honour and profit of our said sovereign lord and the common weal of all this his realm', they proposed to join together with other lords to put before the king a series of protests and petitions delivered to them by his 'true subjects of divers parts of this his realm of England'.⁵ These protests recited the way in which certain earlier kings had been drawn away from the counsel of great lords by men interested only in 'singular lucre and enriching of themselves and their blood'. By this means, these kings had been impoverished and so they had gone on to lay unaccustomed and inordinate taxes on the people, and especially on the enemies of these 'seducious persons' about them; they had allowed these men to suspend the operation of law and justice; and they had favoured their friends and supporters in disputes. As a result, the realm had been reduced to disorder, division and poverty. It now appeared that Edward IV also was surrounded by a group of such persons, who had robbed the king of his lands, forced him to change the coinage, to impose inordinate taxes and levy forced loans that went unpaid, to mispend papal taxation, to suspend the execution of his laws against their clients, and to estrange the true lords of his blood from his council. Having all this in mind, the 'true and faithful subjects and commons of this land, for the great weal and surety of the king our sovereign lord and the common weal of the land' asked for these men to be punished, and for the king to resume his lost estates by the

⁵ Printed in J. O. Halliwell, ed., *A Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of King Edward the Fourth* by John Warkworth D.D., Camden Society, old series, 10 (London, 1839), pp. 46–51 (spelling modernised).

Cambridge University Press

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John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

advice of the lords spiritual and temporal, so as to release his people from unnecessary taxation, as he had promised in his last parliament.

Five years earlier, on 28 September 1464, the marquis of Villena, the archbishop of Toledo, the admiral of Castile and other lords had similarly risen up against the government of King Henry IV of Castile (1454-74), expressing their concern for 'the *cosa pública* [the republic, or public business] of your realms and lordships' and claiming to speak 'with the voice and in the name of the three estates'.⁶ In a long letter, these lords recited the good advice the king had been given by the magnates at the beginning of his reign, urging him to rule himself and his people according to law and custom and in the manner of his glorious ancestors, as he was obliged to do. The king, they alleged, had not taken this advice, but had instead surrounded himself with enemies of the Catholic faith and men of suspect faith, whom he had heavily rewarded and whose counsel he had preferred to that of the great lords. As a result, Church and people had been burdened with taxes and extortions. Papal crusade taxation had been misapplied and the coinage had been changed and devalued. Because the law only worked in favour of the men around the king, his subjects did not dare to sue in his court of audience and large parts of the realm were destroyed for lack of justice. The king would not receive petitions put up to him for his own good, but responded to them violently, as if they were from his enemies. And there was plenty more to be said when the king was in a mood to listen to his people's complaints, but for now the important thing was to strike at the root cause of all these problems: 'the oppression of your royal person by the power of the count of Ledesma, so that your lordship is unable to act as natural reason teaches you'. Stressing their loyalty to the king, their concern for his honour and his soul, and their desire to respond to the grievances of the people, the confederates asked for Ledesma and his '*parciales*' (supporters) to be taken and imprisoned, and for the king to summon his *Cortes* to ordain for the good government of his realms.

When historians have discussed these two rather similar episodes, they have done so in relation to the national political situation in each case: the emerging tensions between Warwick the Kingmaker and the Yorkist usurper, on the one hand, and the factional discords that surrounded the 'impotent' King Henry IV, on the other. They have

⁶ *Memorias de Don Enrique IV de Castilla*, ed. F. Fita and A. Bonilla, Real Academia de la Historia (Madrid, 1913), vol. II, pp. 328ff.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79664-4 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300-1500

