ENGLISH POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Michael Hicks

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English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century is a new and original study of how politics worked in late medieval England. It throws new light on a much-discussed period in English history. Michael Hicks explores the standards, values and principles that motivated contemporary politicians, and the aspirations and interests of both aristocracy and peasants alike.

Hicks argues that the Wars of the Roses did not result from fundamental weaknesses in the political system but from the collision of exceptional circumstances that quickly passed away. Overall, he shows that the era was one of stability and harmony, and that there were effective mechanisms for keeping the peace. Structure and continuities, Hicks argues, were more prominent than change.

Students and teachers of late medieval England will find this a key text in the area, as it covers a broad spectrum in a particularly focused way.

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TO CYNTHIA

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book was to have been a short study of how politics worked in the fifteenth century and the standards to which it conformed. It presumed twenty years of research into fifteenth-century politics, bastard feudalism, idealism and motivation, and local case studies. A change of publisher and title, a doubling in length and an explosion in recent studies has made for a much longer and more elaborate book. The original thrust has not changed, but the range, level and depth of discussion undoubtedly has. It is the first synthesis of a new type of history of fifteenth-century England.

My own research, published or unpublished, has been important, but so has that of many others. The subject matter is vast, largely unresearched and beyond the capacity of any individual to investigate in full. Studying even the English constitution is a tremendous task. Stanley Chrimes' classic *English Constitutional Ideas in the Fifteenth Century* studies particular reigns and particular texts, and a dozen *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes* have mapped parts of a jungle still largely uncharted. Who had thought of writing articles and books on the concept of service, on chivalry in domestic politics, or the culture of childhood twenty years ago? Although we differ in so many particulars, I acknowledge Christine Carpenter's identification and conceptualisation of many key issues, her bold engagement with the thorniest of problems and her perception, which I share, that 'we are still in a state of ignorance in many important areas'. I have been fortunate to draw on many wholly new editions and re-issues of old editions of the principal sources. I have built on half a century of major monographs and volumes of essays on the structure of government, central and local, on the aristocracy and the peasantry, both as classes and in particular localities, on bastard feudalism and on local politics. The contributions of Ralph Griffiths, Gerald Harriss, Jack Lander, K.B. McFarlane, Tony Pollard and Colin Richmond have been more influential than specific references indicate. I have made extensive use of the work produced in the last thirty years. I have abridged the works of my predecessors and contemporaries, adapting and borrowing as appropriate, whilst

subjecting them to my own themes and overriding framework and turning them to uses often unintended by the authors and perhaps unexpected. The interplay of motives and the interaction of different groups, individuals, ideas and factors has taken priority.

Every book selects. I chose some topics for study and rejected others. Researching the book has modified my understanding of where and how everything relates. Accessible material, primary and secondary, is growing apace. Topics originally excluded have become relevant. Further choices have had to be made. There is much that this book is not. That I am concerned primarily with political culture rather than other sorts of culture and with the rural aristocracy rather than urban townsmen makes it one sort of book rather than others that it might have been. It has focused more on England than its dependencies and on civil than foreign war. National generalisations and perceptions have crowded out the myriad regional variations of the original synopsis. There are more beginnings than endings and more topics are touched on than can be more fully explored. There is little here about symbolism, ceremony and ritual, folklore and literary culture, superstitions and the supernatural. And so on. Some such emphases are deliberate, inescapable, yet regrettable. I could not write about everything, nor indeed could I be comprehensive about everything I do write about. This book is interim and provisional to an unusual degree, since most current and future historical scholarship impacts upon it. I hope for future updates and revisions.

The first seven chapters are the foundation for the final three. Chapter 1 sets out the parameters and raises fundamental issues. Chapter 2 looks at the climate of ideas, which are explored in different contexts – monarchy, aristocracy and the other social classes, Chapters 3 to 5 respectively. Chapter 6 is about government. The pivotal Chapter 7 explores some alternative perceptions. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 explore concepts and systems in practice, through bastard feudalism, provincial communities and national politics in peacetime, and culminate naturally in Chapter 11, the collapse into and emergence from civil war.

