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John of Salisbury

Policraticus

EDITED AND

TRANSLATED BY

CARY J. NEDERMAN

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JOHN OF SALISBURY

Policraticus

*Of the Frivolities of Courtiers
and the Footprints
of Philosophers*

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

CARY J. NEDERMAN

*Department of Political Science
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521363990

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First published 1990
Seventh printing 2007

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

John, of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres. d. 1180.

[Policraticus. English]

Policraticus: of the frivolities of courtiers and the footprints of philosophers
edited and translated by Cary J. Nederman.

p. cm. – (Cambridge texts in the history of political thought)
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-36399-3. – ISBN 0-521-36701-8 (pbk.)

1. Political science – Early works to 1800. 2. Education of
princes. 1. Nederman, Cary J. II. Title. III. Series.

JC121.J5813 1990

320'.01–dc20 89-22327 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-36399-0 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-36701-1 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2009

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Acknowledgements

Many people have given generously of their time and knowledge to improve and refine this translation. My greatest debt is to my research assistant, Ms Sarah Crichton, who read every word of the English text and suggested significant changes to and reformulations of my renderings of John's words; the value of her intelligence and good humour can never be adequately calculated or repaid. Friends and colleagues throughout the world lent practical aid and moral support at crucial moments, including Professor Kate Forhan, Ms Allison Holcroft, Dr Katherine Keats-Rohan (whose forthcoming critical edition of the *Policraticus* is eagerly awaited), Dr David Denemark, and Professor Quentin Skinner. While all of these people have in some way made this a better translation, none are to be held responsible for any of its flaws. Thanks are also due to Ms Susan van de Ven, who copy-edited the text, and Miss Catherine E. J. Campbell, who prepared the index. Finally, I owe a considerable debt to my colleagues in the Political Science Department at the University of Canterbury for their exemplary patience and support and to the University itself, which defrayed expenses associated with this work out of its Minor Research Grant programme.

This book is dedicated to two teachers, friends and, for a brief time, colleagues who in all these capacities fuelled my interest in medieval political thought: Neal Wood and the late John Brückmann. The present volume is but small thanks for their efforts to challenge and extend the horizons of my learning.

Editor's introduction

John of Salisbury's *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers* is commonly acclaimed as the first extended work of political theory written during the Latin Middle Ages. At approximately 250,000 words in length, the *Policraticus* is however far more than a theoretical treatise on politics. It is equally a work of moral theology, satire, speculative philosophy, legal procedure, self-consolation, biblical commentary and deeply personal meditation. In sum, the *Policraticus* is the philosophical memoir of one of the most learned courtier-bureaucrats of twelfth-century Europe. The title *Policraticus*, a pseudo-Greek neologism, itself seems to have been invented by John in order to convey the implication of classical learning and erudition as well as to capture the political content of the work.

Because of the diversity of John's interests, the reader must take care to approach the *Policraticus* without reference to current disciplinary boundaries. It is anachronistic to ignore or exclude from consideration those sections of the *Policraticus* which do not meet strict contemporary criteria for political theory. Indeed, even John's conception of what constitutes the realm of the political was different from a modern one, a fact which is reflected in the substance of his writing. Yet if we acknowledge the distance of his fundamental assumptions from our own, we can learn much about the political attitudes and beliefs of medieval Europe as well as about the origins of many of our own cherished political and social values.

Biography

John was born at Old Sarum (the former site of Salisbury) in England between 1115 and 1120. Specific knowledge of his family background and early life is scant; we know in detail only about a brother, Richard, and a half-brother, Robert, both of whom held offices within the English church. The first date we can safely associate with John is 1136, when he travelled to Paris to study at Mont-Saint-Geneviève. The list of his teachers during the ensuing dozen years includes many of the great minds of the mid-twelfth century. He received instruction at one time or another from Peter Abelard, Robert of Melun, William of Conches, Thierry of Chartres, Adam de Petit Pont, Gilbert of Poitiers, Robert Pullan and others; his studies encompassed speculative philosophy, rhetoric, linguistic theory, literature and theology.

