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0521837790 - Jesuit Political Thought: The Society of Jesus and the State, c. 1540-1630

Harro Hopfl

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Society of Jesus recognised from its inception that an engagement with the world of secular rulers was inescapable. Most Jesuits in most places and at most times of course had nothing to do with ‘matters of state’. They neither sought nor welcomed political prominence. But the Society’s more hysterical opponents accused it of liking nothing better than interfering in politics. The Society’s apologists for their part just as routinely proclaimed that the Society’s own articles of association sternly prohibited any political meddling. But to no avail. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* (entry *Jesuit* 1. – composed c. 1900) perpetuates the apparently inseparable association between Jesuits and politics: ‘The stringent organization of the Order soon rendered it very powerful, and brought it into collision with the civil authority even in Roman Catholic countries . . . The secret power of the organization and the casuistical principles maintained by many of its representatives, and generally ascribed to the body as a whole, have rendered its name odious not only in English, but in French and other languages.’

It all obviously depended on what was to count as ‘meddling’. The founders never doubted that the Society’s mission, to say nothing of the restoration of the Church, would require the patronage of well-disposed secular authorities or that, when called upon, members of the Society would render such services to rulers as were appropriate to men of the cloth. But they envisaged no speculative preoccupation with *respublica* and could never have anticipated that the Society would be ascribed distinctive political doctrines, least of all subversive ones. And of course Jesuits never had a collective political doctrine in the same sense that there was a distinctively Jesuit spirituality, Jesuit missions, or (eventually) a Jesuit academic curriculum. It was certainly the Society’s ideal that all Jesuits should think, feel, and speak as one. The Jesuits’ enemies from Protestants and *parlementaires* via *philosophes* to Communists, *Kulturkämpfer*, and (latterly) enemies of liberation theology always envied them the degree of solidarity they actually achieved. But the monolithic character of the Society has

been grossly exaggerated. Successive Jesuit superiors general on the contrary regularly complained about the *lack* of unity of purpose, and the prevalence of *insubordination*, particularly intellectual insubordination (*libertas opinandi*) among the Society's more speculatively inclined members. This is to say nothing of the recurrent propensity of Jesuits to 'national' and other particularisms. If the Society's leadership was unable to secure homogeneity of belief and doctrine in what it regarded as matters of faith or discipline, it stood even less chance of enforcing uniformity about political doctrines which were neither matters of faith themselves nor had any straightforward inferential relationship with them. And when prominent Jesuits wrote in the service of secular or ecclesiastical potentates, the 'by permission of superiors' (*permissu superiorum*) that normally graced the title-pages of Jesuit books could mean even less than it ordinarily did; the 'superiors' in question might not even be Jesuit superiors. The Society's authors, moreover, naturally had to attend to the sensibilities of the audiences they envisaged, and to the conventions and vocabularies of the genres in which they were writing.

The lack of transparency of the relationship between the Jesuits and matters of state makes it less surprising that there appears to be no extant survey of Jesuit political doctrine in the round, such as is attempted here, although there are innumerable scholarly and polemical monographs on particular episodes, thinkers, and issues in the political and intellectual history of the Society of Jesus. What follows is not the definitive textbook of Jesuit political theory that Jesuits themselves unaccountably failed to write. Nor are we searching for a doctrinal homogeneity that consists of saying the same thing about everything. The political doctrines that are explored here hang together, and were distinctively Jesuit. But their homogeneity is of a different kind and, for reasons which will become obvious, there could be no such thing as an exclusively and peculiarly Jesuit doctrine on any matter whatever, least of all matters of state. Their still centre is a set of beliefs concerning the nature of good order in any collectivity as demanding hierarchy and monarchy. These beliefs are today deeply unfashionable, but are none the worse or less interesting for that. They were as constitutive of the Society's spirituality and its mission as of its theology and its ecclesiology (chapters 1–2). They were regulative of what other beliefs and doctrines were espoused by Jesuits in other contexts. They did not, however, dictate all that Jesuits might say or think, nor did they eliminate all possibility of disagreement.

The Society's founders always recognised that the provenance of many of these core beliefs was the practice of politics and the reflections of *auctores* on

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matters civil or political. But the founders' most urgent task was to employ these ideas to articulate a clear and distinct idea of the true Church, the role of the Society of Jesus within it, and the optimal order (or as we should say, organisation) of the Society for fulfilling that role. That organisation was remarkable and has continued to be a source of fascination, even for those not addicted to conspiracy theories (chapter 2).

