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## Politics

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## Using Concepts in Medieval History: Politics

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The later Middle Ages did have a concept of 'politics' and the 'political', but not one which corresponds to most ways in which historians have discussed 'politics'. Using modern frames of reference, historians have identified phenomena in late medieval England which they describe as 'politics' or as 'political'. But this is not, in fact, the vocabulary which contemporaries applied to the same phenomena. Historians and late medieval actors used words with similar morphology, but not in the same ways, nor in the same contexts, nor with the same connotations. Over the past century, the meaning of 'politics' and 'political' has evolved both within and outside the discipline of medieval history, from one in which competition for control of the institutions of the state was the definition of politics itself, to another in which competition for influence within many different human groups can be described as 'political'. This has had a tangible impact on what historians consider politics to be and thus on how they interpret medieval phenomena. That said, there is no need to conclude that, since our vocabulary does not correspond to medieval vocabulary, and is in itself shifting, then it can only lead us into anachronism: that there is 'no such thing as politics' in late medieval England. If we shift our view slightly, we can see that although in late medieval England the vocabulary of 'politics' was largely confined to expert discourse until the fifteenth century, and included a slightly different range of phenomena from those we most strongly associate with 'politics', similar sets of ideas, arguments and assumptions are also found in contexts where this language did not occur. There are moreover clear overlaps between these contemporary categories and our own. Given movements in the historiography of late medieval England in recent decades, concerned not only with the politics of the kingdom and the nobility but also with the politics of counties, towns, villages and parishes, another way seems gradually to be opening up.

By way of counterpoint to what can seem very English debates, it also encouraging that recent historians of late medieval Europe have been increasingly tempted by the invocation in a modified form of what Jürgen Habermas, talking of a later period, calls *Öffentlichkeit*, translated into English as 'the public sphere'.<sup>1</sup> This model, and the fundamental notions of publicity,

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Offenstadt and Patrick Boucheron (eds). 2011. *L'espace public au Moyen Âge: Débats autour de Jürgen Habermas*. Paris: PUF; Hipólito Rafael Oliva Herrero, Vincent Challet, Jan Dumolyn and María Antonia Carmona Ruiz (eds). 2014. *La comunidad medieval como esfera pública*. Seville: Universidad de Sevilla; Jan Dumolyn, Jelle Haemers, Hipólito Rafael Oliva Herrero and Vincent Challet (eds). 2014. *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe: Communication and Popular Politics*, ed.. Turnhout: Brepols. The key work is Jürgen Habermas *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit : Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Luchterhand, 1962. published in English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. Frederick Lawrence and

information circulation and opinion it contains, has much to recommend it as a means of conceiving of politics which does not simply impose what seems to us most obviously political, nor lead us into an unhelpfully baggy concept of politics as the competition for power in any context. It is also possible to talk of ‘state formation’ and ‘political culture’ or ‘political society’ as historians habitually do, focusing on the way that local elites act as officers for different forms of ‘state’ power. In these cases, however, there is arguably a stronger risk of teleology, although not an unavoidable one, since contemporaries did not divide the former from forms of rule which have nothing to do with what we would call the ‘state’. The ‘cultures’ or ‘societies’ which we identify as ‘political’ were not described as such by contemporaries. Other concepts, both ‘public’ as opposed to ‘private’, but also ‘common’ as against ‘singular’, for example, suggest models of politics which strike a middle ground between medieval perceptions and our own preoccupations. There is a lesson for the practice of conceptual history here. It is not necessarily the word whose morphology most resembles our own which necessarily gives the best clues to understanding what we are hoping to analyse.

## I.

Later medieval English writers were well aware of the Aristotelian division, known to Latin writers since the early twelfth century, between ethics, economics and politics, respectively the art of ruling oneself, a household and a community.<sup>2</sup> For Hugh of Saint-Victor, in his *Didascalicon* (before 1137) the division of the practical art into ‘ethical, economic and political’ (*ethicam, oeconomicam et politicam*) corresponded to the division between ‘individual, private and public’ (*solitariam, privatam et publicam*), which in turn mapped onto the ‘moral, administrative and civil’ (*moralem et dispensativam et civilem*).<sup>3</sup> From the second half of the twelfth century, this understanding of politics acquired a more precise Aristotelian flavour in the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury (1159).<sup>4</sup> This was developed in scholastic discourse later in the thirteenth century following the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* by William of Moerbeke (1268-9);<sup>5</sup> in subsequent commentary upon it, notably by Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great;<sup>6</sup> before being adapted for lay audiences initially in ‘mirrors for princes’ and encyclopaedic works, before Nicole Oresme’s French translation of 1370-77.<sup>7</sup> The message common to all of these works, and one which had an enormous impact across Europe, was that good government pursued the common

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Thomas Bürger). Cambridge: Polity, 1989. It has been highly influential on students of the eighteenth century, less so of the Middle Ages. See esp. Nicolas Offenstadt. *Le Moyen Âge de Jürgen Habermas: Enquête sur une réception allemande*. In *L’espace public*, ed. Offenstadt and Boucheron, 77-96

<sup>2</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein. 1987. The history of the word *politicus* in early-modern Europe. In *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. A. Pagden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 41-56, at p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh of Saint-Victor, *Didascalicon de studio legendi*. ed. C. Buttner. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1939. II, 19, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> John of Salisbury, *Policraticus I-IV*, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, Turnhout: Brepols 1993; John of Salisbury, *Policratici sive de Nugis curialium et vestigiis philosophorum libri VIII*, ed. Clemens C. I. Webb, 2 vol., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909; English translation: John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. and trans. C.J. Nederman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> For the dating of this translation see Nicole Oresme, *Le Livre de Politiques d’Aristote*, ed. A.D. Menut. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1970, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Kempshall. 1999. *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>7</sup> Oresme, *Le Livre de Politiques d’Aristote*, ed. Menut, p. 3.

profit, which could overrule even legitimate individual or group interests, and that tyranny was rule for the particular interest of the ruler, not of the community.<sup>8</sup>

Yet although, as we shall see, arguments in terms of the common good and mutual profit were established early in what we would call the politics of late medieval England, the terminology of ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ or even ‘politic’ behaviour did not make the leap on any significant scale into what we might call practical politics. The word ‘politicus’ appears only late in chronicles or in documents issuing from the royal administration. The *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* cites no examples of ‘politicus’ in chronicles or administrative documents.<sup>9</sup> The first example of use in such documents given by the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*<sup>10</sup> and the *Middle English Dictionary*<sup>11</sup> relates to the same petition (in Middle English) and subsequent statute (in French) of 1429 which seeks to promote the ‘good politique governaunce and supportation’ of the Calais Staple.<sup>12</sup> This, indeed, is the first use of ‘political’ in the text of the digitized *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, which start in the reign of Edward I.<sup>13</sup> This impression is confirmed when we extend the search earlier in the period with such resources as are now freely available in searchable, digital form. A rough test corpus of Latin chronicles from the reign of Henry III, which takes in the contemporary chronicles of Roger Wendover (1216-35: 339 pages),<sup>14</sup> of Matthew Paris until his death in 1259 (2043 pages),<sup>15</sup> and those chronicles published in the Rolls Series as *Annales Monastici* whose contemporary sections mostly concern the thirteenth century (2905 pages),<sup>16</sup> reveals no use of ‘politicus’. A similar search of the Close Rolls, whose published Latin text is available in searchable digitized form from 1227 to 1251,<sup>17</sup> and the Patent Rolls, published in the original Latin from 1216 to 1232, yields a similar result.<sup>18</sup> No examples of ‘politicus’ are found in a search of the ‘royal letters’ of Henry III published by Shirley, which add

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<sup>8</sup> Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Anne-Laure van Bruaene (eds). 2010. *De bono communi : the discourse and practice of the common good in the European city (13th-16th c.)*. Turnhout: Brepols, esp. Eberhard Isenmann, The notion of the Common Good, the concept of politics, and practical policies in late medieval and early modern German cities. *Ibid*, 107-148, and Franck Collard (ed). 2010. *Pouvoir d'un seul et bien commun (VI<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*. Special edition of *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. 1975-2013. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* consulted online at <<http://www.anglo-norman.net/gate/>>.