John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

also tended to regard the public claims of these protesters as spurious, and have assigned them personal motives – in fact, essentially the *same* personal motives: both Warwick and Villena had formerly been the close advisers and allies of their respective kings; once each reign was underway, however, they found themselves displaced by rising men, and they are supposed to have resented the fact. Certain patterns have been noted – after all, what Warwick was doing in 1469, Richard of York had done in 1450, while the manoeuvres of Villena and his allies more or less duplicated the words and actions of those noble leagues that had dogged the rule of John II of Castile earlier in the century – but this perception has generally been taken to undermine the credibility of these protests still further, even when it is recognised that in mid-fifteenth-century England or Castile there was much to protest about. These historiographical parallels are rather interesting, and we shall return to them, but first of all there is a *historical* parallel to deal with, and one that has been largely missed. As is plain from the extracts quoted, the formats of these two rebellions were strikingly similar. In both cases, magnates claimed to act for the people – and not only for the people, but for the people as a political community: the ‘commons’ or ‘three estates’. These magnates produced, or circulated, vernacular manifestoes; and they made a roughly similar litany of protests about the king’s wicked advisers, who had come up from nothing, and were now distorting, by their self-interested control of the royal person, the judicial, conciliar and fiscal transactions of the polity. Almost exactly the same complaints were made against Louis XI by the duke of Burgundy and the other princes of the so-called League of the ‘*Bien Public*’ in 1465, and they too were made in the same way – with public letters written in the vernacular, professions of loyalty and calls for a meeting of the traditional representative assembly, the ‘Estates General’. And meanwhile in Florence, the leading families who rebelled against the Medici in 1466 also advertised their claims in public letters, which called for the city to be ruled by its traditional magistrates and not by the will of a few men whose avarice had brought ruination through excessive taxes, and whose corruptions had produced disorder by destroying confidence in the laws.

It is clear, then, that there were certain common forms for the expression of political opposition in the 1460s, and this fact should raise questions about the rather isolated way in which these episodes have been treated. There were certainly variations in the rhetoric from country to country: English evil councillors were not usually

Cambridge University Press

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John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

regarded as religious deviants, for instance, whereas Spanish ones were routinely linked with Jews and Muslims. There are also many local differences in the causation of these various risings, though it is striking that the causes emphasised by historians – personal relationships within the court, and the shaping of these by a competition for patronage and influence – should be so similar. All the same, the structural parallels between the demonstrations of the 1460s are surely important, and must deserve more attention. Historians have tended to dismiss the historical significance of these common patterns, seeing them, for example, as the conventional repertoires of ‘overmighty’ behaviour, or as the product of direct connections – such that Warwick, for example, may have adopted the postures of 1469 as a result of his frequent visits to France in the period of the ‘*Guerre du Bien Public*’. Priority has been given to tracing the specific causes and motivations behind these events, as if those are the unique and significant element, while the modalities of political action are comparatively timeless and incidental. We might reasonably wonder, however, if the real situation is the reverse – that there are always interpersonal and competitive tensions driving political events, but that what changes, and thus requires discussion, are the structures and processes through which those tensions are formed and expressed. Any political conflict can be explained in the way that later medieval political conflicts are customarily explained, but the structuring of conflict manifestly changes across time and space, its changing forms are rarely unique, and such common patterns as exist in these changes must be worth measuring. A look at an earlier set of late medieval confrontations may help to illustrate this point.

On the death of the powerful King Erik Menved of Denmark (1286–1319), the magnates of his realm, meeting as the *Danehof*, or high court of the realm, demanded a thirty-seven-point charter, or *håndfaestning*, from his brother Christopher, as the price for his coronation.⁷ Beginning with the Church, and moving on to knights, merchants, burgesses and finally to the people and the general concerns of the realm, this charter of January 1320 bestowed liberties that are readily familiar from such documents as *Magna Carta* (1215) and the Provisions of Oxford and Westminster (1258–9), Philip IV’s reforming *ordonnance* of 1303, and the charters granted in response

⁷ Printed in *Diplomatarium Danicum 2.raekke*, 8.bind, 1318–1322, ed. A. Afzelius *et al.* (Copenhagen, 1953), no. 176.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79664-4 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300-1500

