

Ideas of Power in the Late Middle Ages, 1296-1417

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The early 14th-century writer John Quidort of Paris once argued that legal norms should not be deduced from unique events that took place in specific circumstances.⁽¹⁾ Nevertheless, it might be suggested that anecdotes may occasionally prove instructive. In the course of a recent attempt to buy a summer jacket, I discovered that I was being assisted by a graduate of the politics programme at a neighbouring New Zealand university. I was curious to know if they had ever studied medieval political thought. Hazy recollections of a single course taken outside the politics department followed. These were accompanied by the very definite statement that what interested this particular former student was ‘politics and not history’. This view seems echoed in the growing tendency of politics departments, both in the UK, New Zealand, and elsewhere, to focus on the contemporary to the exclusion of the historical. At the same time, it is rare to see history departments advertise for historians of medieval political thought. While keeping John Quidort’s warning in mind, we might then observe that the history of medieval political ideas is by no means a trendy topic in the early 21st century. Joseph Canning’s *Ideas of Power in the Late Middle Ages* is a book that deserves to change that. It provides two invaluable services: it reminds political theorists of the value of historical context and historians that political ideas are interesting.

Ideas of Power is not a straightforward overview of the history of political thought in the later Middle Ages. This is worth noting because the chapter structure and chronological approach, which begins with the publicists of the reign of the French king Philip IV the Fair and ends with the conciliarists of the Great Schism, mean it would be easy to misread this book. Along the way, the reader certainly encounters the ‘usual suspects’ one would expect to find in a survey: Dante, Marsilius of Padua, William of Ockham and so

on. And yet this is a book with a broader point. Canning has already written an excellent textbook (2); this is a very different beast. That each chapter contributes to an overall argument is certainly clear when one looks back from the vantage point of the book's conclusion. Yet, although Canning sets out his approach in a clear introduction, he has chosen not to patronise his reader by constantly highlighting his argument throughout the course of *Ideas of Power*. This may well lead some to miss the fact that this is a book that was written to be read from cover to cover. If *Ideas of Power* has a flaw, then, it is that it does not sell its own novelty particularly well. Yet, in an age where headlines often obscure content, it is not an entirely bad thing to be reminded that not everything can or should be reduced to a sound-bite or its equivalent. What, then, is the broader point of *Ideas of Power*? The approach taken to one of the most polarising of medieval thinkers, Marsilius of Padua, illustrates the book's novelty.

In the course of the 20th century, political theorists and historians often trod their own, separate paths. The division between them was at its clearest when they considered a thinker such as Marsilius. Political theorists often tended to read his great work, the *Defensor pacis*, in isolation from its historical context. They frequently focused on Discourse I of the text, to the exclusion of the much more substantial second Discourse and, indeed, the author's later works. Viewed from this perspective, Marsilius's thought was the product of the Italian city-states, his position that of an ardent defender of republicanism, and his radicalism defined by his view of consent. Historians, on the other hand, tended to place greater emphasis on Marsilius's output as a whole, and on its author's involvement in the dispute between the would-be emperor Ludwig of Bavaria and the papacy. While his 'republicanism' was not entirely brushed aside, the portrait of Marsilius that emerged was predominantly of a thinker keen to defend the rights of emperors. The past decade has witnessed challenges to both these approaches. Much new work consciously seeks to examine Marsilius and his thought from new perspectives.(3) In one sense, *Ideas of Power* fits into this pattern. It clearly recognises and summarises the past polarisation, while offering a new approach. What makes this book distinctive, though, is the nature of that new approach. Canning's portrait of Marsilius is not a snapshot of a medieval thinker in isolation; it is a portrait of a thinker placed within a much broader context. This involves considering not simply Marsilius's personal historical context and the way in which it shaped his thought; it is about viewing Marsilius's ideas through a longer contextual lens. This is undoubtedly where *Ideas of Power* is at its most stimulating. It is also likely to prove the book's most controversial feature.