As the Society increased rapidly in size, fame, and the scope of its activities, so did the range and volume of its publications. So too did the number and vociferousness of its enemies. Publishing defences of the Society against their attacks became a veritable Jesuit industry. Such defences had to deal among other things with the charge of 'meddling in politics' (or in 'secular matters'). Some Jesuit theorists advanced a considerable distance beyond the utterly question-begging distinction between secular (or political or state) matters and spiritual (or religious, ecclesiastical, or church) matters that most Jesuits and their contemporaries treated as self-explanatory. The secondary literature has not hitherto displayed much interest in explorations of this distinction, despite its endemic relevance. It is considered in chapter 3.

The point at which the spiritual and the temporal, religion and statecraft, most obviously coincided and as often as not collided, was the issue of heresy. It was the Society's practical and speculative engagement with heresy that brought it the greatest public prominence and also obloquy. It also proved to be both a focus and a springboard for more sustained Jesuit thinking about *respublica*. In the collective view of the Society from the beginning, true religion and political expediency alike demanded that secular authority should take a hand in the elimination of organised heresy (chapter 4). However, there were much broader issues involved. In fact Jesuits saw dealing with heresy as requiring a confrontation with a diffuse and indeterminate range of enemies of Catholic orthodoxy, variously called Machiavellians, *politiques*, atheists, proponents of 'reason of state', 'policy' and 'statism' (chapter 5). 'Reason of state' posed grave difficulties for Jesuit theorists. The heart of the matter for the Society was that proponents of reason of state advocated religious toleration, and when in power practised it; so did the 'heretics' when it suited their book politically. Received Catholic doctrine, which Jesuit theologians and office-holders therefore endorsed, was that religious toleration or (worse still) freedom of worship were equally disastrous for spiritual welfare and political order. But the issue was anything but straightforward. Some Jesuits of the highest authority in the Society had argued as early as the 1550s that toleration was the lesser evil in the conditions prevailing in the Holy Roman Empire, and many more were

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to say the same of England, Holland, and France from the 1570s onwards. While toleration was not seen as a positive good by any Jesuit theorist, virtually all of them came to acknowledge that it was a morally acceptable policy for Catholic princes when ‘necessity’ dictated it (chapter 6). The flexibility of Jesuit teaching on religious toleration has long been acknowledged in the specialist literature, but has made little impression at the level of more general accounts of the history of political thought.

If reason of state is interpreted more broadly as a doctrine regarding what was and what was not morally defensible in political conduct, Jesuit political theory and casuistry at many points approximated even more closely to it. The most obvious rhetorical strategy for Jesuits was to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’ reason of state. This distinction made it possible to legitimise many departures from impossibly strict norms of piety, morality, and legality, especially on the part of orthodox rulers (chapters 6–7). But Jesuit theology, casuistry, and mirrors of princes could not entirely sanitise and domesticate princely lying and breach of faith, which Jesuits singled out as the most execrable of the tenets of false reason of state. They insisted that princes are just as duty-bound as subjects to practise good faith. Yet their enemies succeeded in making ‘Jesuit’ forever (it seems) synonymous with duplicity, double-dealing, and the doctrine that promises made to heretics are not binding (chapter 7).

The distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ reason of state was, however, something of a polemical makeshift. A better purchase on the genuine moral difficulties which reason of state pointed up was afforded by the concept of prudence, highly prized in practice by the Society *ab initio* as a virtue requisite in any kind of superior. It was also a well-established *topos* in theology and in casuistry. Even formal theological works, which ordinarily did not even recognise the existence of reason of state, could here contribute substantially to political casuistry (chapter 8). Prudence, however, demanded the exercise of an informed and cultivated judgement. But one of the main objectives of the Society was the final elimination from faith and morals of any place for individual opinion (and therefore ‘judgement’) and the curse of dissension and disorder to which in the Jesuit view it inevitably led. What was to replace it was the certitude that came from having an infallible arbiter of controversies, and a science of moral principles and their application to specific cases (casuistry). Prudence had therefore to be firmly subordinated to casuistry. Nevertheless, the practice of casuistry itself was understood to demand prudence (chapter 8). The tension between casuistry and prudence therefore could not be eliminated.