John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

to the French Leagues of 1314–15. As a national statement of rights, it also had much in common with the contemporary ‘charter of liberties’ granted by Magnus Eriksson of Sweden in 1319 and, less closely, with the Scottish Declaration of Arbroath (1320). The Danish charter addressed particular problems typical of the early fourteenth century, so that, for example, clause 12 provided that knights could not be compelled to serve outside the realm, a concession which was also made by the incoming king of Bohemia in 1310 and sought from Edward I of England in 1297. Clause 13 declared that the king should not begin wars without the counsel and consent of the prelates and more powerful men of the realm, just as in the Aragonese *Privilegio General* of 1283, and the English ‘Ordinances’ of 1311. Clause 20 forbade interference in, or impositions on, the free passage of merchandise ‘unless by reasonable cause, and urgent necessity, the king, by common consent of the better sort, has thought to make such restrictions’. Here too were echoes of the English crisis of 1297, couched in the new pan-European language of communal taxation. The provision of clause 28 that people should have justice first in their own district (or ‘*haerraeth*’) and not immediately in the king’s court, and that of clause 35, that people should be tried according to the custom of their land (‘*terra*’), closely parallel the terms of the *ordonnance* given by Louis X of France to the inhabitants of the *bailliage* of Amiens in 1315.⁸ This ordered that men should be tried first in their own local jurisdictions (‘*chastellenies*’), and only cited before the king’s high court of *Parlement* on appeal; almost every clause of the document upheld local custom and local justice, and limited the grounds on which royal judges could hear cases. Finally, where Christopher II was made to swear to uphold in all things the laws of King Valdemar, who had reigned eighty years before, Philip IV and his son Louis X swore to preserve liberties, franchises and customs as they had been in the time of St Louis, while Edward I of England was obliged to reissue *Magna Carta*, though it was recognised, with varying degrees of explicitness, that these kings may need to amend their laws with due consultation and consent.⁹

⁸ *Les ordonnances des rois de France de troisième race*, ed. E. de Laurière et al., 22 vols. (Paris, 1723–1849), vol. I, pp. 562–3.

⁹ *Ordonnances*, vol. I, pp. 354, 562; *English Historical Documents*, vol. III, ed. H. Rothwell (London, 1969), pp. 485–6.

Cambridge University Press

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John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

If we compare these confrontations from the early fourteenth century with those of the 1460s, a series of meaningful contrasts emerge. There is a change, first of all, in the languages used. The charters and ordinances of the earlier period were written mainly in a Latin informed substantially by the vocabulary of Roman and canon law; the documents of the later period were written in the vernacular, informed by the practice of royal chanceries, and shaped by the common political, religious and ethical language of their times. There is a continuity in the principle of action for the realm in these episodes, but changes in the way that realm is represented. Notwithstanding some repeated terminology – ‘estates’, ‘common(s)’ – the realm is seen less, by the 1460s, as a set of particular groups, constituted by their individual liberties and privileges, and more as a socially diverse, but nationally united, community, with a set of common concerns, ventilated by and before a wide public. There are changes, moreover, in the points at issue. By the 1460s, there is less concern with the defence of rights and liberties against intrusive royal jurisdiction, or with the definition of what the king and his officers should or should not be allowed to do. Instead, there is more of a sense that the king’s government is accepted, indeed, that the wellbeing of Church and people depend on it at every point and in every detail, and that the problems requiring attention concern the perversion of this government, its improper exclusiveness, and its failure to deliver what is expected, not its intrusions into the lives of subjects. There are changes, finally, in the nature and affiliations of these documents themselves: not, by the 1460s, charters and ordinances, but petitions and manifestoes, seeking to say something public, and on behalf of the public. Much as legislation of some kind was surely anticipated from the assemblies envisaged by the rebels in Castile and France, if not also in England, their immediate aim was to counsel the king, rather than to make law: to wield a kind of common, or national, opinion, rather than to advance a set of sectional interests.