<sup>11</sup> *Middle English Dictionary* consulted online at <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Parliament of September 1429 in *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, ed. C. Given-Wilson et al. CD ROM. Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2005, item 60 (Punctuation modified. It is clear from comparing the petition and the statute that ‘politique’ is an adjective in both). *Statutes of the Realm*, London: Record Commission, 1810-25, vol. II, p. 254. No earlier example is found by searching the Michigan *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*, consulted online at <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/>>.

<sup>13</sup> *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, ed. Given-Wilson et al.

<sup>14</sup> Roger of Wendover, *Chronica sive Flores Historiarum*, ed. H.O. Coxe, vol. IV. London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1842.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. H.R. Luard, vols. III-V (1248-59). London: Longman, 1876-1880.

<sup>16</sup> *Annales Monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard. 4 vols. London: Longman. 1864-69.

<sup>17</sup> *Close Rolls of the Reign of Henry III*. 6 vols. for 1227-51. London: HMSO, 1902-1922. It was not possible on this occasion to continue this test to the end of Henry III’s reign, since the texts for 1252-72 are only available in closed form on British History Online. After 1272, the full texts give way to Calendars, and so terminological searches of this kind can no longer be carried out. Search for the Close Rolls, Patent Rolls, and the letters edited by Shirley was performed on roughly digitized (OCRed) texts, searching for the string of characters ‘pol’, so it is possible that some occurrences may have been missed.

<sup>18</sup> *Patent Rolls of the Reign of Henry III*, 2 vols. (Covering 1216-32). London: HMSO, 1901-1903.

letters to the king, now preserved in Ancient Correspondence (SC 1), and a sample of letters on the Close Rolls and Patent Rolls to 1272 (958 pages).<sup>19</sup> This corpus is admittedly early, and pre-dates the translation and commentary of Aristotle's politics, or the diffusion of such early translated and widely circulated 'mirrors for princes' as the *De Regimine Principum* of Giles of Rome (c. 1280), which was divided into three books dealing with Ethics, Economics (meaning the household) and Politics. But much the same is seen in thirteenth- and early-fourteenth century chronicles in the vernacular, such as the chronicle of Robert of Gloucester (877 pages) and the version of the Middle English *Brut* chronicle to 1333 published by Brie (286 pages).<sup>20</sup> Neither the section of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon* covering the period 1135 to 1352 nor its continuations (587 pages) reveal any use of 'politicus', although, as we shall see, it is used in the earlier, discursive sections of this work.<sup>21</sup> It is always possible, indeed likely, that an instance of 'politicus' or its vernacular equivalent will be found by a more extensive search of chronicles and administrative documents, printed or unprinted. But it has to be said that its absence from this scratch corpus of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century documents dealing with precisely what we habitually consider to be 'politics' is in itself telling.

On the other hand, although the words 'politics' and 'political' seem to be absent from the discourse of what we would call practical politics, the form of reasoning which Aristotle's *Politics* and those who took it up were most inspired by – that rule ought to be for the profit and benefit of all, and that this overruled even the legitimate interests of individuals and groups – was absorbed early on in these same contexts. Indeed, this absorption occurred considerably before the translation of the *Politics* into Latin or its diffusion in 'mirrors for princes'. Moreover, this discourse did not only take the form of the invocation of powerful concepts in the abstract, but was manifested much more frequently in a form of reasoning which sought to establish mutual interest through the establishment of common profit and, just as importantly, common damage.

Early examples of this reasoning are to be found in the documents created by the struggle between Henry III and his critics which first came to a head in 1258. So, for example, in the royal letter of 2 May 1258 which announced the king's intention to create a council of twenty-four by whom 'the state of our kingdom will be ordained, corrected and reformed' this was to be done 'according to what they see best to do for the honour of God and for our faith and for the utility of our kingdom'.<sup>22</sup> Although none of the twenty-eight articles which were then presented to the king invoke the common 'utilitas', 'bonum' or 'commodum', a number of articles in this document do make a slightly different argument. They argue that certain practices result in damage to 'the land', to 'many', or to specific groups whose interests are linked to that of the king.<sup>23</sup> They protest, for example, that because the king almost never pays for the 'prises' raised for the needs of his court 'many merchants of the kingdom of England are impoverished beyond

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<sup>19</sup> *Royal and Other Historical Letters Illustrative of the Reign of Henry III*, ed. W.W. Shirley. London: Longman, 1862-1868.

<sup>20</sup> Robert of Gloucester, *Metrical Chronicle*, ed. W.A. Wright, 2 vols. London: Longman, 1887. *The Brut*, vol. 1. Early English Text Society, original series, 131, ed. F.W.D. Brie. New York: Schribner, 1906.

<sup>21</sup> Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon*, ed. J.R. Lumby, vol. VIII. London: Longman, 1882.

<sup>22</sup> *Documents of the Baronial Movement of Reform and Rebellion, 1258-1267*, ed. R.F. Treharne and Sanders. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 74 : 'ordinetur, rectificetur et reformatur status regni nostri secundum quod melius uiderint expedire ad honorem Dei et ad fidem nostram ac regni nostri utilitatem'.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-2.

measure', and foreign merchants do not come to the kingdom 'by which the land suffers great damage'.<sup>24</sup> Another article protests that 'many are impoverished and destroyed' by price-manipulation by Cahors money-lenders in London which causes both 'great loss to the merchants and all the people of that town' and also 'great damage to the lord king'.<sup>25</sup>

These arguments in specific cases attempt to create a mutuality which will persuade the royal government to act. The rhetoric behind this implies that because something is in the interests of all then it should be done, and it is because it is in the interests only of individuals and particular groups, threatening specific common goods, that it should be undone. Even when, on a more emphatic level, oaths were sworn in 1258 for 'the reformation (*reformationi*) and utility (*utilitati*) of the king and the kingdom', and demands were made that the kings hated half-brothers quit the kingdom 'until the state of the realm be reformed' (*usque dum status regni reformaretur*) we see the same desire to create a mutual interest remains.<sup>26</sup> In these cases, the moral charge is sometimes clearer than it was in the complaints of the merchants, for example when the Provisions of Oxford declares that the knights chosen to consider the reform of the kingdom do not have the right to refuse, because this service is 'for the common utility of the whole kingdom' (*pro communi utilitate totius regni*).<sup>27</sup> But this common utility resists abstraction through the variety of ways it is expressed, and the fact that many of these expressions return to the mutual profit of the king, the kingdom and various sub-groups within it. When the newly appointed Justiciar swore to carry out his office, and to hold to justice to all people, this is 'for the profit of the king and kingdom', not the one without the other.<sup>28</sup>

Arguments in these terms gained in strength under Henry III's successors. Edward I, who had been an active agent on both sides of the controversies of this father's reign, was to make use of similar arguments for his own ends. When Edward tried to go to war in 1297 without the consent of a broad assembly which his practices in recent years had led his subjects to expect, he justified himself in the name of the profit of all. In an open letter, the king argued that he had crossed the sea not only 'to recover his right inheritance' but also 'for the honour and the common profit of his kingdom'.<sup>29</sup> He denied having seen the complaints which he heard had been addressed to him, which were said to have been presented as being 'for the common profit of the people and of the kingdom'.<sup>30</sup> Aware of the power of such arguments, he asks that no one believe rumours that he refused such articles or did 'anything else against the common profit of the kingdom to shame and destroy his people', recalling how great discord had earlier occurred by such words being spread in the kingdom, 'and the damages which came from them'.<sup>31</sup> He prayed all the good people of the kingdom that it was 'for the honour of God, and himself, and them, and the kingdom, and for lasting peace, and to put in good estate his kingdom' that he had undertaken

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86, item 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-9, item 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98, item 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102, item 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Documents illustrating the Crisis of 1297-8 in England*, ed. M. Prestwich, Camden 4<sup>th</sup> ser. 24. London: Royal Historical Society, 1980, p. 125: 'pur recoverir sun dreit heritage, dunt il est par graunt fraude deceu par le roi de France, e pur le honur et le comun profit de sun reame'.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127: 'pur le comun profit du pueple e du reame'.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128: 'ou autre chose contre le comun profit du reame pur son pueple honir e destruire'.

