

## INTRODUCTION

The character of ‘medieval political thought’ is problematic. Its very existence, as an identifiable entity or subject, may be questioned, and has been denied. Yet such doubts and denials seem less than plausible in the light of the sustained and fruitful scholarly investigation and exposition that the subject – though not always under this title – has received for the best part of a century. Some aspects of that historiography will be considered in a moment. First, however, something needs to be said more directly about the nature of the subject itself. It is no doubt true that if certain definitions of ‘political thought’ are accepted it will be hard to find such thought in the period surveyed in this book. For most medieval thinkers the analysis, whether conceptual or institutional, of ‘politics’ in its original Greek sense was neither relevant nor possible. Even after the so-called ‘Aristotelian revolution’ of the thirteenth century this is still substantially true. Concepts and terminology derived from Aristotle’s *Politics* then indeed became common intellectual currency; and yet there is no medieval work challenging even distant comparison with that massive treatise. The influence of Platonic or neo-Platonic ideas was no doubt more continuous, though the light it shed was refracted; but there is no medieval text of the character, let alone the calibre, of Plato’s *Republic*. Ideas, whether Platonic or Aristotelian, rooted in the life of the *polis* or city-state had at best a limited application in most medieval societies.

If, on the other hand, ‘political thought’ is understood in terms of ‘the state’ as it has been experienced and analysed in the post-medieval western world, we shall again encounter a concept largely inappropriate in the medieval context. There is certainly room for argument both for and against the view that some kind of ‘state’ emerged, both in fact and in idea, in medieval Europe. This is a recurrent issue in the chapters that follow. Even if that question is resolved in an affirmative sense, however, it remains a hazardous enterprise to credit any medieval writer with a ‘theory of the state’ in what has been, at least for one tradition, the classic modern sense of the term.

In comparison, it may seem, medieval thinkers were concerned with issues much less distinctively ‘political’. Walter Ullmann argued that the medieval outlook in general was characterised by a ‘wholeness point of view’.<sup>1</sup> By this he intended to discriminate between that outlook and one in which, as in modern thinking, separate spheres are distinguished for what is ‘moral’, what is ‘religious’, and so on – including, specifically and emphatically, a sphere of ‘the political’. It is certainly the case that this kind of division and specialisation of disciplines has been a characteristic and important modern development. It is not, however, the case that the alternative ‘wholeness point of view’ has been peculiarly or exclusively medieval. It is surely a viewpoint of that kind that makes Plato’s *Republic*, for instance, so much more than a ‘theory of the state’. As for Aristotle, just because the *polis* was for him a society uniquely capable of making possible a ‘good life’ in comprehensive terms, its analysis could not be narrowly ‘political’. Thus a theory of the household forms an integral part of Aristotle’s ‘political theory’; and his account of political systems as such cannot dispense with such ethical concepts as ‘friendship’ and ‘justice’. Theories of ‘the modern state’ have likewise transcended the restrictions of the explicitly ‘political’. There are ‘sociological’ dimensions in the thought of Bodin or Montesquieu. Again, vitally important political thinking in the modern period has developed within the matrix of jurisprudence or of the ‘political economy’ which emerged from the moral philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As for explicit modern variants of the ‘wholeness point of view’, it may suffice to cite the influential case of Hegel, for whom ‘the strictly political state’ is far from exhausting the content of the term ‘state’ itself.<sup>2</sup>

The credentials of ‘medieval political thought’, then, are not impugned by the recognition that its subject-matter extends to themes which, in other periods or for some thinkers, might seem alien to strictly political discourse. Nor is it necessary, in the defence of those credentials, to have recourse to a definition of politics as nothing less than (in Michael Oakeshott’s phrase) ‘the activity of attending to the general arrangements’ of a society.<sup>3</sup> It is sufficient to recognise that issues seemingly *prima facie* ‘social’, ‘economic’,

1. Cf., e.g., Ullmann 1975a, pp. 16ff.

2. Cf. translator’s note to § 267, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, translated with notes by T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, 1942, pp. 364–5. For the phrase ‘strictly political state’ see § 267 (p. 163); and cf. ‘the state as a political entity’, §§ 273, 176, (pp. 276, 179).