I am solely responsible for what the book contains. I find it unusually difficult to acknowledge all those who have contributed to the thinking and subject matter of this book over the past thirty years. Almost everyone who taught me, whom I have heard, read or discussed, deserves my thanks. Specific identifiable debts are acknowledged, I believe, in the bibliography and notes. Some names feature especially frequently. Not present there, but thanked here, are my research students, especially Toby Purser, Richard Brown, Karen

Stoeber and Winifred Harwood, who have broadened my horizons and made me think more critically. I am grateful to Steve Rigby, who first proposed the project, and to successive editors, Heather McCallum and Victoria Peters. My family, as always, have been tolerant and supportive.

All quotations have been translated from their original language into modern English. Unless otherwise indicated, all places of publication are London.

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Michael Hicks
Winchester
December 2001
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ABBREVIATIONS

Armburgh	*The Armburgh Papers: The Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire and Essex c.1417–c.1453*, ed. C. Carpenter (Woodbridge, 1998)
BIHR	*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*
Brown, *Governance*	A.L. Brown, *The Governance of Late Medieval England 1272–1461* (1989)
Carpenter, *Wars*	C. Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c.1437–1509* (Cambridge, 1997)
CCR	*Calendar of the Close Rolls*
CPR	*Calendar of the Patent Rolls*
Chrimes	S.B. Chrimes, *English Constitutional Ideas in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1934)
Concepts of Service	*Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. A.E. Curry and E. Matthew (Woodbridge, 2000)
Crowland	*The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459–86*, ed. N. Pronay and J.C. Cox (Gloucester, 1986)
Dockray	*Three Chronicles of the Reign of Edward IV*, ed. K. Dockray (Gloucester, 1988)
Dunham, *Hastings*	W.H. Dunham, *Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers 1461–83,*

	Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 39 (New Haven, 1956)
EHD	*English Historical Documents*, vol. 4, *1327–1485*, ed. A.R. Myers (1969)
EHR	*English Historical Review*
English Chronicle	*An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI*, ed. J.S. Davies (Camden Society 64, 1856)
English Parliament	*The English Parliament in the Middle Ages*, ed. R.G. Davies and J.H. Denton (Manchester, 1981)
Fane Fragment	*The Fane Fragment of the 1461 Lords' Journal*, ed. W.H. Dunham (New Haven, 1935)
Fifteenth-cent. Attitudes	*Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. R.E. Horrox (Cambridge, 1994)
Fifteenth-cent. England	*Fifteenth-century England 1399–1509: Studies in Politics and Society*, ed. S.B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross and R.A. Griffiths (Manchester, 1972)
Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*	*Chronicles of the Revolution 1397–1400*, ed. C. Given-Wilson (Manchester, 1993)
Given-Wilson, *Nobility*	C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Later Middle Ages* (2nd edn, 1996)
Green, *Truth*	R.F. Green, *The Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia, 1999)
Griffiths,'For the might of the land'	'"Ffor the myght off the lande, aftir the myght off the grete lordes thereof, stondith most in the kynges officers": the English crown, provinces and dominions in the fifteenth century', *Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. A.E. Curry and

	E. Matthew (Woodbridge, 2000)
Griffiths, *Henry VI*	R.A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI, 1422–61* (1981)
Griffiths, *King and Country*	R.A.Griffiths, *King and Country: England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century* (1991)
Griffiths, 'King's Council'	'The King's Council and the First Protectorate of the Duke of York, 1450–54', *King and Country: England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century* (1981)
Harl 433	*British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, ed. R.E. Horrox and P.W. Hammond (4 vols, Upminster, 1979–83)
Harriss, 'Political Society'	G.L. Harriss, 'Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England', *Past and Present* 138 (1993): 28–57
Harvey, *Cade*	I.M.W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford, 1991)
Harvey, 'Popular Politics'	I.M.W. Harvey, 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. R.H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard (Stroud, 1995)
Henry V	*Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*, ed. G.L. Harriss (Oxford, 1985)
Hicks, *Clarence*	M.A. Hicks, *False, Fleeting, Perjur'd Clarence: George Duke of Clarence 1449–78* (rev. edn, Bangor, 1992)
Hicks, *Rivals*	M.A. Hicks, *Richard III and his Rivals: Magnates and their Motives during the Wars of the Roses* (1991)
Hicks, *Warwick*	M.A. Hicks, *Warwick the Kingmaker* (Oxford, 1998)
HPT	*History of Parliament: The Commons 1386–1421*, ed. J.S. Roskell, L. Clark and C. Rawcliffe