this voyage.<sup>32</sup> By the reign of Edward II, the king's government was accustomed to thinking in these terms. Thus in the 'Stamford Articles' presented to the king in the parliament of April 1309, a set of petitions whose proper consideration was the condition of a grant of taxation, the king was first asked 'to have regard for his poor people, which feels very much hurt'.<sup>33</sup> Each article then presented the sufferings of the people under the pressure of the king's demands, although they do not refer to the common good. The royal government, however, did use this language, replying to one article that an ordinance of Edward I should be observed, which is 'convenient for the king and profitable for his people' (*covenable pur le roi et profitable pur son poeple*), and accepting that a tax on wine, cloth and other merchandise should be suspended until it has been established 'what profit and what advantage' will come of it 'for him and his people'.<sup>34</sup>

This form of reasoning in terms of mutual profit, and the need to avert common damage, was found whether the king acted voluntarily or whether his hand was forced. Thus the 'Ordinances' imposed on Edward II during the summer of 1311 were presented in royal letters as being 'to the honour of God' and also 'for the good of us and our kingdom', notably in seeking to restrain the expenses of the king's household, keeping in mind 'our [i.e. the king's] honour, and our profit and the profit of our people'.<sup>35</sup> Nor were such arguments restricted to moments of heightened tension. By the time the English Parliament had reached the form it would keep for the rest of the Middle Ages early in the reign of Edward III, petitions deemed to be of general interest and potentially furnishing a basis for future legislation were adopted by the Commons and enrolled together in the 'common petition' on the grounds that they served the common good, in contrast to the 'singular petitions' which touched only particular interests.<sup>36</sup> This centrality of the difference between common profit and individual profit was not merely procedural: it is seen throughout the discourse of these petitions in their habitual use of the opposition between various forms of profit shared between the king, the kingdom and the people to recommend the need to action, and opposed to the common damage which would result if current abuses were allowed to persist.<sup>37</sup> In these contexts, into the fourteenth century and beyond, the mobilization of the mutual profit of the king and kingdom was an essential element of what we would call 'politics'.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129 : 'al honur de dieu, e de lui, e de eux, e du reume, e pur pardurable pees, e pur mettre en bon estat son reume'.

<sup>33</sup> *Select Documents of English Constitutional History, 1307-1485*, ed. S.B. Chrimes and A. Brown. London: A. & C. Black, 1960, p. 6: 'prient a nostre seigneur le roi qil voille, si lui plest, aver regard de son povre poeple, qe molt se sent greve'.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7: 'pur saver quel profit et quel avantage accretera a li et a son poeple par cele suztrete, e puis aura le roi consail selonc lavantage qil y verra'.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Doris Rayner. 1941. The Forms and Machinery of the 'Commune Petition' in the Fourteenth Century. *English Historical Review*, vol. 56, 549-70; W. M. Ormrod. 2004. On – and Off – the Record: The Rolls of Parliament, 1337-1377. *Parliamentary History*, vol. 23, 39-56; Gwilym Dodd. 2007. *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 126-55.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Fletcher. 2014. What makes a political language? Key terms, profit and damage in the Common Petition of the English Parliament, 1343-1422. In *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe: Communication and Popular Politics*, ed. J. Dumolyn, J. Haemers, H.R. Oliva Herrer and V. Challet, 91-106.

And yet, until the fifteenth century, the term ‘*politicus*’ remained largely confined to scholastic discourse in the Latin language and was not used to discuss specific examples of English contemporary ‘*politics*’. As we have seen, no vernacular equivalent seems to be attested in Anglo-Norman or Middle English before the fifteenth century, even after Nicole Oresme’s French translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* in 1370-7. It has been suggested that this was because, in scholastic usage, the word ‘*politicus*’ acquired, especially with William Moerbeke’s Latin translation, an association with the government of a town or city, as opposed to a kingdom, and with government by one who is both ruler and ruled, in opposition to a king.<sup>38</sup> Thus Brunetto Latini, in his *Tresor*, glossed ‘*politique*’ as ‘*c’est a dire des governemens des cités*’.<sup>39</sup> For Robert Holcot (d. 1349) the ‘*political*’ arts were the same thing as the ‘*civil*’ arts,<sup>40</sup> and for William of Ockham (d. 1349) ‘*principatum ... politicum*’ was one in which ‘*many rule*’.<sup>41</sup> That said, even Brunetto Latini continued that, although he was only going to deal with the rule of the city, ‘*politics* includes generally all the arts that are needful for the community of men’,<sup>42</sup> and even though he was not going to consider those places, like France, whose kings ruled by a perpetual title, ‘*nevertheless any lord, whatever lordship he has, could take very good teachings from it*’.<sup>43</sup> Ockham, too, uses this language in an effort to qualify an excessive contrast between monarchical, aristocratic and political rule. In this passage in his *Octo Quaestiones de Potestate Papae* (c. 1340x1342), he argues against those who maintain the absolute authority of the pope by invoking the contrast between monarchical rule (*principatus regalis*), in which one alone ‘*shines above all*’ (*praeifulget*), and ‘*aristocratic and political rule, in both of which many command, dominate and excel*’.<sup>44</sup> Instead, notes Ockham, the best rule occurs when charity, peace, friendship and concord flourish amongst subjects, and discord is prevented, which is best obtained when the prince rules in accordance with the common good.<sup>45</sup>

Long before John Fortescue argued that because England, unlike France, was not simply a *dominium regale* but a *dominium politicum et regale*, the English king could not ‘*rule his peple bi other lawes than such as thai assenten unto*’ nor ‘*sett upon thaim non impositions without thair owne assent*’,<sup>46</sup> political rule was associated with good rule, which meant rule for the common good, established by reason and counsel. Walter Burley could remark as early as the 1320s that in order to contract important business the king needed to assemble parliament, and by that stage this had

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<sup>38</sup> Rubinstein 1987, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres dou Tresor*, ed. F.J. Carmody. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1948, p. 391.

<sup>40</sup> *Super Sapientem Salomonis* [1336]. Basel, 1586. Cited in the *Dictionary of Latin from British Sources*, sub. ‘*politicus*’: ‘*prime ... sunt artes civiles sive politice*’.

<sup>41</sup> William of Ockham, *Opera politica*, ed. J. G. Silkes et al., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974, p. 109. Cited in the *Dictionary of Latin from British Sources*, sub. ‘*politicus*’.

<sup>42</sup> *Li Livre dou Tresor*, p. 391: ‘*politike compregne generaument tous les ars ki besoignent a la comunité des homes*’.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392: ‘*et neporquant tot signour, quel signorie k’il aient en poroient prendre mains bons ensegnemens*’.

<sup>44</sup> William of Ockham, *Opera politica*, p. 109: ‘*tam principatum aristocraticum quam politicum, in quorum utroque, praesident plures, superat et praecellit*’.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: ‘*Propter hoc enim est omnis principatus bono communis expediens principaliter institutus, et ista summo conatu plantare debet princeps et fovere in sibi subiectis*’.