At the heart of Canning's argument is the view that the ideas of medieval thinkers can only be understood when situated within their proper context. Few historians would disagree, but this is an argument that goes beyond the need to understand the specific circumstances that informed the thought of each individual writer, although this important area is by no means ignored. As Canning highlights, Marsilius of Padua's training as a physician undoubtedly left its mark on his ideas, as did his involvement in Ludwig's conflict with the papacy.(4) Similarly, the conflict between Pope Boniface VIII and Philip IV played its part in the development of the thought of John Quidort. Nor can Ockham be disconnected from the debates over poverty that shaped the Franciscan experience. More fundamentally, Canning argues – and he is doubtless right to do so – that all of these writers were inspired to respond to 'real' problems. These were not isolated theorists exploring abstract solutions in a vacuum; they were active participants in the political and ecclesiastical struggles of their day. And perhaps none more so than Marsilius himself: 'There was a practical point to Marsilius's writings; they were not just works of theory' (p. 94). And yet there is, Canning suggests, a broader contextual thread that unites these thinkers and that helps to define their works. They share an interest in addressing some common questions. These concern the nature of power and the origins of authority. The most fundamental issue, as Canning sees it, is the question of where legitimate authority lies: 'In short, who is in charge?' (p. 1). In other words, when viewed from this perspective, John Quidort, Dante, Marsilius and even John Wyclif and Franciscus Zabarella can be said to be standing on common ground.

Late medieval writers approached varying crises in different ways but at the heart of their works lay the central issue of where legitimate authority should be located. The first crisis, and the focus of the book's opening chapter, is the series of disputes that gripped France in the 1290s and the early 14th century as Philip IV came into conflict with Boniface VIII over, firstly, royal rights to tax the Church and, later, over

the broader issue of royal jurisdiction over the clergy. In common with Jürgen Miethke, Canning believes that this dispute gave birth to a new form of political writing.⁽⁵⁾ By the beginning of the 14th century the rapidly maturing university system had produced writers such as John Quidort, Giles of Rome and James of Viterbo. These individuals, alongside the anonymous authors of tracts such as the *Quaestio in utramque partem*, were inspired by the contemporary conflict to seek to establish the nature of temporal and ecclesiastical power, and the relationship between them. The debate hinged around the question of whether a hierocratic interpretation, one that ultimately located all authority in the papacy, should be accepted or whether a dualist perspective that viewed temporal and spiritual authority as two essentially independent strands was the correct interpretation.

In chapters two and three, Canning moves on to consider the further series of crises triggered by efforts to re-establish imperial authority under the Emperor Henry VII and Ludwig of Bavaria. These, again, brought the temporal power into conflict with the spiritual. Henry's efforts to assert his authority in northern Italy gave rise to what Canning considers a new approach to power and authority in the thought of Dante Alighieri. Dante's solution to the problems of the medieval world, a strong emperor, was an old one; his methodology, new. At the same time, Canning notes that what is interesting here is not Dante's advocacy of empire but the way in which he approached the problem. While the publicists of the Franco-papal dispute had chosen to construct arguments that appealed to authorities, Dante pioneered an approach that returned to first principles. Yet, in common with the publicists before him and Marsilius writing some decades later, Dante's thought revolved around the dual – and inextricably linked – problem of power and legitimate authority. Indeed, for Marsilius, whose thought is the focus of chapter three, the papal claim to a plenitude of power – and how best to debunk it – was, Canning argues, the crux of the problem to be confronted. To understand the thought of either Dante or Marsilius fully it is, then, necessary to understand the centrality of this question of power and where it should be located.

With its fourth chapter, *Ideas of Power* takes a sidestep away from a straightforward chronological approach by considering the wider debate surrounding poverty. It then returns to focus on the thought of Marsilius's contemporary, William of Ockham. For Canning, the debate over the nature of property that began in the mendicant orders and that developed in the radically different theories of John Quidort and Giles of Rome, is another facet of the ongoing debate over the location of legitimate authority. In Ockham himself we find what Canning terms a 'third way' of exploring this problem (p. 125). Approaches amongst earlier writers, hierocratic or dualist, focused on the exercise of power within a Christian society in which the ruler would always enjoy some form of relationship with the Church. Following Stephen McGrade, Canning suggests Ockham 'desacralized' secular power, effectively moving the problem away from a debate involving specifically Christian societies. Ockham can also, however, be read as providing a theological argument to justify the complete autonomy of secular rulers and political communities. Canning argues he developed, in effect, an alternative to Aristotelian naturalism but one that achieved the same ends: an independent political sphere.