	(4 vols, 1992)
HR	*Historical Research*
Ingulph	*Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*, ed. H.T. Riley (1859)
James	M.E. James, *Society, Politics and Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986)
Lander	J.R. Lander, *Crown and Nobility 1450–1509* (1976)
McFarlane, *England*	K.B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century* (1981)
McFarlane, *Nobility*	K.B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973)
McFarlane Legacy	*The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*, ed. R.H. Britnell and A.J. Pollard (Stroud, 1995)
Myers	*The Household of Edward IV: The Black Book and the Ordinance of 1478*, ed. A.R. Myers (Manchester, 1959)
Original Letters	*Original Letters illustrative of English History*, ed. H. Ellis (11 vols, in four series, 1824–46)
Paston L & P	*Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. N. Davis (2 vols, Oxford, 1971–6)
Plumpton L & P	*Plumpton Letters and Papers*, ed. J.L. Kirby (Camden 5th series viii, 1998)
POPC	*Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council*, ed. N.H. Nicolas, (7 vols, 1834–7)
'Private Indentures'	'Private Indentures for Life Service in Peace and War 1278–1476', ed. M. Jones and S. Walker, *Camden Miscellany* 32 (1994)
PRO	Public Record Office, London
Revolution and Consumption	*Revolution and Consumption in Late Medieval England*, ed. M.A. Hicks (Woodbridge, 2001)

RP	*Rolls of Parliament* (6 vols, 1767–77)
Rulers and Ruled	*Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England*, ed. R.E. Archer and S.K. Walker (1995)
Stonor L & P	*Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290–1483*, ed. C.L. Kingsford, (Camden 3rd series 29, 30, 1919); *Camden Miscellany* 13 (1924)
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
Vale	*The Politics of Fifteenth Century England: John Vale's Book*, ed. M.L. Kekewich, C.F. Richmond, A.F. Sutton, L. Visser-Fuchs and J.L. Watts (Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, Stroud, 1995)
Virgoe	R. Virgoe, *East Anglian Society and the Political Community of Late Medieval England*, ed. C. Rawcliffe, C.M. Barron and J.T. Rosenthal (Norwich, 1997)
Watts, *Henry VI*	J.L. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge, 1996)

1

PARAMETERS

The Wars of the Roses were the longest military and political upheaval between King Stephen and Charles I. Did the Wars result from fundamental weaknesses in the social and political systems? Or did they mark merely the lowest point in two centuries of under-performance? In actuality they were a wholly exceptional epoch. A deep economic recession ('The Great Slump 1440–1480')[1] and consequent royal impoverishment coincided with unprecedented foreign intervention and popular unrest, which would have strained any political system, however strong and healthy it was. The crisis headlines in the textbooks overlook the underlying harmony and stability. Central government, local government, the judicial system and the economy operated throughout uninterrupted and indeed almost unimpaired. It was not that fifteenth-century England was in turmoil bar a few brief interludes of peace, but that only occasionally and only briefly was normal life disrupted by political crises. It is the systems rather than the events that are the subject of this book.

Behind every system lies the people, perhaps two millions strong, who comprised and contributed to society both individually and in the mass. Society is always shaped by its members, who formulate and constantly modify its rules, which in turn shape, channel and eventually constrain human energies. Such structures are themselves slowly modified in arrears to fit contemporary realities as society gradually evolves. When any society outgrows the rules, the rules have to be altered. Such was the case in fifteenth-century England.