3. M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Political and Other Essays*, Methuen, 1962, p. 122: ‘Politics I take to be the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together.’

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‘ecclesiastical’ or even ‘spiritual’ arise here because of their bearing upon questions of *authority* and *jurisdiction*. Thus the theory of *dominium* expounded by John of Paris at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has a great deal to do with problems arising from changing economic conditions,<sup>4</sup> but it is expounded deliberately in the context of an argument – a *political* argument, we may properly say – about royal and papal *power*. Again, the theoretical issues raised by the conciliar movement of the fifteenth century were largely theological issues regarding the nature of the church as a spiritual society; but – setting aside the overtly political conflicts in the context of which the movement developed – those issues were, for some writers at least, concerned with the consequences of treating the church as a particular instance of the genus comprising *political* societies as such.

There are various ways, accordingly, in which the genuinely political character of ‘medieval political thought’ can be established. Yet it remains, also, *medieval*; and nothing said here is intended to deny that there are specifically ‘medieval’ characteristics to be considered and particular problems in the historical interpretation of this body of ideas. For one thing, medieval society was theocentric and even, for some of its leading figures, theocratic. Necessarily, therefore, an account of medieval political thinking will include more theology and ecclesiology than would be expected in a modern sequel. Chapters 11 and 14 below, for example, would be hard to parallel in a history of modern political thought, whereas the ecclesiastical and theological issues with which they deal are central here. Again the relative dearth, especially in the earlier phases, of explicit political theorising in medieval society means that historians must concern themselves to a very considerable extent with ideas that are implicit in institutions and procedures, including (an important element in the evidence) ritual and ceremonial. The exploration of ideas and attitudes embedded in governmental and social structures means, moreover, that the history of medieval political thought must frequently merge into the historical analysis of medieval society itself. This demonstrates the advantage – indeed the necessity – of, for instance, the account in chapter 9 of ‘Government, law and society’ in the period from the mid-eighth to the mid-twelfth century. There is also, however, a more general question about the approach to the subject adopted here, which may itself be approached by way of some brief comments on earlier historiography.

4. Cf. pp. 638–40 below.

It is possible, and not necessarily unrewarding, to write the history of political thought in this as in other periods as, essentially, the history of political thinkers. Medieval thinkers can indeed be given places among ‘the masters of political thought’.<sup>5</sup> ‘The medieval contribution to political thought’, again, can be assessed by reference to the work of outstanding figures – Aquinas, Marsilius, Hooker.<sup>6</sup> Yet whatever the merits and disadvantages of this kind of history may be for other periods, it can hardly fail to yield an imperfect and distorted picture of political ideas in the medieval centuries. For reasons already stated, few writers in that period can be meaningfully identified as ‘political thinkers’ at all; and very few indeed can be regarded as having made a major individual contribution to the subject. Even if the net is cast more widely and the definition of a ‘political thinker’ made more flexible, so much of the evidence will be lost as to leave the resulting ‘history’ unacceptably spasmodic and patchy. Whole tracts of time, indeed, would virtually disappear if the record were restricted to the work of individual thinkers. Yet without an understanding of, in particular, the earlier medieval centuries, our perspectives on the later period, with its revival of explicit political discussion and analysis carried out by more readily identifiable ‘political thinkers’, must be misleadingly foreshortened. To see these later medieval political ideas, in some sense no doubt ideas reflecting a more sophisticated culture, in the context of the earlier sources upon which their exponents continued to draw is, for one thing, to gain a degree of security against the risk of distortion when what is ‘medieval’ is viewed and assessed in terms of its supposed anticipation of what is regarded as ‘modern’.