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Casuistry applied the general principles of natural and divine law to specific cases, and merged seamlessly with theology and ‘controversies’. Ruling, statecraft, governance, like any other practice or activity, therefore fell within their province. The Catholic theologian, Jesuit or not, was, however, bound by the demands of a curriculum which had *no* place for ‘politics’ *eo nomine*, let alone for the new-fangled ‘reason of state’. The only location for ‘political matters’ the theological curriculum afforded was under the headings *on justice and right*, and *on laws*. But the paradigmatic Jesuit principle was that what is essential to the survival of the commonwealth is not laws as such, but governance, *principatus*, and super- and sub-ordination: relations of command and obedience. For the most part, Jesuit theologians followed the standard topics of the Thomist curriculum, but accommodated them to their specific preoccupations and principles (chapter 8). Other formats, such as the mirror for princes, the polemical monograph, the scriptural commentary, and the (initially) much less strictly routinised thematics of ‘controversial’ theology, allowed Jesuits more freedom to pursue ‘political’ questions.

As the Thomist curriculum construed *respublica*, the heart of the matter was the question of the source and end of secular authority as such, and the derivation of the right of specific rulers and regimes to exercise such authority (chapter 9). On its premises, it was necessary to reconcile reason and Revelation; indeed the same topics and the same approach also featured in commentaries on certain scriptural *loci*, notably Romans 13, *the* political text of the time; scriptural commentaries (as ‘positive’ theology) were also part of the theology curriculum. It was not in doubt that civil authority ultimately ‘descended’ from God. The question was *how* it descended. And on this matter theological discussions were largely ‘secular’ and ‘natural’ in character. Jesuit theologians and polemicists on this basis were able to take issue with Divine Right theorists, and particularly patriarchalist accounts of the genesis of authority and regimes. But the entire Thomist tradition was here caught in a tension which Jesuit orienting ideas accentuated; indeed it pervaded much of early modern political thought. On the one hand, the Society’s core beliefs demanded an account of political authority in terms of the rights of rulers and the duties of subjects, and a ‘presumption’ in favour of princes in every doubtful case (chapter 9). On the other hand, legitimate secular authority was unquestionably limited and derivative authority. But the Society’s political thinkers were by no means agreed about whether the limits on rightful authority could or should take institutionalised form; they also disagreed about whether the derivation of the authority of specific princes and regimes presupposed some historic contract, compact, or

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agreement. That too was both a philosophical and a polemical issue which agitated their contemporaries. What is clear, however, is that their accounts (unlike those of Hobbes and Locke which otherwise resemble them closely) did not involve the postulate of a 'state of nature', even though a concept with that name was articulated and deployed in other contexts (chapter 10).

The same preoccupations and the same tensions also characterised the theory of law that was developed *pari passu*. Law was reconciled with political authority by construing it as a species of command and an 'act of will' of the ruler, precisely analogous to Bodinian conceptions (chapter 11). However, the ultimate justification of secular government and law alike was the common good. That concept received no sustained exploration, nor did its relationship with the natural rights of individuals that Jesuits unhesitatingly conceded, notably the right of self-defence. It was not clear either to what extent the right of property was protected against the authority of the commonwealth (particular its authority to levy taxes) by its status as part of the law of nations, and in certain cases as a natural right. The concept of natural liberty did not much figure in these discussions, even though it was regarded as axiomatic that all human beings are naturally free and equal, and that no one is naturally endowed with the right to command, coerce, and punish (chapter 12).

Here then was a restatement of a tradition of speculative thought, with resources and a momentum of its own, whose criteria of relevance and cogency were certainly not those of ecclesiastico-political controversy, and whose content was difficult for the Society's High Command to police. And yet it was precisely this thoroughly academic and speculative tradition which provided Jesuit *polemicists* with both an arsenal and an ultimate fall-back position: notably the conception of the people, commonwealth, or political community as the immediate source of the authority of rulers (chapters 9–12).