<sup>46</sup> Sir John Fortescue, *The Governance of England*, ed. C. Plummer. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885, chap. i, pp. 109-110. Cf. Fortescue, *De Laudibus Legum Anglie*, ed. and trans. S.B. Chrimes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 24-7 and Fortescue, *De Natura Legis Nature*, c. 16, cited at length in Fortescue, *De Laudibus*, ed. Chrimes, pp. 152-3

become an unavoidable rule of English ‘political’ life.<sup>47</sup> Similar connotations can be detected, for example, in the one use of ‘politicus’ by Ranulph Higden (d. 1364) at the start of his *Polichronicon*, in a discussion of the kinds of persons whose deeds are remembered after them: a prince in his kingdom, a knight in battle, a judge in his seat, a bishop amongst the clergy, a ‘politicus’ amongst the people, a ‘oeconomicus’ in the house and a ‘monasticus’ in church.<sup>48</sup> Translators of this work into Middle English had difficulty rendering the first of these, even though they corresponded to the well-known Aristotelian division between politics, economics and ethics. John Trevisa’s late-fourteenth-century translation of Higden rendered them as ‘lawefulman in the peple, housbond in hous, religious man in chirche’. Being a ‘politicus’ was thus associated with having the standing of a trustworthy, law-worthy man of sufficient standing to act as a juror.<sup>49</sup> Only in the mid-fifteenth century was this translated as ‘off a politike man in the peple, of a howsebonde man in a house, of a contemplatif man in the chirche’.<sup>50</sup>

The ‘political’ concerned not just a kingdom but many different groups of human beings under some kind of authority and some form of law. In any context it involved rule over many according to established laws or conventions, in accordance with reason, often involving some form of consultation or counsel. As Ockham’s use of these terms already implies, this did not just apply to lay rule. In Reginald Pecock’s *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of Clergy* (c. 1449), ‘politik gouernauncis’ refers to the rule, both spiritual and worldly, which churchmen have over other men, clergy and laity. Pecock seeks to demonstrate that this cannot be wrong in itself, but only when the officers who wield it, be they priests or dukes or any ruler, fall into sin.<sup>51</sup> For Pecock, ‘politik gouernaunce’ is simply rule of some over others, and a resulting hierarchical relationship of ‘ouerte and netherte’.<sup>52</sup> These arrangements are specific to particular times. Just because the Old Testament Jews had only one bishop in ‘thilk oold politik gouernaunce’ does not mean that we should only have one now.<sup>53</sup> Such arrangements are man-made, in the past, and both ‘bischophode and archbischophode, clekenhode and religiose mannys lawis’ and also ‘othere politik mennys lawis ben noon othere than mennys ordinauncis and mennys tradiciouns reuling men forto do this or that, to which as bi Goddis pleyn lawe tho men weren not bifore bounde’.<sup>54</sup> That these laws were ‘civil’ did not make them ‘republican’ in the sense that they were determined by an authority other than the monarch. Rather, ‘it is leefful to princis with hir comounalte forto make politik and cyuyl lawis and ordinauncis for the better reule of the peple’.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cited in Nicole Oresme, *Livre de Politiques*, p. 26. For the development of this requirement see G.L. Harriss. 1975. *King, Parliament and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>48</sup> Higden, *Polichronicon*, vol. I, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> MED, ‘laueful’, adj. James Masschaele. 2008. *Jury State and Society in Medieval England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 37-8, 128-130.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> Reginald Pecock, *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of Clergy*, ed. C. Babington. London, Longman, 1860, e.g. pp. 429, 431 (‘the synne and yuel cometh not fro and bi the seid iiij<sup>e</sup>. [i.e. fourth] politik gouernaunce had and vsid by the clergie, but fro and bi mannys natural passious and freelnesis and fre wil, aghens which is not mad sufficient fight and bateil’), 433, 435

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 424, 432 (for quote).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 437.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453. See also, *Ibid.*, p. 464.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454.

In England, this was not a strictly ‘ascending thesis’ in Walter Ullmann’s sense, in which power came up from the people not down from divine right, but it did involve rulers in the exercise of persuading their subjects that they were ruling for their mutual benefit, and not to their damage, ruin or impoverishment.<sup>56</sup> Persuasion by argument or by threats was an essential part of monarchical rule in England, just as it was in the pope’s rule of Christendom or the bishop’s of his diocese, in a way that brings us to the question of the ‘public’ and ‘publicity’. Latinate writers with minimal exposure to Roman law would have known that ‘Those things which pertain to human right are either public or private. Public things are considered to be nobody’s property for they belong to all (*universitatis*). Private things are things which belong to individuals (*singulorum*).’<sup>57</sup> This could mean things which were common property, notably roads, bridges and watercourses. Moreover, this language does occur in those contexts of royal government and administration from which the language of the political is absent. In the mid-thirteenth-century Close Rolls, for instance, ‘public’ denoted things that were the property of everybody, and thus which involved the special concern of the king as the guardian of the common good, such as the ‘public road’ or ‘public street’ (*via publica, strata publica*).<sup>58</sup> Or it could mean information: that which was ‘publicly’ proclaimed was consequently common to all. One important function of the network of royal officials at different levels in the kingdom of England and beyond was not just to execute orders but to relay information. In the mid-thirteenth-century Close Rolls, officials in England, Ireland and Gascony, bishops, bailiffs and sheriffs, are ordered ‘that you should have publicly read’, ‘that he should publicly proclaim’ or ‘that in your whole county you should publicly read’.<sup>59</sup> They are also ordered to ‘publicize’ (*publicari*) particular proclamations or letters, or their ‘publication’ (*publicacionem*) was invoked.<sup>60</sup> Public protests and public appeals were made, and matters were publicly prohibited.<sup>61</sup> Brazen criminals went about ‘publicly’ in parts of the kingdom, and must be repressed.<sup>62</sup> ‘Public indignation’ was to be feared in 1260 if the king allowed his half-brother Aymer of Lusignan to return.<sup>63</sup> ‘Public rumours’ flew about, and it was reported to the king that subversive words were ‘publicly ... said’ in Gascony.<sup>64</sup> The ‘public whores’ of the clerks of Oxford, or the outlaw whose ‘crime is publicly confessed’, were to be dealt with in accordance of common knowledge of their status and dispositions.<sup>65</sup> The rebels still holding out at Kenilworth Castle in 1265 were threatened with being reputed as ‘public enemies’: enemies to all known by all to be enemies.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Ullmann. 1965. *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

<sup>57</sup> *Digest*, 1.8.1 cited by Eberman 2010, p. 109, n. 14: ‘haec autem res, quae humani iuris sunt, aut publicae sunt aut privatae. quae publicae sunt, nullius in bonis esse creduntur, ipsius enim universitatis esse creduntur privatae autem sunt, quae singulorum sunt’.

<sup>58</sup> Close Rolls, 1231-34, pp. 44, 387, 399; 1234-37, pp. 462 (twice); 1247-51, p. 498.

<sup>59</sup> Close Rolls, 1227-31, pp. 45, 59, 392 for these citations. Reading and proclamation ‘publice’: Close Rolls, 1227-31, pp. 45, 59, 392, 430; 1231-34, pp. 326, 542, 544; 1234-7, pp. 329, 512, 532; 1237-42, pp. 22, 133; 1242-47, pp. 127, 319, 357, 360, 472, 536, 547; 1247-51, pp. 108, 283, 320, 358, 424, 492, 504, 529, 549, 559. (29 instances). *Royal Letters of Henry III*, ed. Shirley, p. 102 (Ancient Correspondence: 1254), 300 (Close Rolls: 15 Mar. 1266).

<sup>60</sup> Close Rolls, 1227-31, pp. 93, 464 (twice), 1242-7, p. 478; 1247-51, p. 358 (twice). *Royal Letters of Henry III*, ed. Shirley, vol. II, p. 272 (Close Rolls: 21 Aug. 1264), 300 (Close Rolls: 15 Mar. 1266), 394 (Close Rolls: 12 Oct. 1259).

<sup>61</sup> Close Rolls, 1231-34, p. 73; 1242-7, p. 424, 242.

<sup>62</sup> Close Rolls, 1237-42, p. 137.

<sup>63</sup> *Royal Letters of Henry III*, ed. Shirley, vol. II, p. 152. From Close Rolls, 18 Jan. 1260.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41 (1244), 183 (1261?). From SC 1.

<sup>65</sup> Close Rolls, 1231-34, pp. 568, 570 (three times) (*publice meretrices*); 1237-42, p. 146.

<sup>66</sup> *Royal Letters of Henry III*, ed. Shirley, vol. II, p. 289 (1265). From SC 1.