Any political system is a facet of society. Although ostensibly authoritarian and hierarchical, the English monarchy depended on the consent both of its greatest subjects – the magnates, aristocracy and urban oligarchies that comprised the politically active nation – and increasingly of the commons as well. No English king could outrage the values and expectations of these groups and survive. Royal government and

royal laws evolved alongside society, more frequently through agreement in parliament and through the actual practice of enforcement and neglect than through violence and revolution.

The fifteenth century in England was a phase within long-lived political and social systems that lasted for many centuries, that already existed by the twelfth century and continued into the seventeenth and even beyond. 'Relatively little structural change took place in English society between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries', wrote Professor Stone long ago. Even the English Revolution, Professor Laslett implied, marked no serious break: 'a national social revolution' was 'not in question in the seventeenth century'.[2] It makes sense to consider the central social organisation of bastard feudalism over the five centuries 1150–1650 and to argue that the boundaries at each end are artificial and could be extended.[3] The pre-industrial economy and its attendant society make sense up to the Industrial Revolution of the mid-eighteenth century. No sharp or permanent changes in social and political systems within these centuries were more significant than the continuities uniting them. This is not to say that the Wars of the Roses or the mid-fifteenth-century slump did not matter, but that they failed to break the mould and to institute long-term fundamental change. Neither politics nor society could be static. The structures inherited in 1399 were transmitted to Tudor historians somewhat modified, yet remained familiar enough to Shakespeare and the audiences of his history plays. Contained within this book, therefore, there is a concept of progress, as what was inherited very slowly alters, but not a notion of progress with a moral component, a defined ending, determined theme, or inevitable objective. The present is not better than the past. Even our own present is being rapidly superseded.

The terminal dates that this book observes are 1399 and 1509. These mark important political events, not structures, for which relevant timespans are longer and merge gradually into something else rather than change sharply at precise moments. Historians, however, need definitions and boundaries if they are to understand the past and to communicate that understanding to others. They have to impose limits to their discussions if they are not to become too broad to be meaningful. Hence the dates to which this book is confined, the long fifteenth century that has become hallowed by custom, at least for late medieval historians.

2

POLITICAL CULTURE

Past political cultures

Late medieval people were like ourselves. We have not evolved. Mankind has undergone no discernible biological change since written history began, let alone over the past five centuries. It follows that we can empathise with our fifteenth-century predecessors, imagine ourselves in their situation, and understand why they acted as they did. We appreciate that the past differs from the present: the circumstances, the context, have changed. It seems much more than a century ago that 'great household was still a most potent force in every aspect of the English life'.[1] If the rural Gloucestershire of his youth in the 1920s had become a lost world to Laurie Lee thirty years on,[2] how much more striking (if gradual) have been the transformations from medieval to modern. Researching past circumstances is what historians and archaeologists are for. Once the facts are established, as they generally are, we can place ourselves in our fifteenth-century predecessors' shoes, we can locate ourselves in their England, we can reconstruct and understand what they were going through, and why they behaved as they did. Professor Richmond's twenty-year immersion in the *Paston Letters* revealed that 'the parameters of the political culture' were 'much the same, resemble closely [and were] more or less synonymous with those of our political culture'.[3] We too can be late medieval magnates. Clad in appropriate armour, bearing bows and arrows, on the correct site and briefed precisely on events, we can re-enact the Wars of the Roses and even improve on the results. Some of us do.