Like so many other educated churchmen of his era, John chose an active career in the corridors of power rather than life in the cloister or the school. He joined the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury, a vocal and energetic advocate of the rights of the English church, in 1147. In his capacity as secretary to Theobald, John was an omniscient bureaucrat: he composed the Archbishop's letters, advised him on legal and political affairs, travelled to the Continent as an archiepiscopal envoy, and altogether lived in the manner of a trusted intimate.

Because Theobald's court attracted many clerics with training and experience similar to John's own, he could continue to indulge his intellectual pursuits in a sympathetic environment at Canterbury during the 1140s and 1150s. John seems to have been a member of a small circle of learned bureaucrats whose members included Thomas Becket, the future martyr, a trusted servant of Theobald's before he was appointed as King Henry II's Chancellor in 1155. It was this circle of like-minded men that constituted the immediate audience for much of John's writing. The *Policraticus*, for instance, is not only dedicated to Becket but often addresses him personally about current events or personalities.

John's activities on behalf of the Archbishop brought him into contact with some of the most powerful and prominent men of twelfth-century Europe. He was present at the Roman curia for many crucial occurrences during the pontificate of Eugenius III (1145–

1153), four years of which he would later chronicle in his *Historia Pontificalis*. He enjoyed a warm friendship with his fellow countryman Nicholas Breakspear, who ascended the papal throne as Adrian IV in 1154. The *Policraticus* often relates stories and sayings derived from its author's interviews with Adrian, with whom John was sufficiently intimate to raise criticisms of the conduct of the papal curia.

John was also well acquainted with important figures in twelfth-century secular life, especially the young Henry II (1153–1189). He had supported Henry's side in the struggle against the partisans of King Stephen (1135–1153) during the period of English history known as the Anarchy. His later writings reveal a consistent horror of civil war of the sort engendered by Stephen's usurpation of the throne. John was, however, sufficiently vocal in his opposition to Henry's policies towards the English church to be banished from court during 1156 and 1157. Although he was to recover favour with his monarch, he acquired a lingering scepticism about Henry's motives which was to be confirmed by later events.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that when Becket became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, John backed his friend's cause against the English crown. He consequently spent much of the 1160s in exile, either in France or at the papal court, lobbying on behalf of Becket and against Henry and the English bishops who backed the King. Yet as the large body of his correspondence dating from this period testifies, John felt no more comfortable with Becket's zealotry than with Henry's repressiveness. His letters often adopt an independent line and express a willingness to compromise with Henry which is in marked contrast with Becket's intransigence.

The murder of Becket did not deprive John of his career at Canterbury. Yet while he served the English church in numerous capacities during the early 1170s, and was consecrated Bishop of Chartres in 1176 (a post in which he seems to have achieved little), his waning years were peaceful and restrained after his intrigues during the era of Theobald and Becket. He died at Chartres in 1180 and is buried in the abbey church of Notre-Dame-de-Josaphat.

John of Salisbury's literary output falls broadly into two categories. On the one hand, he composed several treatises of considerable philosophical interest, most notably the *Policraticus*, but also the *Entheticus de Dogmate Philosophorum* (or *Entheticus Major*), a satirical poem about philosophers and courtiers, and the *Metalogicon*, an

important discussion of pedagogy and speculative philosophy. These works all date from about the period between 1154 and 1159. By contrast, John's writings of an historical nature – the *Historia Pontificalis* and most of his letters, as well as his lives of St Anselm and Becket – were composed later in his career, during or after his association with Becket. This should not be taken as evidence that he lost interest in scholastic or theoretical disputes. On the contrary, his historical writings (and indeed many of the crucial decisions of his administrative career) often represented practical applications of the principles he had already articulated in a philosophical form. Above all, it was a constant concern to unify theory and practice that constituted the hallmark of John's political and intellectual life.