Medieval ‘politics’ was understood as the art of ruling a broad variety human groupings, but an art which relied especially on the mastery of communication within that group, with the aim of securing assent, and determining a course of action or a form of regulation which corresponded with reason and mutual benefit. This could and did involve the exercise of violence, symbolic or physical, whether the unit of rule was a kingdom, a manor, a town, an abbey or a diocese. But each of these units was best ruled when agreed conventions were respected, and mutual goods were seen to be the purpose of rule. Still, it is telling that although Aristotle’s distinction between good and bad forms of rule was supposed to be found in rule for the common good as opposed to rule for the rulers own interests, when this was illustrated in one manuscript of Oresme’s translation of the *Politics*, what distinguishes the good from the bad is calm discussion on the one hand, and the use of violence and cruelty, equipped with instruments of torture, on the other.<sup>67</sup> The ideal was communication, ideally face-to-face, to find the common good and persuade by reason, not violence: that was the difference between heaven and hell. In reality, however, not all these units were the same and not all were face-to-face communities as the medieval vision of ‘politics’ imagined them. Many indeed were characterised as assemblages of units geographically and socially dispersed. Not all the members of that meta-unit knew one another or had even met one another. In a kingdom, a diocese or the extended affinity of a great noble, a minority would have known the ruler well, some would have talked to him, some simply seen him or heard him speak. Most would only have dealt with their ruler’s officials, or even those who had contact with those officials. In a town or a village, although hierarchy and degrees of closeness and distance persisted, rulers were accessible to differing degrees. Mayors and bailiffs, aldermen and worthy members of the merchant guild or inner council were still citizens of the town.<sup>68</sup> Manorial officials were closer, as active in the royal and seigneurial administration as at movements of sedition and rebellion.<sup>69</sup> A distant lord of a manor or town looked more like a king, seen less often (if at all) than his bailiffs and stewards. Recent historians have made good use of ‘brokerage’ in understanding the interaction between local formations of social power and the ‘state’, and recent work on ecclesiastical rule, too, stresses the local effects, in the parish, of bishops’ search for groups of trustworthy men with whom to govern.<sup>70</sup> The forms of politics which characterised these assemblages were not the same as those which characterised the rule of a simple group of human beings, as medieval theorists imagined it. Perhaps that is why ‘public’, more than ‘political’, and specific assemblages of mutual benefit as much as an abstract common weal, provided the most cogent vocabularies for describing its workings.

## II.

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<sup>67</sup> Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale MS 2904, ff. 1v, 2r reproduced in Oresme, *Livre de Politiques*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>68</sup> For a development of this observation, see Christian Liddy. 2017. *Contesting the City: The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250-1350*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>69</sup> Christopher Fletcher. 2017. Justice, meurtre et *leadership* politique dans la Révolte anglaise de 1381. *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, no. 34, p. 61-86

<sup>70</sup> Michael Braddick. 1991. State Formation and Social Change in Early Modern England: A Problem Stated and Approaches Suggested. *Social History*, vol. 16, 1-17; Braddick. 2000. *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Masschaele 2008; Ian Forrest. 2018. *Trustworthy Men: How Inequality and Faith Made the Medieval Church*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Hilde De Weerd, Catherine Holmes and John L. Watts. 2018. Politics, c. 1000-1500: Mediation and Communication, *Past and Present Supplement*, issue 13, 261-296..

So much for medieval vocabularies of politics: what of those of historians and how have they evolved? ‘Politics’ and ‘political’ in modern English usage have two distinct referents, which we might call the ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ conceptions of politics. Over the last century, the ‘narrow’ definition, focused on the state, has come to be challenged by various ‘broad’ conceptions, both explicitly in political science and implicitly in the use that historians make of the words ‘politics’ and ‘political’. ‘Politics’ in the narrow sense is most easily understood with reference to *Politik* as famously defined by Max Weber in a lecture delivered in 1919, published in English as ‘Politics as a vocation’.<sup>71</sup> Although his original German elides what in English would be separated into ‘politics’ and ‘policy’, Weber’s characteristically clear and incisive discussion builds on what was then also a commonplace of liberal political thought in the Anglophone world: that politics is above all concerned with the state and competition for control of its resources.<sup>72</sup> This choice of definition was given extra sharpness by the purpose of his lecture: he had been asked to discuss ‘politics’ as one of a series of ‘vocation lectures’ discussing different careers for an audience of students. Weber thus began by setting out a series of different uses of *Politik* in the ‘broad’ sense.<sup>73</sup> He defined *Politik* in a phrase as ‘any kind of independent *leadership* activity’, before clarifying this usage through a series of examples: the *Reichsbank*’s interest rate policy, for example, but also the *Politik* of a trade union in a strike, the policies of the board of management of an association, ‘and even of the political manoeuvrings [*Politik*] of a shrewd wife seeking to influence her husband’. But Weber then drastically narrowed the range of inquiry, excluding the vast majority of these ‘broad’ usages: ‘Today we shall consider only the leadership, or the exercise of influence on the leadership, of a *political* organization, or in other words a *state*.’ Much of the rest of this essay concerned the nature and development of the state as it was in 1919. Weber was interested, with his audience of student careerists in mind, in the process by which state officials come to direct but not to possess the means at their disposal. Politics was the business of trying to secure control over this ‘means of administration’.<sup>74</sup>

Is it possible or useful to apply this ‘narrow’ concept of ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ to medieval conditions? What about the ‘broad’ sense of ‘politics’ which Weber puts to one side – the tactics of securing power in any human grouping? Is this useful, or is it too broad to teach us very much? The answers, usually implicit, which historians of late medieval England have given to this question have changed over time and have seldom commanded unanimity. On the one hand, there is a long tradition of studying the expansion, roughly between the mid-twelfth and the mid-fourteenth century, of the machinery of royal government in England.<sup>75</sup> This has been continued

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<sup>71</sup> Max Weber. 2004 [1919]. *Politics as a Vocation*. In *The Vocation Lectures* (trans. R. Livingstone). Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett.

<sup>72</sup> For a critique, still valid as an attack if not in terms of the alternative it proposes, and despite its author’s subsequent career, see Carl Schmidt. 1995 [1932]. *The Concept of the Political*, trans. G. Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 20: ‘One seldom finds a clear definition of the political... In one way or another “political” is generally juxtaposed to “state” or at least brought into relation with it.’ For a more congenial and more recent critique, see Pierre Rosanvallon. 2015. *La contre-démocratie: La politique à l’âge de la défiance*. Paris: Seuil.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-8

<sup>75</sup> T.F. Tout, Hilda Johnstone and Margaret Sharp. 1920-33. *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England*. 6 vols. Manchester: Manchester University Press; William A. Morris, Joseph R. Strayer, James F. Willard, William H.

more recently as part of the broad comparative project of studying the emergence of the ‘modern state’ in a variety of contexts in late medieval and early modern Europe, notably under the aegis of the European Science Foundation in the 1990s, published by Oxford University Press in the *Origins of the Modern State* series, and more recently in the European Research Council project *Signs and States* (2010-14) headed by Jean-Philippe Genet. More recently still a number of historians, working on early modern as well as later medieval history, have taken a slightly different approach to ‘state building’, considering the different ways in which local ‘brokers’ put their social power at the disposition of various forms of ‘state’ authority.<sup>76</sup> Essential here is the question of how particular groups put their existing power, influence and know-how at the disposition of various superior authorities, and so increased both the range of action of those authorities and their own power, at the local level and beyond. One might conclude that it would be perfectly legitimate to define competition over the control of royal fiscal, judicial and administrative apparatus as unimpeachably ‘political’ in a narrow sense. There were developed means of government, they were becoming more so, and they were the focus of different kinds of appropriation or contestation. Still, it is interesting to note that movements in this direction amongst historians of late medieval England have been more hesitant, even though there has been a great expansion in recent years in the study of phenomena – petitioning, office-holding, justice, direct and indirect taxation, jury inquests, representation – which historians of different periods and different regions have no problem in labelling as ‘political’. In fact, there are good reasons for this in the historiography of late medieval ‘politics’, ones which have long been known to historians, but which are seldom discussed explicitly.

It was in the years before and after Weber’s lecture that the view of medieval English political history as concerning rivalry for the control of the state apparatus reached its apogee. T.F. Tout (1914) and J.C. Davies (1918) both argued on the basis of detailed study of the king’s administration that Edward II’s reign was a key moment in the development of the royal government.<sup>77</sup> For Tout and Davies, the struggles between the king and his baronial opponents were struggles over the control or restraint of what Weber would call the ‘means of administration’. For Tout, Edward’s reign was a ‘turning point’ in the development of the royal governmental machinery, thanks to the administrative reforms which took place during his reign.<sup>78</sup> For Davies the barons stood opposed to this ‘royal system of administration’ in a ‘conflict of principles, contradictory and irreconcilable’.<sup>79</sup> Nothing could be more ‘political’ than that, even in a narrow sense.