'Here we deceive ourselves. We have fallen into a common fallacy. 'Our characteristic failing … is the complete inability to meet the past on its own terms and value it for its own sake.'[4] Assuming that medieval notions of contract were like our own 'is extremely dangerous', writes Professor Green. 'The longer I have worked on the Middle Ages the more alien and remote they have come to seem to

be.'[5] Even professional historians seldom agree what the facts and events mean. Our subjects did not help us. 'For much of the medieval period', K.B. McFarlane wrote, 'the evidence for motive is almost entirely lacking.' We lack the statements of motive that can be taken for granted even for the Tudor era that immediately follows. We therefore deduce intentions from actions. Such deductions are inevitably crude, over-simplified and reductionist. Too often they are expressed in cynical terms of material self-interest and self-preservation. Rampant individualists, even in our society, are conditioned by values and social norms. Of course such material considerations mattered to fifteenth-century people; but what they saw as materially vital, such as the continuance of their family names and titles or the salvation of their souls, were not necessarily what we expect today. We must not presume that late medieval motives were less complex and late medieval people more consistent than we are today.

The application of third-millennium assumptions or commonsense to past scenarios seldom explains what actually happened. Even commonsense or reason has changed its meaning, so that what our medieval predecessors thought reasonable often appears to us perverse. 'Though to modern minds apparently spurious', their arguments were 'rational in terms of criteria that were familiar to the authors'.[6] The reverse also applies. Twenty-first-century judgements are too often anachronistic. Almost every day politicians and broadcasters denounce some aspect of our present as medieval, usually out of ignorance. Fifteenth-century England, its society and politics, bastard feudalism and the Wars of the Roses, its leaders and people have too often attracted hostile historians whose preconceptions prevent them from understanding the past on its own terms. 'This means that now, as never before' – and how much truer is this now than of 1959! – 'there is a danger of underestimating the importance of aristocratic and hier-archical principles in English history ... of aristocratic leadership and the great household before the twentieth century.'[7] Worse than that, for some 'it is only a matter for indignation' that the great had such thickly staffed households or a reasonable presumption 'that aristocrats were an antipathetic group of superfluous parasites'. Was chivalry more than 'a polite veneer' or 'loyalty chiefly a literary device, only active ... when self-interest (or mutual interest) binds man and lord together'? Most historians approve of Henry VII's despoliation of his nobility and Edward IV's destruction of his brother Clarence. Such prejudices can be multiplied, creeping even into apparently sympathetic histories – for no historian, however hard he tries, can wholly exclude his own age from his work – and get in the way of historical understanding.

Perhaps present-minded assertions that 'gentlemen behave badly' and even 'that dukes will throw their weight about'[8] are relevant to us today – the author knows no dukes – but they are valueless as keys to the cultures of the past. 'We fail to realise that at the time these things seemed both natural and momentous', lamented Professor Myers, and thus 'miss an important element in the spirit of the age and the dynamic forces of its society'.[9] When we deduce from first principles, still more when we resort to modern political prejudices, our assumptions diverge radically from those of the fifteenth century; and so too, consequently, do our conclusions.

The past is not separated from the present merely by physical and material conditions, by facts and figures, but by the whole climate of ideas. We cannot bridge this divide merely by reconstructing the context. We need to enter the spirit of the age: the first principles that operated within the set of circumstances that we have indeed established by our research and which caused our subjects, so often, to act differently from ourselves. 'The first and greatest task of a historian', wrote Namier, revealingly quoted by Carpenter, 'is to understand the terms in which men of a different age thought and spoke and the angle from which they viewed life and society'.[10] We have too easily discounted ideas and principles as primary sources of motivation.

Monty Python's Terry Jones strikingly illustrates the point. Roman attitudes to gladiators contrast with those current today. If 'the idea of killing living creatures for sport horrifies a lot of people today', how much more shocking is gladiatorial combat, which made a public spectacle of murder and which everyone would condemn.

> Go back those 2,000 years and the reverse is true. There is not a single Roman writer who condemns the business of public killing in the gladiatorial games … The Romans believed that it was beneficial to watch people being killed. Not just good entertainment, but morally valuable. It made people into better Romans.

Today we empathise with hunted foxes and would pity doomed gladiators.