Ideas of Power is rounded off by a discussion of John Wyclif and the conciliarist movement in a sixth chapter that deals with the crisis generated by the Great Schism. Here, again, Canning argues, we are dealing with the problem of power and where legitimate authority should lie. He focuses, in particular, on the role of God's grace in establishing legitimate *dominium* (and hence the legitimate exercise of power) in society, and on the role of consent in establishing the source of ultimate authority in the Church. It is in the preceding chapter, 'The treatment of power in juristic thought', however, that *Ideas of Power* reaches its high point.

Readers who turn to the book expecting a straightforward analysis of the thought of the jurists Bartolus of Sassoferrato and Baldus of Ubaldis will doubtless feel slightly disconcerted by *Ideas of Power*'s fifth chapter. In the context of the broader discussion of power and authority, this chapter poses a key question: can the terms 'sovereignty' and 'state' be used with reference to the medieval world? I have to admit, particularly when it comes to the latter, I have always been something of a sceptic. Canning offers an analysis of both concepts in juristic thought, and a focused discussion of the way in which mid 14th-century jurists dealt with the question of papal temporal power in the Papal States in particular. His analysis provides what is, to my mind, one of the most convincing cases for retaining the use of both terms. This chapter is,

quite simply, masterly. It deserves to be read in the context of the book as a whole, and it deserves to be read widely. Linked to a concept of corporation theory, Canning provides cogent reasons to suggest the jurists developed a clear concept of 'state'. The chapter is equally interesting for its discussion of sovereignty and the comparisons Canning draws with modern institutions such as the European Union. Is a concept such as 'alienable sovereignty' possible or a contradiction in terms? It is, at the very least, an intriguing concept, as is the idea of a 'hierarchy of sovereignty' as an explanation of 14th-century political structures. As Canning notes in the book's conclusion, the work of jurists in this period has been underestimated.

Alongside the creativity of 14th-century jurists, the book, as a whole, concludes by reminding us of two points that are easy to overlook. The first, looking forward, is that scholastic ideas continued to exist alongside humanist ones during the Renaissance. So, while it makes sense to conclude the book with the Schism in the first quarter of the 15th century, we should not assume that the ideas discussed here simply ceased to have any currency after that date. The second, looking backwards, is to reassess the importance of medieval 'Augustinianism', the medieval world view as it had developed before the rediscovery of the corpus of Aristotle's writings. There is a lingering tendency to view the history of late medieval political thought as a clash between Augustinianism and Aristotelianism, the former represented by hierocrats such as Giles of Rome, the latter by dualists such as John Quidort. As Canning recognises, and makes clear when discussing James of Viterbo in particular, the hierocrats were as much influenced by Aristotle as the dualists. What Canning reminds us is that Augustinianism continued to exert a wide-ranging and important influence. Paradoxically, Augustinian ideas could even be used to justify secular authority with no reference to the Church (p. 194). As Canning notes, it would be useful to re-examine Early Modern political thought in the light of the analysis presented here.

I found only one minor typo in *Ideas of Power*: the 'Emperor Henry' referred to by John Quidort is undoubtedly Henry III and not Henry II (p. 57). More generally, Canning's choice of a straightforward chronological structure makes *Ideas of Power* highly readable but does, on occasion, have its drawbacks. In addition to the problem that readers who dip in and out risk missing the book's broader argument, it means that points are sometimes introduced but not dealt with for some time. I found myself, for example, concerned by the apparently casual and unqualified use of the term 'sovereignty' in chapter one; my concerns were only allayed by the robust discussion in chapter five. It might also be possible to criticise a few of Canning's specific choices. It was unclear to me, for example, why the older editions of Giles of Rome's *De ecclesiastica potestate* by Scholz (1929) and James of Viterbo's *De regimine christiano* by Arquillière (1926), should be favoured over the much newer editions produced by Robert Dyson in, respectively, 2004 and 2009.⁽⁶⁾ I am also not entirely convinced that Henry of Cremona's tract *De potestate pape* really was John Quidort's 'prime target' in *De potestate regia et papali*, and would have liked to have seen this claim explored further (p. 49). More significantly, there is Canning's decision to concern himself exclusively with the thought of 'late medieval scholastic writers – theologians, philosophers and jurists' (p. 3). The middle category, in particular, seems something of a vague 'catch all' to allow for the inclusion of a writer such as Dante.