In the mid-twentieth century, however, this approach suffered a devastating critique, to a great extent through the inspiration of the influential Oxford historian K.B. McFarlane. For McFarlane, over-concentration on the machinery of royal government, together with a belief that

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Dunham (eds). 1940-1950. *The English Government at Work: 1327-1336*. 3 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America; A.L. Brown. 1989. *The Governance of Late Medieval England*. London: Edward Arnold.

<sup>76</sup> Braddick 1991; Braddick 2000; Masschaele 2008; De Weerd, Holmes and Watts 2018.

<sup>77</sup> T.F. Tout. 1914. *The Place of Edward II in English History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; J.C. Davies. 1918. *The Baronial Opposition to Edward II Its Character and Policy: A Study in Administrative History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>78</sup> Tout 1914, p. vii.

<sup>79</sup> Davies 1918, p. v.

there was inherent competition between the king and the higher nobility to control it, had fundamentally distorted the understanding of ‘real politics’ in late medieval England.<sup>80</sup> In his lectures in the 1950s and 1960s, now most accessible in his posthumously published Ford Lectures of 1953, he instead sought to examine the priorities of the English nobility to understand ‘the character of fourteenth-century political activity’ which an over-concentration on Parliament, in particular, had obscured.<sup>81</sup> It was not competition over some Weberian ‘means of administration’ that motivated the nobility, but the habitual concerns of their class: namely war, land and family, lordship and service, revenue and expenditure, and only finally ‘politics’.<sup>82</sup> It is telling, however, in terms of what was to come, that McFarlane was sparing in his use of the vocabulary of ‘politics’. In his Ford Lectures he invokes the ‘social and political consequence’ brought by land, the consequences for a noble family of ‘political miscalculation’ leading to death and forfeiture, he talks of the limited effect of ‘political disturbance’ on agriculture, and of the importance of hospitality for ‘building up and maintaining a political connection’.<sup>83</sup> But that is all: 9 uses in 121 pages, or 0.07 per page. Since McFarlane was trying to liberate late medieval history from the tyranny of an excessively institutional approach, this makes sense. It is even ambiguous in his usage whether ‘political’ is in the ‘narrow sense’ or the ‘broad sense’ since the nobility’s political activities took place in the face-to-face community made up by them and the king. This is both the politics of the state (although McFarlane was specifically trying to assert that this was not its most important characteristic) and the politics of a particular human grouping.

As a new generation of historians took up the call to study the nobility as a means of understanding what was still called late medieval ‘politics’, the language of politics and the political crept back. For Edward II’s reign, the two key works were the studies of J.R. Maddicott (1970) and J.R.S. Phillips (1972) on two prominent nobles: the king’s foremost opponent, Thomas, earl of Lancaster, and one of his most loyal supporters, Aymer de Valence, earl of Pembroke.<sup>84</sup> Both concluded that Tout’s and Davies’ account of a ‘baronial opposition’ concerned to limit or control the royal machinery of government did not accord with a close analysis of the careers of these two key players. They were late medieval nobles and they acted according to the values and the interests of their class in the particular iteration represented by their landed holdings, their networks of association, their personal hatreds, rivalries and friendships, and the way the king’s actions affected all of these. They wanted the king to get on with his job, and they only intervened positively or negatively when he did it badly. They did not act out of an active desire to secure control of the royal machinery of government, even if they might promote or oppose particular programmes to reform the administration of the royal government, notably the Ordinances imposed on Edward II in 1311.

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<sup>80</sup> K.B. McFarlane. 1973. *The Nobility of Later Medieval England: The Ford Lectures of 1953 and Related Studies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 120.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 15 (twice), 58, 101.

<sup>84</sup> J.R. Maddicott. 1970. *Thomas of Lancaster, 1307-1322: A Study in the Reign of Edward II*. London: Oxford University Press; J.R.S. Phillips. 1972. *Aymer de Valence, earl of Pembroke 1307-1324: Baronial Politics in the Reign of Edward II*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Did this mean that the ‘politics’ of Edward II’s reign were ‘politics’ only in the broad sense which might equally well denote struggles for power and authority within any human grouping: a factory, a school, an office or a family? In fact, although Maddicott and Phillips argue in essence that a state-centred account of the struggles for power which marked Edward II’s reign was distorting, these historians nonetheless thought of themselves as studying ‘politics’ – and not in the ‘broad’ sense outlined above. Phillips’ study of Aymer de Valence is subtitled ‘Baronial Politics in the Reign of Edward II’, and opens by objecting to Tout and Davies’ oversimplification of ‘the very complex nature of political life during the reign’, whilst still drawing a contrast between ‘the politics of the reign’ and the structure of Pembroke’s retinue and landholdings.<sup>85</sup> Politics, here, as it was for McFarlane, is a separate sphere from a noble’s rule over his own men. Maddicott concurs in arguing that ‘early fourteenth-century politics cannot be interpreted in these terms’ and asserting that his aim is to ‘demonstrate the complexity of political life’.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, a more systematic analysis reveals that on the 64 occasions that Maddicott uses political (51), politics (8), politically (3) or politician (2) in 334 pages, or 0.19 uses per page, the unit in question is the politics of the kingdom.<sup>87</sup> Maddicott contrasts Lancaster’s landed resources and the implicitly national ‘politics’ which they allowed him to intervene in, the ‘political ambitions’ and ‘political schemes’ they enabled him to pursue.<sup>88</sup> ‘Political life’, ‘political power’, ‘political influence’, Lancaster’s ‘political career’, ‘political activities’, ‘political success’ and ‘political ventures’ all concern interventions in an overtly ‘political’ sphere which, when one tracks them one by one, starts to seem strangely unmedieval, especially since, as we have seen, contemporaries would not have regarded them as more ‘political’ than the administration of a town or of a diocese.

Telling here is Maddicott’s use of the word ‘politician’ to describe barons in general and Thomas of Lancaster in particular in a way which seems to undercut the attempt to de-centre our understanding of late medieval ‘politics’.<sup>89</sup> One of Maddicott’s recurrent concerns is to observe when Lancaster seemed to be acting according to ‘his political principles’, meaning his attachment to a particular programme: the enforcement of the Ordinances, possibly as part of a commitment to intervention in the politics of the kingdom stretching back to Simon de Montfort’s opposition to Henry III.<sup>90</sup> From this point of view, what makes something political is the fact of directing one’s actions, not just towards the interests of oneself or one’s group, but towards the achievement of a specific programme. A comparable approach is found in J.C. Holt’s *The Northerners* (1961), where he argues that fighting the king for the application of a charter of liberties, Magna Carta, marked a fundamental break from what had come before.<sup>91</sup> What makes something political, then, is a ‘political programme’, on the implicit analogy of a political party advancing a manifesto.<sup>92</sup> A comparable approach was advanced more recently by the French

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<sup>85</sup> Phillips 1972, p. vii.

<sup>86</sup> Maddicott 1970, p. vii.

<sup>87</sup> This and subsequent counts of the use of words in secondary material have been performed manually, so a degree of error is not unlikely.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 14, 18, 22.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 333.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 238, 318, 319.

<sup>91</sup> J.C. Holt. 1961. *The Northerners: A Study in the Reign of King John*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> Maddicott refers to the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum* as a ‘political broadside’, although he at one point doubts that Lancaster’s attachment to the Ordinances can be seen as commitment to ‘a vital part of a political manifesto’.

historian of late medieval England, Jean-Philippe Genet, in a long review article of Maddicott's *Simon de Montfort* (1995), which began by posing the question of whether Simon de Montfort was a 'baron' or an 'homme politique'.<sup>93</sup> This article sought to explore whether de Montfort was a 'baron comme un autre' – which here means seeking to advance himself, his family and his associates – or whether he was an 'homme politique', meaning that he sought to defend a specific programme. That there is more to this distinction than might first appear (why could he not be both?) becomes clearer in Genet's monograph *La genèse de l'État moderne: Culture et société politique en Angleterre* (2003).<sup>94</sup> According to Genet, '... politics does not exist outside of the State, and more precisely of the modern State; in feudal society, it was brute social relationships which founded the relationship to power...'<sup>95</sup> We are thus back to Weber's definition: true 'politics' is narrow-sense 'politics', the struggle to control the state. It seems that, without the state, all we have is broad-sense 'politics', the search for influence or authority as might be found in any human grouping.