The *Policraticus*: textual history

The arrangement of the text of the *Policraticus* as we know it today does not seem to reflect either the order of its composition or the development of John's interests. John's earliest effort to treat many of the themes ultimately addressed in the *Policraticus* may be found in the *Entheticus Major*, so-called because John prefaced the *Policraticus* with another shorter and quite different poem also called *Entheticus*. Probably composed between 1154 and 1156, the *Entheticus Major* satirises many of the foibles of princes and courtiers, compares them to the standards set by the ancient philosophers, and lays down a new code of conduct for the intellectual Christian man of affairs.

What the *Entheticus Major* lacked, of course, was sustained philosophical argument of the sort found in the *Policraticus*. Thus in 1156 or 1157, during his period of self-proclaimed 'disgrace' when he was exiled from Canterbury due to Henry II's anger, John began to write a prose work which attempted to demonstrate the foundations of the good life for man and to demystify the false images of happiness propounded by those of his contemporaries who unwittingly advocated the hedonistic doctrines of Epicureanism. This treatise, which represented a sort of self-consolation (perhaps modelled on Boethius's 'Consolation of Philosophy') in a time of political disfavour, came to form the bulk of the chapters in books VII and VIII of the *Policraticus*.

After his recall to Theobald's household, John seems to have undertaken to transform his self-consolatory meditation into a full-

fledged volume of advice to his fellow clerical bureaucrats about how to avoid potential misfortunes of life at secular and ecclesiastical courts. In particular, such concerns apparently stimulated John to compose the more overtly political sections of the *Policraticus* (books IV, V and VI) in which he articulates a theory of government and society which, if realised, would better preserve the physical and spiritual safety of civil servants like himself as well as their princes and subjects. John thereby broadened his concern from the good life for the individual man to the good life for the entire political body. The completion of the *Policraticus* in its final form is dated, on both internal and external evidence, to the middle of 1159.

Sources

Like most works of medieval philosophy, the *Policraticus* depends heavily upon authoritative sources as a means for extending and enhancing its arguments. Thinkers like John believed that the case for a specific claim was strengthened not only by rational demonstration but also by the antiquity and the eminence of the authorities one could adduce in support of it. Thus we encounter throughout the *Policraticus* extensive quotations from and citations of both pagan and Christian sources.

John's most important authority, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, is Holy Scripture. While his careful and often subtle use of biblical imagery and texts reveals a thorough knowledge of both Testaments, he manifests a clear preference throughout the *Policraticus* for the Old Testament, especially the books of the prophets and of wisdom. At times, the *Policraticus* even engages in extended biblical commentary. Much of book V, for instance, is taken up with exegesis of a passage from Job, by means of which John demonstrates the salient features of the good ruler.

John is also conversant with the Fathers of the Latin Church and other early Christian authors. The *Policraticus* displays a particular fondness for St Augustine and St Jerome, and for the historical writings of Orosius, but there are few available writers of the patristic age whom John fails to cite. By contrast, he is more hesitant in referring to the writings of his contemporaries; Bernard of Clairvaux is the only recent figure upon whose work the *Policraticus* explicitly draws with regularity. More commonly, John mentions the doctrines

of contemporary thinkers by means of pseudonymous references, a technique which he employs throughout his corpus when he wishes to cloak the actual identity of his opponents.

The *Policraticus* is perhaps best known, however, for the number and range of its references to the texts and doctrines of pagan antiquity. Indeed, the scope of John's learning has often earned him the designation of the best read man of the twelfth century. John's classical education was particularly thorough in the areas of rhetoric, philosophy and poetry. He seems to have been familiar with all the available works of Cicero – although not, of course, with Cicero's two major works of political theory, *De re publica* and *De legibus*, whose ideas he knew only through Christian intermediaries like St Augustine. Likewise, John integrated into the *Policraticus* many citations from the major and minor Latin poets; among his favourites were Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, Lucan and Ovid.

Yet there are good reasons for doubting whether the breadth of John's classical quotations and allusions in the *Policraticus* was matched by a thorough acquaintance with the texts to which he refers. It has been demonstrated, for instance, that his use of passages from the pagan historians Gellius, Suetonius and Frontinus does not reflect direct exposure to their writings. Rather, John relied on *florilegia* (or books of extracts) compiled by later editors which were readily available to him at the Canterbury Cathedral library. Hence, John's classical learning was not as extensive as a cursory reading of the *Policraticus* might suggest.