Thus a more thematic or conceptual approach must potentially be, and has been in fact, more fruitful in the history of medieval political thought. The point may be illustrated by a brief consideration of three major contributions to the historiography of the subject since the late nineteenth century. There is first the dominant figure of Otto von Gierke and the three volumes (published between 1868 and 1881) of *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*. Gierke’s monumental and magisterial work was of course concerned with more than the strictly medieval period; and particular importance here, especially for English-speaking scholars, attaches to that part of the third volume which was translated by F.W. Maitland and published in 1900 under the significant title of *Political Theories of the Middle Age*. Gierke was indeed concerned with ‘political

5. M.B. Foster, *Plato to Machiavelli*, vol. 1 in E.McC. Sait (ed.), *The Masters of Political Thought*, Harrap, 1942. 6. Passerin d’Entrèves 1939.

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theories', and his concern was expressed through the deployment of formidable learning in an immense body of source-material. It was, however, for all its range, a concern of a rather specific kind. Not only is Gierke's work explicitly directed to 'the law of associations' (*Genossenschaftsrecht*): it seeks and finds in that law an 'ideal type' or model of fellowship and group personality. The ideal, moreover, is essentially and avowedly Germanic, even if both Gierke and those influenced by him saw it as a source of more generally applicable principles for a modern world suffering from excessive 'individualism'. In this powerful perspective, medieval political thought reveals above all the principles of a group or corporate life generating in those who share it morally valuable qualities of loyalty and brotherhood which transcend even the political division between rulers and ruled. It is a thesis which can be and has increasingly been questioned;<sup>7</sup> but it cannot be doubted that Gierke's work opened up, effectively for the first time, much of the buried wealth of medieval thinking about society.

Shortly after the publication of Maitland's important translation from Gierke, R.W. and A.J. Carlyle produced the first of what eventually amounted to the six volumes of *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*. Reprinted as recently as 1970, this remains an invaluable contribution to the subject, not least on account of its copious provision of quotations from the sources in the original languages. What calls for comment here, however, is the structure and method adopted by Carlyle (the singular form seeming warranted in view of the fact that the work was preponderantly written by A.J. Carlyle, with some contributions by the brother who predeceased him). Within a broadly chronological framework, the approach is essentially thematic, with relatively little attempt to give sustained and systematic attention even to major individual thinkers.<sup>8</sup> A particularly characteristic feature is the recurrence in successive sections and volumes of the work of chapter-headings which Carlyle clearly regarded as identifying the principal themes to be explored: 'The source of law'; 'The source and nature of the authority of the ruler'; 'The theory of the divine right'; 'Representative institutions', and so on. Even more striking and important, however, is the clear conviction that it is possible to identify certain 'great political conceptions of the Middle Ages': these are listed as 'the supremacy

7. Cf. pp. 588–9 below; also Black 1984, as index, esp. pp. 210–17.

8. Exceptionally, separate chapters are devoted in vol. IV to John of Salisbury and Gerhoh of Reichersberg (Part IV, chaps. II, III); but these deal only with the two authors' views on the relationship between the spiritual and temporal powers.

of law, the authority of the community, the contractual relation between ruler and subject'.<sup>9</sup> Here again we have a view – with its corollary, that 'the theory of the absolute Divine authority of the King . . . had little importance in the Middle Ages'<sup>10</sup> – which has exercised a good deal of influence but which would now be regarded as too restricted and one-sided for anything like unqualified acceptance.