Although the derivation and ends of secular and ecclesiastical authority were quite different, one of the cruxes of these discussions was the appropriate relationship between what was just coming to be called Church and State. The issue was peculiarly intractable for Jesuits because of their unshakable conviction that the Church was just as much and as literally a *respublica perfecta* as any secular commonwealth. How both secular and ecclesiastical rulers could exercise authority over the same bodies of subjects, and where the loyalty of subjects was to lie when they came into conflict, was a defining issue in early modern political thought. Jesuit ecclesiology, despite the conspicuous political sagacity of so many Jesuits, was in the end unable to resist a resolution that subordinated political to 'spiritual' authority. The

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Society's enemies, both Catholics and Protestants, accordingly accused it of fostering political disobedience, legitimating tyrannicide, and ultimately rendering all political authority among Christians precarious by upholding the papal power to depose rulers, with tyrannicide as the *ultima ratio*. The Society found itself in extremely difficult circumstances over the accession of Henri IV and later his assassination, the Oath of Allegiance demanded by James I/VI, and the Venetian Interdict. The Society, via its most prominent theologians and controversialists, had now to issue circumspect and authoritative statements of its position. On tyrannicide, a standard topic in rhetoric and scholastic theology, various Jesuits had previously adopted one or other of the various positions regarded as defensible since classical times (chapter 13). On the papal authority to depose excommunicated secular rulers, there had been very little discussion, since Jesuits had regarded the matter as uncontroversial (chapter 14). The position of its spokesmen once these became burning issues was not entirely unambiguous.

The Society in the first decades of the seventeenth century had thus come to be identified with a number of political doctrines. Some of these it had always rejected outright. Others, elaborated and endorsed by the Society's leading theologians and polemicists, subsequently became an embarrassment to the Society's High Command or the papacy, or to both. At any rate, there were now famous and influential texts, many of them proclaiming their provenance *e Societate Jesu* on their title-page, which constituted a participation in virtually every genre of political discourse and every controverted political issue of the time. The content and inner logic of these writings and the contribution of lesser lights is now to be exhibited. Their legacy will be considered subsequently.

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CHAPTER I

The character of the Society of Jesus

The Society of Jesus was not the first religious order to find itself involved in political controversy or in articulating a political theology. The same had been true of its great medieval predecessors, the Franciscans and Dominicans. But as it was originally conceived, there was nothing about the Society to suggest to it that it should follow their precedent. On the contrary, it had every reason to be exceedingly careful about being seen to ‘meddle in politics’. Its concern with *respublica* grew out of the avocations it accumulated, each of which left its mark on the form and content of Jesuit political thinking. It is therefore necessary to begin with some account of how the Society understood itself and what kinds of work it came to undertake.

The Society’s original ‘charters’ anticipated neither its later public prominence, nor its mushroom growth,¹ nor many of the employments in which it came to specialise. The *Formula of the Institute*, a brief summary of the purposes and organisation of the Society submitted by Ignatius of Loyola and his companions to Paul III in 1539,² described the primary purpose of the new ‘community’ as simply ‘the advancement of souls in Christian life and doctrine and . . . the propagation of the Faith by the ministry of the Word, spiritual exercises and works of charity, specifically (*nominatim*) by way of the instruction of boys and unlettered persons in Christianity’. Paul III’s bull *Regimini Militantis Ecclesiae* of 27 September 1540, which officially recognised the Society, added ‘public teaching’ and ‘hearing

¹ *Regimini* imposed an upper limit of sixty on future membership without any dissent from the Society. The limit was already removed in 1544 at the request of the Society.

² After substantial reworking by several cardinals, the *Formula* became the bull *Regimini Militantis Ecclesiae*. Its text as subsequently modified became known as the *Institute*. See *MHSJ*, vol. 63 (*Monumenta Ignatiana*, Series III) vol. 1, *Constitutiones* 1, pp. 15ff and the excellent English translation in A. M. de Aldama, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Formula of the Institute* (cited as *Aldama, Formula*), pp. 3–23; for the expanded version, Julius III’s Bull *Exposcit Debitum* of 21 July 1550, see Ganss, *Constitutions*, document 1, pp. 63–73.

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confessions'.³ No more specific formulation of the Society's purposes was thought compatible with its fundamental commitment to go wherever the Pope or their Superior General sent its members, 'whether to Turks, the New World, Lutherans [omitted from *Regimini*, presumably for diplomatic reasons], or to any other infidels or faithful whatever' (*Formula*, pp. 17, 27).