Although this was nowhere made explicit, in the studies of the English nobility which emerged in the 1970s, the 'politics' under study were not treated simply as struggles for power which could take place within any group or community. This was arguably because nobles were actors who were in the same face-to-face community as the head of the royal government, the king. From this point of view, the study of the nobility becomes the history of 'politics' the moment a noble actuates his political potential by involving himself directly with the king. Thus nobles are judged to act 'politically' when they interact with the king, when they are active in his administration or engaged in activities against his projects. They are judged to be 'politically unimportant' if they limit themselves to the rule of their lands and the localities in which their landed resources were based. For Maddicott, the earl of Oxford was the 'least politically conspicuous' of the earls, was 'too obscure and politically unimportant a figure to need comment', and joins the earl of Richmond amongst the 'political nonentities' – meaning those who did not intervene in the politics of the kingdom.<sup>96</sup> In a comparable fashion, one influential study of the nobility of Richard II's reign, published in the early 1970s, remarked that the 'political importance' of Edmund of Langley, earl of Cambridge and subsequently duke of York, had perhaps been underrated, noting that he had avoided 'political extremism', and placing him together with the earl of Northumberland as one of 'the honest brokers of politics in 1388 and 1389'.<sup>97</sup> Another remarked that the king's uncle, Thomas of Woodstock, earl of Gloucester, once he became involved in politics could not escape, unlike Sir Peter de la Mare, who 'could fade into political obscurity as a Herefordshire gentleman', since as the king's uncle he was inevitably trapped in what, to modern eyes, appears to be the quintessential political realm.<sup>98</sup> It is telling that when

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Maddicott. 1970, pp. 259, 312. Cf. D.A. Carpenter. 1988. Chancellor Ralph de Neville and Plans of Political Reform. In *Thirteenth Century England II*, ed. P.R. Coss and S.D. Lloyd. Woodbridge: Boydell, pp. 69-80.

<sup>93</sup> Jean-Philippe Genet. 1998. Simon de Montfort: Baron ou homme politique? *Médiévales*, no. 34, 53-68. Reviewing J.R. Maddicott. 1994. *Simon de Montfort*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>94</sup> Jean-Philippe Genet. 2003. *La genèse de l'État moderne : Culture et société politique en Angleterre*. Paris: PUF, p. 203.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263 : 'le politique n'existe pas en dehors de l'État, et plus précisément de l'État moderne, dans la société féodale, c'est le rapport social brut qui fonde le rapport de pouvoir'.

<sup>96</sup> Maddicott 1970, pp. 8, 68, 316.

<sup>97</sup> Anthony Tuck. 1973. *Richard II and the English Nobility*. London: Edward Arnold, pp. 8, 141-2, 142.

<sup>98</sup> Anthony Goodman. 1971. *The Loyal Conspiracy: The Lords Appellant under Richard II*. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, p. 14.

work on the nobility reached the level of synthesis in the 1980s, they were by now considered to be identical to the ‘political community’,<sup>99</sup> and conflict between crown and nobility was self-evidently ‘political conflict’.<sup>100</sup>

Things become more complicated when we consider how the political history of late medieval England subsequently developed. Being the king’s uncle made one inevitably political, being the king even more so. Other nobles could choose to be political or withdraw to their ‘country’, leaving the king to himself and attending to the management of his estates. But wasn’t their country political also? At first this question might seem to be one of our own definitions: in the broad-sense of politics, yes, in the narrow-sense, no. But the development of gentry studies which first appeared in print in the 1980s and 1990s problematized this situation. The dealings of knights and esquires with one another in the county were ‘political’ in the broad sense – they were ‘local politics’ – but they might also be ‘political’ in the sense that their collective interests also impinged on the narrow sense politics of the kingdom. Thus although, for example, Nigel Saul’s thesis on the fourteenth-century Gloucestershire gentry was avowedly ‘mainly social and economic’ in theme, it nonetheless brought ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ into question in a way which destabilised earlier certainties about what ‘politics’ was.<sup>101</sup> Thus although Saul uses these words a total of 34 times in 262 pages, or 0.13 per page, his usage moves between national politics (9 uses), local politics (‘the politics of the shire’, ‘county politics’ etc.) (9 uses), one ambiguous use (it is not clear if the ‘[p]olitical leadership in the shire’<sup>102</sup> wielded by magnates of second rank concerned the politics of the kingdom or of the county), and senses which concerned the interaction between the politics of the kingdom and the politics of the county (15 uses). When ‘political factors’, ‘national political considerations’ or simply ‘political considerations’ affect appointment to county office, when a ‘political flavour’ or ‘political significance’ is detectable or ‘political affiliations’, ‘political influences’ or ‘political partisanship’ are in play, the word ‘political’ denotes the influence of the politics of the kingdom (which is more perfectly political to the modern mind) on the politics of the shire (which is perhaps political only by extension). But when the concerns of county politics come to influence the gentry’s attitudes to national politics, when they applied ‘their ideas not only to local but also to the King’s government’, then an important slippage is introduced.<sup>103</sup> Is the ‘increasing political self-consciousness of the gentry’ their consciousness of the politics of the kingdom, or their consciousness of how that politics might impinge on their local concerns?<sup>104</sup> Although, for Saul, ‘county politics’ is still clearly less politics than the politics of the kingdom, something is starting to give. By the time Simon Payling published his study of *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire*, the semantics of the historiography of late medieval English ‘politics’ had moved further.<sup>105</sup> Thus whereas Payling uses ‘politics’ or ‘political’ 49 times in 220

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<sup>99</sup> Christopher Given-Wilson. 1987. *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth-Century Political Community*. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul.

<sup>100</sup> Anthony Tuck. 1985. *Crown and Nobility, 1272-1461: Political Conflict in Late Medieval England*. London: Fontana.

<sup>101</sup> Nigel Saul. 1981. *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. vi.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>105</sup> Simon Payling. 1991. *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

pages, or 0.22 times per page, 24 of these occurrences refer to 'shire politics' or 'Nottinghamshire politics', and in the remaining 25 cases, it is rarely clear if 'national politics' can be separated off from its organic relationship to the local. After all, was the office-holding greater gentry of Nottinghamshire 'political society' as opposed to 'county society' because of its political dominance of the shire or its role, collectively, in national politics? This indeed is Payling's central point: 'late medieval politics in general' cannot be seen 'solely in terms of the relationship between the crown and the nobility'.<sup>106</sup>

If the nobility easily became 'political' when they came into contact with the king in person, this was less obviously so of the gentry. Nonetheless, the underlying focus of most work on the late medieval gentry was how their ideas and interests affected the aims, interests and room for manoeuvre of the king, the nobility and the royal administration. This is the central theme, for example, of the work of Christine Carpenter and those of her students who have followed her down the road of analysing the 'political and social world in the localities' in order to understand the politics of the kingdom – the interaction between locality, which is one thing, and polity, which is another.<sup>107</sup> In the 1990s and early 2000s, research into 'political culture' expanded further to seek to deduce the consequences of the values and activities of peasants and townsmen in the politics of the kingdom.<sup>108</sup> In much of this work, historians tend to start with the assumption that groups under study became interested in the 'politics' of the king and kingdom insofar as the latter impinged on their own lives, conceived of as originally local and self-sufficient. Thus the narrow-sense 'politics' of the kingdom is affected by a series of values, interests and concerns in a variety of social settings which are conceived of as 'local' – the county, the town, the village. These ideas include the broad-sense 'politics' of these settings (the competition for influence and authority within each of them), but also all the other concerns, economic, social or religious, for example, which animate these milieus. But it is worth noting that in many approaches which consider 'political culture' or 'political society' what makes a given culture or society 'political' is the effect which it has on the narrow-sense 'politics' of the king and kingdom. This becomes clear, for example, in terms such as 'infrapolitics' which, like the terminology of 'subpolitics' as used by modern political scientists, implies that the only true 'politics' is the narrow-sense 'politics' of the state.<sup>109</sup> For Christine Carpenter, indeed, this is almost a criteria of the acceptable