In choosing to explore the ideas of theologians, philosophers and jurists, Canning's aim is clearly to demonstrate that the traditional canon of 'political' writers who have formed the focus of interest amongst historians of political thought since the early 20th century still has much to tell us and, indeed, can be explored from a new perspective. In this he is undoubtedly successful. At the same time, it would have been interesting to reflect on what writers who fall outside the traditional canon can tell us about the problems of power and legitimate authority. Canning does not address this but his book is certainly an invitation to others to do so. The question of where legitimate authority lies might well be a key that unlocks more than the traditional canon. Is the model he is proposing, in short, one that tells us something about the nature of late medieval society as a whole? It may well do. Although discussed in a much less sophisticated manner, it is precisely the problem of legitimacy, for example, that French chroniclers felt obliged to address when dealing with Charles I d'Anjou's mid 13th-century conquest of the southern Italian *regno*: Was Charles's authority legitimate simply because it was established by papal grant? Chroniclers struggled, in particular, to justify the disinheritance and execution of the last legitimate Hohenstaufen heir, Conradin. Where did a

source of authority lie that could legitimate disinheriting a family of its patrimony?(7) In the course of the 14th century, as Canning ably demonstrates, the answers were becoming considerably more complex; the basic question, however, was the same. Where was legitimate authority located? There is, then, a broader history of this key question waiting to be written. In *Ideas of Power*, Joseph Canning has provided an extremely stimulating new reading of the traditional canon that challenges political theorists and historians to think differently. He has also opened the door to thinking about later medieval political thought in new ways. In isolating the problem of power and legitimate authority Canning's book is a contribution to a broader debate over the way in which the inhabitants of medieval Europe perceived their world.

Notes

1. *De Potestate Regia et Papali: Johannes Quidort von Paris. Über Königliche und Päpstliche Gewalt ('De Regia Potestate et Papali')*, ed. with a German translation by F. Bleienstein (Stuttgart, 1969), c. 14, p. 148.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought 350–1450* (New York, NY, London, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Most notably: G. Garnett, *Marsilius of Padua and 'The Truth of History'* (Oxford, 2006) and the essays collected in *The World of Marsilius of Padua*, ed. G. Moreno-Riaño (Turnhout, 2006) and *A Companion to Marsilius of Padua*, ed. G. Moreno-Riaño and C. J. Nederman (Leiden, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For the latest assessment of the former: T. Shogimen, 'Medicine and the body politic in Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor pacis*', in *A Companion to Marsilius of Padua*, pp. 71–115.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Miethke, 'Die Traktate 'De potestate papae'. Ein Typus politiktheoretischer Literatur im späten Mittelalter', in *Les genres littéraires dans les sources théologiques et philosophiques médiévales: Définition, critique et exploitation. Actes du Colloque international de Louvain-la-Neuve, 25-27 mai 1981* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982), pp. 193–211.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Giles of Rome's 'On Ecclesiastical Power'. A Medieval Theory of World Government*, ed. and trans. by R. W. Dyson (New York, NY, 2004); *James of Viterbo, De Regimine Christiano. A Critical Edition and Translation*, ed. and trans. by R. W. Dyson (Leiden, 2009).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. C. Jones, *Eclipse of Empire? Perceptions of the Western Empire and Its Rulers in Late-Medieval France* (Cursor mundi vol. 1, Turnhout, 2007), pp. 189–97.[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is happy to accept the review and thanks the reviewer for the time he has taken to fully engage with the book.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/59458>