Of the philosophical and literary works of the Greeks, John knew little in comparison with later centuries; like virtually all Western men of his time, he read no Greek. He could acknowledge the bare existence of Homer, Herodotus, Pythagoras and Socrates, and he was occasionally able to ascribe specific doctrines to them. He knew some of Plato's thought by means of an available Latin translation of and commentary on the *Timaeus*. Perhaps most importantly, John was closely attuned to the reintroduction of Aristotle's writings into the Latin West, a process which is commonly said to have revolutionised medieval learning. He may have been one of the first in the Middle Ages to be familiar with the entirety of Aristotle's *Organon* (the six Aristotelian treatises on logic). Even though Aristotle's moral and political writings would not be circulated in Western Christendom until the thirteenth century, John was able to glean from the *Organon*

many important Aristotelian ideas (such as the doctrine of the golden mean and the psychology of moral character) which he incorporated into the social philosophy of the *Policraticus*.

Yet the general absence of classical models of politics created for John something of a dilemma, since his intellectual instincts resisted the postulation of innovative concepts unsupported by long-standing tradition. His solution is one that was not uncommon in the Middle Ages: he created a bogus authority – in essence, he perpetrated a forgery – in order to legitimise ideas which were otherwise original to him. The archetypal instance of this in the *Policraticus* is his reference to a work called the ‘Instruction of Trajan’, purportedly composed by the Roman imperial writer Plutarch. John attributes to this treatise many of the most significant and insightful features of his political theory, especially the claim that the political system can be analysed in detail as an organism or living body whose parts are mutually devoted to and dependent upon one another. In fact, the framework for the whole of books V and VI is allegedly borrowed from the ‘Instruction of Trajan’. Yet there is no independent evidence for the existence of a work by Plutarch (or some later Plutarchian imitator) as described by John, and when the ‘Instruction of Trajan’ is cited by authors subsequent to him, it is always on the basis of the report of the *Policraticus*. Hence, scholars now usually conclude that the ‘Instruction of Trajan’ was actually a convenient fiction fashioned by John as a cloak for that intellectual novelty so despised by the medieval cast of mind. Moreover, this gives us good reason to believe that when John refers to other unknown sources, he may be performing a similar sleight of hand upon his audience.

John's method: *exempla*

To the modern reader, one of the most peculiar features of the *Policraticus* is John's regular and prolonged use of *exempla*, that is, stories told to illustrate or exemplify a lesson or doctrine. Many chapters of the text are little more than a collection of such tales strung together with no apparent organisation or interconnection. The sources for these *exempla* vary widely: many are biblical, some derive from classical or patristic historians, and a few are even the products of John's own experiences at papal and royal courts. The complaint is sometimes heard that he is wholly unconcerned about

the actual historical significance – let alone the accuracy – of the stories and events he recounts. John's reliance upon *exempla* does not meet standards set by modern historical scholarship.

Yet the use of *exempla* must nevertheless be taken very seriously. The *Policraticus* is as much a work of moral edification as of philosophical speculation. It is intended to have practical relevance and value by imparting to John's contemporaries a code of conduct applicable to the unsettled circumstances of the clerical administrator. Thus, John's examples are oriented to the demonstration of how abstract principles of moral and political behaviour may be employed in everyday life. Like the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, the *exempla* of the *Policraticus* teach general lessons through concrete stories. Sometimes these lessons pertain to the translation of vicious or sinful beliefs into action, while at other times they illustrate the ways in which goodness and faith manifest themselves. But in all cases, John's *exempla* are meant to help the reader to bridge the gap between abstract moral discourse, on the one hand, and the actual conditions in which human beings find themselves, on the other.