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>107</sup> Christine Carpenter. 1992. *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>108</sup> David Carpenter. 1992. English Peasants in Politics, 1258-67. *Past and Present*, no. 136, 3-42; Michael Hicks. 2002. *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century*. London and New York: Routledge; John L. Watts. 2004. The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics. In *The Fifteenth Century IV: Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. L. Clark and C. Carpenter. Woodbridge: Boydell, 159-80; John L. Watts. 2014. Popular Voices in England's Wars of the Roses, c. 1445-c. 1485. In *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. J. Dumolyn, J. Haemers, H.R. Oliva Herrer and V. Challet, 107-122; Lorraine Attreed. 2001. *The King's Towns: Identity and Survival in Late Medieval English Boroughs*. New York: Peter Lang; Christian Liddy. 2005. *War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York and the Crown, 1350-1400*. Woodbridge: Boydell.

<sup>109</sup> Simon Walker. 2000. Rumour, sedition and popular protest in the reign of Henry IV. *Past and Present*, no. 166, 31-65.

use of ‘political culture’: if such a concept cannot be used to understand ‘politics themselves and political narrative’ then it ought to be discarded as lacking explanatory utility.<sup>110</sup>

There is, of course, something self-fulfilling about the present analysis. It is not surprising that historians interested first and foremost in the politics of the kingdom – explaining the events of Edward II’s reign or the Wars of the Roses – will continue to centre their efforts on politics in Weber’s narrow sense. Outside of this field, historians continue to use ‘politics’ in a way which cuts between different levels without necessarily impinging on the interaction of the king and nobility, or even the king and the gentry. Cordelia Beattie, for example, subtitles her thesis on medieval single women, published in 2007, *The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England*.<sup>111</sup> In this work, a political act is ‘an act of power’, which might lead one to suspect that is simply broad-sense politics which are at issue. But in fact this is not the case: Beattie is concerned with politics in terms of the efforts of central government to react to the crisis of labour supply in the aftermath of the Black Death.<sup>112</sup> Such an account is certainly political even in Weber’s narrow sense, but it has little to contribute to understanding the interaction between the nobility and the ‘political narrative’ constructed around them. Is it thus not about politics? Mark Ormrod’s *Political Life in Medieval England* (1995) deals with a range of contexts, notably judicial, in which the points of interaction between government and different groups of subjects are far more varied.<sup>113</sup> Work on the politics of the village, meanwhile, suggests contexts which involve the intervention of various forms of actors that historians are accustomed to regarding as ‘political’, notably royal and seigneurial officials, but which reveal how strange it would be to divide such matters from broader issues particular to a village context such as the management of resources, manorial legal and judicial structures, and internal social and economic stratification.<sup>114</sup> Christian Liddy’s work on late medieval English towns explicitly challenges the dichotomy we have been wrestling with between seeing politics everywhere and thinking only of politics in terms of ‘the machinery of government’.<sup>115</sup> His characterisation of a particularly urban form of politics based around issues such as access to common land, the annual mayoral election and the control of the circulation of information seems a long way from the king and the nobility even if, when the latter sought to make use of the former, they were obliged to negotiate these concerns.<sup>116</sup> In Ian Forrest’s recent study of the use of local juries to facilitate the rule of bishops over the laity of their dioceses, ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ is omnipresent, occurring some 69

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<sup>110</sup> Christine Carpenter. 2004. Political Culture, Politics and Cultural History. In *The Fifteenth Century IV*, ed. L. Clark and C. Carpenter, 1-19, p. 5.

<sup>111</sup> Cordelia Beattie. 2007. *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1 (for quote), 3, 11, 14, 31, 37, 94, 98, 144, 147.

<sup>113</sup> W.M. Ormrod. 1995. *Political Life in Medieval England, 1300-1450*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Dyer. 2004. The Political Life of the Fifteenth-Century English Village. In *The Fifteenth Century V*, ed. L. Clark and C. Carpenter, 135-157. More recently discussed by Chris Briggs. 2017. Identifying the political in the late medieval village. Paper delivered at *Pratiques politiques quotidiennes*. Journée d’étude at IRHiS, University of Lille. 21 September 2017. For a comparable argument applied to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Andy Wood. 2002. *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 5-17.

<sup>115</sup> Liddy 2017.

<sup>116</sup> For an approach more centred on the consequences for the politics of the kingdom, see Christopher Fletcher. 2017. News, noise and the nature of politics in late medieval English provincial towns. *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 56, 250-272.

times in 353 pages, or 0.20 occurrences per page, not as much as Payling, but more than McFarlane, Maddicott or Saul.<sup>117</sup> Forrest's 'politics' is a matter of power relations within parishes ('local politics') and of office holding ('political inequalities' did not necessarily correspond to 'economic inequalities') and only very occasionally of national politics (when 'political stability' permits economic recovery in the late fifteenth century).<sup>118</sup> Is this just 'broad sense' politics? Here the imposition of such a binary between 'broad' and 'narrow' senses of politics would be more clearly anachronistic. Parish officers and parish jurors are clearly part of a continuum with manorial, seigniorial, urban and royal officers and jurors. All of these activities would have been regarded by medieval observers as part of 'politics', of 'common' or 'public' life: forms of rule by counsel and by reason justified by mutual benefit, dealing with that which was not private property, but which belonged to no one and to all.

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Thanks to a century of empirical research, historians of late medieval England have ample means to avoid the stark choice between defining politics on first principles either as being about the state, the king and the nation, or else as simply being competition over power and influence in any human grouping. Late medieval English politics now has much more content than that. Historians' concepts have evolved more organically than hard, theoretical definitions allow, and this is fitting, since the phenomena they are describing are organic phenomena, not the crystalline structures of holistic theory. The themes brought to the fore by recent work on the politics of bishop and parish, town and village reveal enough common themes for it to be clear that the old binary is not as compulsory as it once was. They supplement rather than replace earlier work on the nobility and gentry, as well as the mighty volume of work on the English parliament and royal governmental and judicial institutions which preceded it. Important themes in the present state of the art intercut with the range of medieval concepts which included politics: the importance of officials and of different kinds of inquest jury; the importance of information – both information projection, information gathering and controlling common talk and rumour; the importance of accounting and being held to account; the importance of public resources and their management – common fields, common roads, common spaces, but also money, water supplies, labour supplies and even access to competent priests.<sup>119</sup> Breaking down the boundaries imposed by an early twentieth-century concept of politics need not lead to an excessively general notion of politics, instead it can help to reconceptualise where we place the boundaries of politics today as much as in the middle ages. Once we abandon the implicit mental analogy, reinforced by our ordinary use of language, between late medieval politics and eighteenth- or nineteenth-century British political institutions, we might tentatively suggest that medievalists have a head start on colleagues working on more recent periods, who are currently trying to establish an approach to

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<sup>117</sup> Forrest 2018.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 208 for the last two quotes.

<sup>119</sup> In addition to works cited above, see John Sabapathy. 2014. *Officers and Accountability in Medieval England, 1170-1300*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Christopher Fletcher. 2010. De la communauté du royaume au *common weal*: Les requêtes anglaises et leurs stratégies au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle, *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques*, no. 32, 135-149.

politics which is not just limited to what seems, before we stop to think, self-evidently ‘political’.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Jonathan Parry. 2019. Educating the Utopians: Review of *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000*. In *London Review of Books*, vol. 41, no. 8, 18 April, 10-12. For recent attempts to produce a non-state-centred definition of ‘politicization’ in contemporary society, see Camille Hamidi. 2006. Éléments pour une approche interactionniste de la politisation. *Revue française de science politique*. vol. 56, 2006, 5-25.