The Carlyle view would, in terms of a third important and influential approach to medieval political thought, be seen as an emphatic – indeed over-emphatic – assertion of an 'ascending', in contradistinction from a 'descending', conception of political authority. Walter Ullmann's familiar formulation recognised indeed the presence and the importance of both views in medieval thought; but he argued that throughout the long period between the Christianisation of the Germanic peoples of northern and western Europe and the late thirteenth century, it was the descending theory – in which political power comes by delegation from God, to whom alone the ruler is accountable – that overwhelmingly preponderated. Even so, Ullmann claimed, 'The history of political ideas in the Middle Ages is to a very large extent a history of the conflicts between these two theories of government.'<sup>11</sup> Here yet again, no doubt, we have an illuminating and fruitful hypothesis which is nevertheless open to question and debate and which would certainly not be universally accepted as a sufficient framework for a thorough exploration of the subject. In any case it is of course by no means the only important general concept to have emerged from Ullmann's massive and wide-ranging scholarship. His insistence on the medieval 'wholeness point of view' has already been mentioned. Even more important, arguably, is Ullmann's concern to convince his readers that for most of the medieval period our investigation is concerned with 'governmental' rather than strictly 'political' ideas – with ideas essentially about the exercise of authority in *gubernatio*, which in turn was seen as being indissolubly connected with *jurisdictio*, 'laying down the law'.<sup>12</sup> It followed from this that legal and juristic sources had for Ullmann an importance which had assuredly not been overlooked by other historians but which for him meant that the medieval view of society and authority 'found its most conspicuous expression in the law and in . . . jurisprudence'.<sup>13</sup>

The present volume cannot, as a work of co-operative scholarship, offer

9. Vol. iv, p. vii.

10. Vol. vi, pp. 185, 191. This however is not entirely consistent with views expressed elsewhere by Carlyle: cf. vol. iii, pp. 115–24 on the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and, perhaps especially, vol. i, pp. 215ff. on ninth-century writers and the influence of Gregory the Great.

11. Ullmann 1975a, p. 13. 12. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18. 13. Ullmann 1975b, p. 12.

anything like the single magisterial view to be found in a Gierke, a Carlyle, or an Ullmann. Its aim is, rather, to present a conspectus, as comprehensive as is possible within prescribed limits of space, of the present state of historical scholarship in the field surveyed. Such a conspectus need not be, nor is it here, so neutral as to preclude critical assessment. The judgements of the authors concerned have been brought to bear upon the issues arising in scholarly debate; and since the division between one chapter and another cannot be absolute and rigid, there is room for differences of emphasis and approach in the handling of topics that are relevant to more than one chapter. It is hoped that such differences do not amount to contradictions and that their presence may yield a degree of cross-fertilisation rather than confusion. This is applicable not only to topics but to texts and their authors; for the formula adopted has meant that even major thinkers have not, as individuals, been regarded as the preserve of any one contributor. The reader who is for the time being concerned with, let us say, Aquinas or Marsilius, should be able, with the help of the index, to bring together the views of several scholars approaching the ideas in question from a diversity of angles.

The political thought discussed here is predominantly that of Latin Christendom, of 'the West'. However, besides the brief introductory sketches of Christian, classical and Roman-law 'foundations', there is a substantial chapter on the political ideas of Byzantium, which are examined over the whole period down to the final eclipse of the eastern empire in the middle of the fifteenth century. This has been included because of the persistent significance for political development in the Latin West, especially during the first half of the millennium here surveyed, of both the fact and the idea of the Byzantine imperial system. Similarly, though less elaborately and systematically, space has been found, especially in chapter 12, for some attention to ideas derived from non-Christian cultures either on the frontiers of or within Latin Christendom. The political ideas of Jewish and Islamic thinkers could obviously have received much fuller treatment; but to have provided this would have extended the scope of the book beyond what the available space could have sustained.

For the rest, the various chapters may be left to speak for themselves with the further clarification provided in the introductory chapters to parts III, IV and V respectively. A word about the apparatus may suffice to conclude this brief general introduction. The abbreviated 'author and date' references which are, with very few exceptions, employed in the footnotes, can be elucidated by reference to the relevant section of the Bibliography, which in

turn is intended primarily to serve this specific purpose. It is not, of course, claimed that the listing of primary and secondary works cited in the body of the book constitutes a comprehensive bibliography of the subject as a whole. It is hoped, however, that, subdivided as it is, the Bibliography may go some considerable way towards providing rapid access to details of much of the relevant material. So far as the biographical (in some cases necessarily quasi-biographical) notes are concerned, their function is limited to that of ready reference – to locate authors chronologically and in some measure bibliographically in respect of their principal writings.



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**FOUNDATIONS**

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