Thematic unity of the *Policraticus*

Because it was composed over the course of many years and touches upon a bewildering array of topics and issues, the *Policraticus* might appear to be more a rambling and disjointed collection of stories and observations than a focussed and coherent piece of philosophical argument. But while on initial inspection this claim seems plausible, the careful reader will discern in the *Policraticus* a number of unifying elements which lend intellectual coherence to the treatise. In surveying these themes, we may begin to grasp the nature of John's contribution to Western modes of political discussion and debate.

Perhaps the most surprising theoretical feature of the *Policraticus*, at least when judged on the basis of current attitudes towards the Middle Ages, is John's treatment of the relationship between secular and spiritual spheres and powers. John is not strictly a 'hierocratic' thinker, if that term denotes the claim that all political authority flows from God through the Church to earthly rulers, so that the use of power is always to be regulated and limited by ecclesiastical officials. Instead, he permits secular government to be conducted without direct interference by the Church. Like the soul in the body, he

asserts, the priesthood fixes the general aims of the healthy political organism (namely, the conditions necessary for salvation). But the head of the body is responsible for ensuring and supervising the actual physical welfare of the organism as it pursues its path through life. Thus, there exists a common good within the community unique and distinct from, although conducive to, the ultimate spiritual end of salvation. It is the promotion of this common good – the realization of a just society on earth – that forms the primary temporal duty of princes and of all their subjects.

John's doctrine of the different but interrelated aims within the community parallels his teachings about moral goodness and personal happiness. As a Christian, he accepts that the ultimate goal of human existence is eternal life in the presence of God. But for him this does not diminish the importance of achieving goodness and happiness on earth. Rather, the *Policraticus* declares that men are morally bound to seek their own temporal fulfilment through the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of virtue; such a way of life, while it can never earn the gift of God's grace from which arises salvation, only confirms the completeness and joyfulness which is the special attribute of the faithful Christian. John consequently attempts to fuse classical and Christian values and to demonstrate a fundamental consistency between ancient moral philosophy and medieval Christian moral theology.

John believes that, at least so far as life on earth is concerned, men play an active role in creating their own happiness both as individuals and as political creatures. He claims that the political system must be guided by the principles of nature, which he regards as 'the best guide to living'. Yet nature does not strictly determine human behaviour. Rather, men must actively cooperate with nature by means of experience and practice. Human beings conform to the course suggested by nature, a feat which is accomplished by developing and perfecting their knowledge and virtue. This is true at the personal as well as the social level: just as humans cultivate their own individual qualities by improving upon their natural attributes through effort and education, so they achieve a well-ordered political community by acknowledging and performing the natural duties demanded by justice towards their fellow creatures. Nature may fix the path of the good life, but men must exercise their minds and wills so as to discover and follow this route.

It is obvious, then, that John's political and moral philosophies are inextricably interwoven. Nowhere is this more evident than in his notion of moderation. John contends in Aristotelian fashion that the golden mean is a structural feature of all the virtues which individual persons may acquire; justice, courage and the like are middle points between dual vices of excess and deficiency. For this reason, John insists throughout the *Policraticus* that while many sorts of conduct (such as hunting, banqueting, drinking, gaming and so on) are vicious if performed often or regularly, they may be condoned if done in moderation for the purpose of recreation. In sum, moderation is the touchstone of an ethically correct (and ultimately, happy) life. But moderation simultaneously constitutes the salient characteristic of the good ruler in the *Policraticus*. John's king exercises power in a moderate fashion, neither releasing his subjects wholly to the caprice of their own volition nor controlling their behaviour so strenuously that they become incapable of using their legitimate free will. Royal moderation is equivalent to respect for the proper sphere of liberty which belongs to each and every member of the political community. John stresses that even a zealous insistence upon the virtue of subjects is a violation of the terms of moderate government: the king accords his people a sufficient measure of personal liberty that they may commit errors, at least so long as their sins endanger neither the safety of orthodox faith nor the security of the temporal polity. For the ability of an individual to acquire his own virtue requires him to train and exercise his will, which means that he will make mistakes on occasion.