It is hard to deny that this evidence points to some significant developments over the hundred-and-fifty-year period that separates the two sets of events. A substantial degree of political integration has taken place, as well as what appears to be a politicisation of social and legal relationships: that is, a more self-conscious sense on the part of status groups that they have responsibilities to the political whole, together with a reconsideration of their roles in relation to that whole and in relation to its political interests and requirements. It is not that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79664-4 - The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300-1500

John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

the wholeness of society went unrecognised in the early fourteenth century – references to the good old laws of long-dead kings, to all the realm and to the common consent of the better sort make that plain – but it is clear that, earlier on, the liberties of estates and districts were a more pressing and real concern than the common good, whatever that might have been. By the 1460s, on the other hand, the tentacles of central government were everywhere, and participation in high politics had spread, in one way or another, very widely across most European societies. The political community was thus, in every country, a much more extensive, complex and ever-present phenomenon, and politicians of all kinds were forced to engage with it in real, as well as verbal, terms. These, then, are changes not just in the vocabulary of politics, but also in its formats, its aims, its nature. What we are seeing here is evidence of structural change, and structural change in what historians have commonly seen as a creative and positive direction – towards the making of coherent and extensive polities, or political societies. A history which took more account of the importance of political structures and of the presence of political evolution within our period would thus capture something about the political life of Europe in the later middle ages. More than this, it would be a new departure in the historiography, at least at the level of the continent as a whole.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Although a great deal of specialised writing has been published in the last few decades, together with the multi-volume *New Cambridge Medieval History* (henceforth *NCMH*) and a number of important country-level studies, the main introductory surveys of later medieval politics available to English readers are now about thirty or forty years old. Daniel Waley's *Later Medieval Europe from St Louis to Luther* was first published in 1964. Denys Hay's *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* followed in 1966. George Holmes' book *Europe: Hierarchy and Revolt, 1320–1450* came along in 1975, and, while *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe*, by Bernard Guenée, came out in English as recently as 1985, it was a translation of a work first published in France in 1971. These books have been revised and republished, in some cases several times, but, inevitably, and for all their virtues, they have not altogether escaped the state of research and understanding that prevailed when they were created. The volumes of the *NCMH*,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79664-4 - The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300-1500

John Watts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

on the other hand, contain many fundamental challenges to older views, as well as a wealth of important new material, but as a series of multi-authored works, they do not offer a new synthesis, and the editors' introductions typically take a cautious line on the big picture of each century. A few new survey works have emerged, such as David Nicholas' *Transformation of Medieval Europe, 1300-1600* (1999), or Robin W. Winks and Lee Palmer-Wandel's *Europe in a Wider World, 1350-1650* (2003), but their novelty principally lies in their placing of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries alongside the sixteenth; they do not offer reinterpretations of politics in the later middle ages. But a reinterpretation is precisely what is needed. Before we go any further, it will be helpful to explore how the historiography of this period has developed, and to consider what may be wrong with some of its guiding assumptions.

Perhaps the most fundamental influences on our understanding of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries lie in the very term, 'later middle ages', and the narratives of 'decline' and 'transition' with which it is associated. The invention of the middle ages, and the subdivision of that epoch into three broad phases – 'early', 'high' and 'late' – have had an enduring effect on the way in which our period has been approached. A series of institutions and cultural forms that grew or flourished between the tenth and thirteenth centuries have been regarded as characteristic of medieval civilisation – above all, the Latin Church, united under papal headship and the Holy Roman Empire of the Salians and Hohenstaufen; but also the crusade and chivalry, 'scholasticism' and Roman and canon law, Gothic art and architecture, 'feudalism', monasteries and communes. While the coming of these things is often regarded as sudden and revolutionary, their disintegration in the later middle ages was slow, and it has formed one of the twin poles of later medieval historiography. 'The Decline of Empire and Papacy' was the title of the penultimate volume of the pre-war series of the *Cambridge Medieval History*; *The Waning of the Middle Ages* was the title chosen for the first English translation of Johan Huizinga's famous study of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century culture. No modern work is quite so infused with an atmosphere of decay, but the sense of old rules not working, or of old ways becoming corrupted, remains widespread. In part, this is because of the mixed fortunes enjoyed by what is supposed to have been the main agency and beneficiary of papal and imperial decline: the nation state. The juridical kingdoms, which had seemed so powerful and promising at