It is apparent from this that the Society originally envisaged that its main work would be to raise the level of piety, knowledge of doctrine, and morality of nominally Catholic cities and provinces, to reconvert heretics, and to convert heathens in foreign parts.⁴ The founders' predilection was for missionary activity among the poor and lowly and pagans. But between the 1530s and the 1560s the allegiance of many parts of Christendom to the See of Rome hung by a thread. 'Heresy', as Rome defined it, had penetrated or become officially established in much of northern and eastern Europe and was infiltrating parts of Italy itself. Even cardinals in Rome disagreed about what was a just and necessary 'reformation' of the Church and what was heretical 'deformation'. The Society was a company of educated priests⁵ wholly confident in its interpretation of true Christian doctrine and life. It was committed by special vows to be at the Pope's disposal, and it was enjoying a spectacular growth in membership at a time when monasteries were emptying and candidates to the priesthood were scarce. Rome had more urgent tasks for such men than teaching children their Ten Commandments and dying of fevers among the pagans. Before long, popes and bishops began to employ Jesuits for reforming entire dioceses, acting as advisers to papal emissaries abroad, and as theologians at Trent.⁶ Soon it was all Ignatius could do to prevent his sons being made bishops or even cardinals.⁷ Foreign missions continued to be something to which the Society was devoted, but missionary work had to take its place alongside other activities.

³ *MHSJ*, vol. 63, pp. 15, 16, and 26; cf. *Constitutions*, pp. 64, 66.

⁴ *Constitutions*, s. 308 (*Declaration A* to the Preamble of pt IV).

⁵ The eleven founders of the Society all had degrees from Paris or elsewhere. Ignatius was sometimes wrongly credited with a doctorate; Dalmases, *Ignatius*, pp. 122–3. Contrary to its original conception, it became the Society's norm for its members to be priests, unlike the older orders. Jesuits were soon called 'the Fathers of the Society of Jesus'.

⁶ Láinez, Salmerón, and Favre (who died *en route*) were papal theologians at Trent; Canisius and Le Jay went as advisers to the prince-bishop of Augsburg, Cardinal Otto von Truchsess. Favre had long been employed in preaching and as a consultant at colloquies in Germany.

⁷ Young, *Letters*, p. 112 and fn. 12 (= *EpIg* 1, Letter 149, p. 456, also pp. 460–7). In 1554 Canisius refused the title (but not the work) of bishop of Vienna; Brodrick, *St Peter Canisius*, p. 187. For Ignatius successfully dissuading Pope Julius III from elevating Francisco Borja to the cardinalate in 1552 see Young, *Letters*, pp. 257–8.

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TEACHING

Its founders did not intend the Society to be a learned or a teaching order.⁸ Ignatius and his fellow-founders had originally simply assumed that the missionary activities they envisaged demanded a very considerable degree of learning and facility in speaking and writing, as well as a sound theological education. But they expected that recruits would acquire these accomplishments at orthodox universities, as they themselves had done, not that the Society would teach them itself. This proved not to be feasible, in part because Jesuits were dissatisfied with the orthodoxy, methods of instruction, and standards of discipline at many universities. The founders were devoted specifically to the *modus Parisiensis*, with its orderly graduation of courses to be followed by cohorts of students of the same age in sequence, its 'repetitions' and disputations, to encourage emulation among students and to check whether the material had been mastered, and its strict discipline.⁹ As the Society inadvertently embarked upon the foundation of an educational empire, in response to demands made on it by rulers, municipalities, and bishops, it was natural to combine teaching 'externs' (pupils and students not intended for the Society) with training its 'scholastics' (novices). It was henceforth the Society's firm policy to insist on control of the administration, curriculum, and teaching methods of all colleges, seminaries, and university faculties which it was called on to staff. All appointments to positions in the colleges were ultimately in the hands of the Superior General, and more immediately under the direction of the Provincial.

Its reputation for piety, zeal, and learning gained the Society its first patrons in the academic field. Notable among these were the Duke of Gandía and Viceroy of Catalonia, Francisco Borja (or Borgia), who gave the Jesuits complete administration of his newly founded College at Gandía, and João III of Portugal, who in 1542 entrusted them with a college at his University of Coimbra. By the late 1540s the Society was sufficiently highly regarded for the Viceroy of Sicily and the municipality of its capital Messina to ask it to establish a college. Geronimo Nadal became its founding rector.¹⁰ Messina, which taught both externs and scholastics, proved to be a model and precedent. The Roman College, founded in 1551 and intended by Ignatius as an example for all the rest, borrowed its curriculum

⁸ 'Teaching' in the early documents meant teaching the rudiments of Christian doctrine and life to children and the unlettered; e.g. *MHSJ*, vol. 63, p. 18; Aldama, *Formula*, pp. 2 and 3; and Ganss, *Constitutions*, p. 66.

⁹ See Codina Mir, *Aux sources de la pédagogie des Jésuites*. ¹⁰ See Pate, *Nadal*, pp. 64–85.