By contrast, immoderate conduct (especially that in excess of the mean) is regarded by John as the defining mark of tyranny. The discussion of tyranny is one of the best known and most influential features of the *Policraticus*. Unlike preceding classical and medieval authors, who conceived of tyranny purely in terms of the evil or destructive use of public authority, John identifies the tyrant as any person who weds the ambitious desire to curtail the liberty of others with the power to accomplish this goal. As a result, his theory of tyranny is generic in the sense that it permits the tyrant to emerge in any walk of life. Specifically, he catalogues three classes of tyrants: the private tyrant, the public tyrant and the ecclesiastical tyrant. Private tyranny occurs when any private person employs the authority allotted to him so as to dominate or limit the legitimate freedom of someone

else. The private variety of tyrant may appear in the household, the manor, the shire or anywhere that power is wielded. The suppression of private tyranny John assigns to royal government, since the king is charged with primary responsibility for the enforcement of law and the protection of all sections of the community.

When monarchic authority passes into the hands of an ambitious man, however, the form of tyranny becomes specifically public, in so far as the office of the prince differs from other forms of power in secular society. For the prince, as the pinnacle of temporal political organisation, represents both the ordinary assurance of the security and liberty of his subjects and the authoritative source of earthly law and jurisdiction within his realm. Thus, a public tyrant is inevitably accompanied by the destruction of the other parts of the community as well. In order to combat the threat of a public tyrant, John believes that the other members of the polity are charged with a duty – stemming from the principle of justice itself – to criticise, correct and, if necessary, even to kill a tyrannical ruler. Moreover, he takes this duty to be a generalised one: it pertains not merely to royal magistrates but to all segments of the body politic, since all are equally obligated (by their membership in society) to enforce the terms of justice.

The final category of tyranny – the ecclesiastical tyrant – is perhaps the most striking one to the modern reader. John devotes nearly as much attention in the *Policraticus* to the criticism of the behaviour of clerics and priests as of temporal political officials. In particular, he realises that there is great scope for churchmen to abuse their powers and hence to become ecclesiastical tyrants whose ambition for the offices and wealth of the church requires them to disregard the spiritual nourishment of the body of Christian believers. He is less forthcoming, however, about the appropriate method for the punishment of ecclesiastical tyrants. In general he prefers to leave such correction to the determination of the Roman pontiff, although he does acknowledge that once a cleric or priest has been stripped of ecclesiastical immunity he may be prosecuted for his crimes by earthly authorities. But of more significance, John's analysis draws theoretical force from its refusal to excuse any sphere in which power is exercised from the possibility of tyrannical conduct.

The key themes of the *Policraticus* in many ways reflect the concerns of twelfth-century political, intellectual and ecclesiastical

life. Indeed, John's very conception of philosophy compels us to examine his thought in relation to its historical circumstances. Throughout his writings, he stresses that philosophical inquiry ought not to be a specialised, dry and obscure pursuit, but rather an integral feature of an active and dutiful life within the political arena, a life devoted to the service of God and His children. In the conduct of his career, as well as in the political theory of the *Policraticus*, John sought above all to illustrate the principle that philosophy is an aid to achieving the good life of both the individual and the whole community. The vitality of John's political thought consists primarily of its confrontation with the practical demands of politics in relation to the requirements of living well in a moral and religious sense.

At the same time, John's work succeeds in making the philosophical analysis of politics more intellectually respectable to a medieval audience. The *Policraticus* aims to demonstrate that public affairs are not necessarily corrupt, but can instead be conducted in a philosophically satisfactory manner according to which human goodness and happiness are promoted and enhanced. Such a claim represents an important step towards the incorporation of political thought into the domain of speculative inquiry from which medieval writers had largely excluded it up to John's own day. The thirteenth century, with its full recovery of Aristotle's social and political philosophy, would complete this process. But one need not await the infusion of Aristotelian doctrines to discover an author for whom political philosophy is a worthwhile and coherent field of learning. John of Salisbury richly deserves a reputation for having restored the theoretical study of politics to a place of prominence in the intellectual system of the medieval West.