> We think that compassion is one of the noblest human virtues – that, in fact, you can measure the quality of a civilised society by its level of compassion for the weak, the poor, for those who suffer. By that standard, Rome may not deserve to be called civilised at all, because in the ancient city compassion

was regarded as a moral defect. Seneca, the stern voice of Roman republican virtue, said it was an emotion that 'belonged to the worst sort of people – old women and silly females'.

Terry Jones exaggerated,[11] but his point holds good. Between the Romans and ourselves there lie not merely differences in intellectual principles but the values that permeate whole societies and civilisations. There is a cultural gulf. Fifteenth-century England was also a culture quite different from our own.

Direct avowals of motive do matter. There always were political and constitutional principles, convictions and beliefs that were consciously formulated and expressed, that impelled people into action, and for which, in the last resort, they were willing to die, in battle or at the stake. We should not doubt their force because we cannot share them. They are the tip of that iceberg of ideas that make fifteenth-century culture so alien to ourselves. There was an accepted constitutional framework within which politicians thought and acted, but political and constitutional ideas were never the sole source of political motivation or even of primary importance. Self-conscious principles are no more important in determining conduct than the unconscious and even subconscious ideas that condition them or, indeed, combat them or insidiously undermine them. Standards and prejudices instilled in childhood may predispose or even predetermine one's political stance as an adult. Already there was a culture of childhood[12] that may well have underpinned much that followed. We need also to allow for all those values and standards, criteria, assumptions and misconceptions, perceptions, attitudes and prejudices, conventions, customs and manners, myths, expectations and aspirations, sentiments and even instincts across the whole range of human experience from military prowess to potty-training. If human nature remains constant, much that we take to be natural and biological turns out to be culturally engendered. Even emotions and feelings, such as Terry Jones' compassion or love for another human, are shaped by nurture, by formal education, example, social contact and environment. Our sense of humour and our sense of the pathetic are cultural phenomena specific to our own era.

What makes up a culture embraces the whole range of intangible notions that we all carry around in our heads. Some notions have long and learned academic pedigrees, which may well have escaped the majority of users. Most are inchoate and imprecisely formulated, many are potentially contradictory, and all are influenced by circumstances

and vary from individual to individual. They certainly go beyond the 'ordering, rationalising, contextualising, and articulating of *conscious* thought'.[13] Fully to comprehend fifteenth-century politics, society and culture, we must assimilate all these notions, which is obviously impossible. We cannot psycho-analyse the dead.

Let us consider as illustration our families, into which we are all born and which we all take for granted. Today we presume a free choice of wedding partner by mature and consenting adults (the love match), monogamous marriage (one wife or one husband at a time), commitment to life-long marriage (until death us do part), the establishment of a separate household on marriage, the nuclear family of conjugal couple and offspring, breeding exclusively within wedlock, and remarriage on the death of a partner. Whilst we are aware of other societies that do things differently, that practise polygamy, child-marriages and arranged marriages, we consider their practices inferior, wrong, sinful or even illegal. Our society and our law discriminates against unmarried cohabitees, incest, bastards, wife-beaters, child-abuse and bigamists. Despite galloping changes, such as divorce on demand, sexual liberation, universal contraception, artificial restraints on family size (2.4 children) and a growing acceptance of gay partnerships, marriage and parenthood, most people still regard our inherited conventions as normal and correct. Yet that is what is being discussed here in a fifteenth-century context: not human nature, biology, hormones or instincts, but conventions, which society once developed and which society can change; conventions that apply to our western society and that interlock. Britain today and fifteenth-century England share the convention of late marriage, normally between mature adults in their twenties and long after puberty, from which most of the other conventions listed above stem and with which they interact, which still differentiate our society from those with different practices elsewhere both now and in the past.[14] Neither we nor fifteenth-century people think or thought about such matters very much. We take them for granted, presume them, infer from them, and act on them.

