

Book Review forthcoming in *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*

***Counsel and Command in Early Modern English Thought.* By Joanne Paul. Cambridge University Press, 2020. viii + 244 pp. £75.**

From Brexit to climate change, the question of whose advice should be sought and heeded dominates contemporary political debate. Joanne Paul's recent publications stand testament to this topicality: they include a chapter in the volume *Political Advice: Past, Present and Future* (2021), edited by Jacqueline Rose and Colin Kidd, which places essays by historians alongside pieces by modern political practitioners. *Counsel and Command* is similarly premised on the fusion of politics and history, though rooted in the past rather than the present.

As Paul puts it (p. 5), 'This study is formed at the intersection of the history of political thought and political history.' Here Paul positions herself within a broader trend which has seen historians of political thought turn to political history with renewed seriousness. Recent examples include Max Skjönsberg's work on the theory and practice of party politics in eighteenth-century Britain and Mark Goldie's Carlyle lectures on John Locke as both political actor and thinker. So what does it mean to combine the history of political thought and political history? *Counsel and Command* offers valuable tools for this task, pointing towards ways in which the field might develop in future.

The book unpicks the paradox of political counsel. What was the point of counsel if it was ignored by those in command? And what was the point of command if one was reliant on counsel? Paul begins with close analysis of major canonical figures – Machiavelli, More, Erasmus – but traces how their reception varied with political circumstance. She notes that counsellors deployed different sources of authority on different occasions. Sometimes

histories were viewed as more objective sources of political expertise; at other times, the practical experience of travellers and diplomats was paramount. In one work Paul references, Cardinal Pole cites the fact that Thomas Cromwell had recommended Machiavelli to him as proof of Cromwell's untrustworthiness; on other occasions, however, a deep knowledge of Machiavelli could make a counsellor seem serious and authoritative. Citing or rejecting certain authorities could open up political possibilities, but also close them off.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the historian aiming to combine the history of politics and political thought is that of sources. Writings on counsel too often read like the work of armchair generals, and even in the rare cases of important political actors (like Thomas More) publishing on the theme, it is hard to establish the relationship between their theory and practice. In Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light*, Thomas Cromwell begins work on a book of counsel, recording his all-too-candid advice on working with Henry VIII. He calls his manuscript 'The Book called Henry' (surely in imitation of Thomas Elyot's *The Book named the Governor*, discussed by Paul in Chapter 2). When Cromwell falls from power, 'The Book called Henry' is hastily burnt, before it incriminates him further. Though fictional, the manuscript's fate reflects one of the fundamental difficulties faced by the historian of counsel: those who did it well often had good reason not to commit their thoughts to paper. If we want to get to the bottom of the question of how counsel was delivered and received in practice – which *personae* worked (or not) at crucial moments – future studies will need to move still further away from more canonical figures and towards a focus on the letters and unpublished writings of men such as Cromwell or the Cecils. Another way to go about this would be through greater historicisation of well-known figures – work Paul has begun on Thomas More elsewhere, but which could have been given more space here.

Paul makes the intriguing claim that there is something distinctively English about the focus on counsel. She is clear that this is one of her more 'tentative' suggestions: indeed, she

also draws on a range of thinkers from beyond the British Isles, while carefully tracing the changes of emphasis that occurred when these works were translated into English. If there is something distinctively English about the ideas of counsel explored here, this may be linked to the idiosyncratic character of the English Reformation. Paul's book does tell an oblique story about the effect of the Reformation on counsel, but this might have been drawn out further, exploring the particular political imperatives of the English situation in the wake of the break with Rome.

Paul's account ends somewhat suddenly with Thomas Hobbes, who eschews a role for counsel in favour of absolute sovereign authority. For Paul, Hobbes's intervention came after decades of polarisation, stoked by the absolutist fervour of James VI & I, whose rule by favourites radicalised parliament. In political histories, James's stock has risen in recent decades; however, in histories of political thought he often remains a villain, and Paul is a little too eager to continue this emphasis. Elsewhere, she offers suggestive material on the slippage between 'counsel' and 'council' in the context of the Privy Council or Parliament. Might there not be a role for Church Councils within this history too? James was, as Paul notes, hostile to any line of thought which might imply that counsel could become command. However, as W.B. Patterson has emphasised, James was also a great advocate of ecumenical councils as the best means to settle the controversies of the Reformation. These two stances are not necessarily contradictory, but they do suggest that understanding James's stance on church councils might help us make more sense of the Stuart Royalist attitude to counsel, moving beyond a picture limited to erratic reliance on favourites.

Ultimately, the strengths of *Counsel and Command* lie more on the side of political thought than political history. Paul provides a clear-eyed and elegant statement of the enduring problem of counsel, but leaves it to later scholars to trace in more detail the influence of these debates on the rough and tumble of everyday political life. Nonetheless,

she succeeds in encouraging historians to think harder about the relationship between political theory and political practice. Future scholars are advised to pay her book close attention.

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