Conceptions of the family shape most aspects of the lives of its members and their relations with other families, larger units and even the state itself. A monarchical system has the royal family at its centre, is presided over by the head of that family who combines or has combined the roles of husband, father, brother and son (or female equivalent), and imposes administrative, financial and military obligations on the heads of every other family. Within the broad similarities of the families of today and yesteryear, however, there are differences over five centuries. Thus aristocratic marriages, even between mature

adults, were normally arranged and teenage marriages were common-place. Child labour was normal and most adolescents were boarded as servants with other families.[15] A lower life-expectancy made for short marriages, many step-parents and orphans, more children per family but a higher wastage among them, relatively few – and younger – old people. There were variations between classes and regions and over time. Similar conventions in different cultures can produce different results.

Whilst the family is a fundamental building block of society, even this brief consideration indicates how extensive were its ramifications and the range of conventions that governed its operation and hence those aspects of society with which it interacted. No consideration has yet been given to the related issues of morality, upbringing and accul-turation, gender, lineage and inheritance. A dozen attitudes were explored by Dr Horrox's team in 1994 – attitudes to government, law, the aristocracy, service, religion, education and advancement, informa-tion and science, women, urban society, rural society, the poor, and death: in each case there was not one attitude to be considered, but many.[16] Yet those examined scarcely scratched the surface. What about attitudes towards children and foreigners, to trade and war, contempo-rary senses of the past and patriotism? If there was indeed 'a culture of childhood',[17] surely there was a culture of old age, a teenaged or adolescent culture too? If the English 'very thoroughly believe in prophecies, phantoms and witchcraft', which seemed at times to provide a rational explanation of the present and a hope for the future, if Chief Justice Fortescue was serious about alchemy's capacity to cure and enrich his king, and if all sorts of things had symbolic meaning as tokens, these are Pandora's boxes not for exploration here.[18] And there was also change over time: not just a state, but a 'growth of "legal consciousness"' which 'shaped people's values, beliefs and aspi-rations and … [influenced] political attitudes'.[19]

It is probably impracticable to reconstruct the full range of ideas current even today and certainly impossible for the past. This book does not attempt the task. Nor does it attempt to assign ideas to particular pigeonholes, as values, assumptions, prejudices, principles, etc. Our predecessors were not machines, who imbibed a common culture with their mother's milk and applied it the same way. Their responses varied; they even reacted against it, both in identical and contrasting circumstances. No book can analyse a whole culture. This one confines itself to political society and hence a more manageable range of ideas. The total remains impressive nonetheless and only some

ideas can be considered, some in what immediately follows, yet others more appropriately in chapters to which they relate.

Categories of ideas

The range of ideas is enormous and beyond satisfactory categorisation, yet arrangement into categories is a necessary preliminary to rational discussion.

The first category can be dismissed summarily. It consists of those ideas that are not political. Most ideas in most periods are not primarily political and hence do not demand extended treatment here. Superstition, a mother's love for her children, fear of darkness, squeamishness, and respect for the aged are obvious examples. However most ideas have the potential to affect political principles and indeed political conduct under certain circumstances, particularly if politicians promoted or offended established norms, as some of the examples in the second category demonstrate.

Second are all those ideas that are not primarily political, but which nevertheless have political implications. Religion, arguably the most important, constitutes a whole system, a framework for everything else, and incorporates many facets that bear not at all on politics. Only parts of it are discussed below. Just as fundamental in quite different ways are attitudes towards women and the concepts of worship and service, which underpinned all areas of life including politics, but only occasionally impinged directly on it and determined political behaviour.

Together these dwarf the third category, those ideas that are overtly political: what are normally categorised as political and constitutional theory. Political historians cannot restrict themselves to these. Several key concepts are discussed below: many others are taken up in subsequent sections.

Religion

Sophisticated modern historians find it hard to engage with medieval religion – its literalness, pervasiveness and immediacy. It is still more difficult for those who are not christian or religious at all. Yet engagement with medieval religion is inescapable. It was pervasive and touched every aspect of social behaviour. Christianity was the principal and perhaps the sole religion in western Europe, otherwise known as Christendom. It was a complex system of beliefs to which everybody subscribed or acquiesced. The christian Church was at one level the congregation of the faithful, the sum total of many millions