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Power and Fear in Philip IV's France

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The writing of much medieval political history has been dominated by what one might call a Weberian paradigm. For the sociologist Max Weber the gradual drift toward a greater "rationalisation" of human affairs, intellectual as well as political and economic, was central to his conception of history.¹ Weber believed that in the realm of politics and administration the inherent technical superiority of bureaucratic as opposed to other forms of organisation was one of the central facts of the sociology of politics.² One can see this Weberian paradigm unfolding in the classic book by J. R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*.³ The reader emerges from the pages of this book with the impression that European political history is the story of how the modern state struggled to reach its true form, which, although immanent in the medieval and early modern periods, was not fully realised. Strayer sees as essential to a modern state "impersonal, relatively permanent political institutions ... which allow a certain degree of specialisation in political affairs and thus increase the efficiency of the political process ..." The superior efficiency, rationality, and integrative capacity of these institutions explain their success. They not only allowed their masters to out-compete everyone else on the political scene, they also promoted the good of society as a whole.⁴ As Strayer puts it, "the state gave greater peace and security, more opportunity for the good life, than loose associations of communities".⁵

Although much of the political history of Europe in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries can be understood in this inter-

pretive framework, not all can. In the midst of the seemingly inevitable triumph of rationality, there were outbreaks of irrationality. One of the most striking of these was the emergence in the early fourteenth century of charges of fantastic evil-doing – demonolatry, magic, and sexual perversion – as a staple of the discourse of political conflict at the highest levels of European society.⁶

This was especially true of the reign of Philip IV of France, whose last years were marked by some spectacular eruptions of the fantastic onto the political scene. For example, in 1301 Philip arrested Bernard Saisset, the bishop of Pamiers.⁷ Although the principal charges against the bishop involved treason, Saisset was also accused of being a manifest heretic. He had spoken, so it was charged, against the sacrament of penance and maintained that fornication committed by people in holy orders was not a sin. He had also asserted that Pope Boniface VIII had acted against truth and justice in canonising Philip's grandfather, Louis IX, who was residing in Hell.⁸

The fantastic did not figure too prominently in Philip's prosecution of Bishop Saisset, but it was a principal part of the case against another bishop, Guichard of Troyes. Arrested in 1308, Guichard was accused of using black magic to bring about the death of Philip's wife, Queen Jeanne, in 1305. He was said to have prepared a poison compounded of toads, scorpions, and spiders with which to kill various princes of the realm.⁹ He had conjured up the Devil, who appeared in the form of a flying monk with horns on the front of his head.¹⁰ He was a heretic who had spat on the cross. He was a murderer, a thief, a simoniac, a sodomite, a usurer, a forger, and a counterfeiter. Most fantastic of all, he was said to be the son of an incubus that had impregnated his mother.¹¹

Philip also launched such accusations against Pope Boniface VIII. The pontiff was said to be *an open materialist, having no belief in the immortality of the soul, and holding that all happiness was found in this world; he does not believe in transubstantiation and never pays honour to the host during mass; he neglects all fasts; he refuses confession to prisoners, and forces clerks to reveal the secrets of the confessional; he has approved a book by Arnold of Vilanova, condemned as heretical by the University of Paris; he condones all sexual sins, and commits most of them; he keeps a private demon and consults sorcerers; he has clerks executed in his presence urging on the executioners; he murdered Celestine [his predecessor as pope] and imprisoned all who questioned his abdication; he makes money of everything and declares that the pope cannot be a simonist; he has caused the loss of the Holy Land through using the funds for other purposes: he breaks legal marriages and has made a married nephew a cardinal; he has set up silver images of himself in the churches, so that people should worship him; he treats all Frenchmen as Patarines; he has often repeated that he would gladly lose the church to ruin France, that he will make martyrs of all Frenchmen, and that he would rather be a dog or an ass than belong to that country.*¹²

Perhaps Philip's most famous victims were the Templars. Arrested en masse in October 1307 they were accused of denying Christ and spitting on his image during their reception into the order. During their reception they were also ordered to engage in sexual relations with other members of the order whenever required to do so. And finally they had turned to the worship of idols.¹³ The order was dissolved in 1312 by Pope Clement V while its grand master went to the stake in 1314.

Why were fantasy, fear, and power so closely linked in the early fourteenth century?¹⁴ Frankly admitting that this is speculation, this article suggests that some of the roots of this eruption of the fantastic into high politics lay in the glaring contradiction between the vaunting aspirations of early fourteenth-century rulers and the limited means at their disposal for accomplishing the actual tasks of government. Throughout western Europe kings had by the early fourteenth century made themselves the effective leaders of their polities. Much was now expected of them, but the tools they had with which to fulfil those expectations were limited. Philip's reign came at the end of a long period of institutional development of the French monarchy.¹⁵ But one should not exaggerate the sophistication or capabilities of his government. Its servants were few and its procedures relatively unsophisticated.

All in all, the French royal government scored low on what some political scientists would call the "autonomy of the state".¹⁶ By "autonomy of the state" is generally meant, first, the extent to which states can become social actors in their own rights, endowed with their own interests apart from those of any particular social class, and second, the capacity of the state to act contrary to the wishes of those classes that are socially and economically dominant.¹⁷ In some ways we can regard medieval royal governments as having a high degree of autonomy. Government was the personal responsibility of the king. Royal servants were the king's personal agents, freely chosen by him and answerable only to him. They thus may have had an unusually high capacity to act contrary to the interests of the politically and economically dominant classes. However, it can also be argued that the autonomy of the medieval state was relatively limited. Kings were definitely members of a particular social class, the land-owning aristocracy. Like all other aristocrats, their economic well-being depended primarily on their capacity to extract surplus from the peasants living on their estates. The techniques they used to exploit their estates did not differ qualitatively from those of other aristocrats. Kings thus shared the interests of the dominant class in a direct and personal fashion. Moreover, they were bound to other members of the aristocracy by many personal ties, including those of vassalage and marriage. They participated in an aristocratic culture that was largely closed to members of other classes. Finally, their governments were staffed primarily by members of the aristocracy.

Paradoxically the very systematisation and institutionalisation of royal power that took place during the thirteenth century also constrained the king's room for political manoeuvre. In the field of law and justice, for example, the king had the duty to do justice, but that duty was more and more circumscribed by precedent, ordinances, and the theorising of a self-conscious legal profession with a high regard for itself. If kings wanted to appear to rule "justly", there were bounds to what actions they could take. In short, the growth in the size of the kingdom and the sophistication of its government inevitably created a dense "web of resistance" to the desires and goals of an individual king.¹⁸

Philip was probably the most powerful king that France had seen, but his range of political manoeuvre was nevertheless constrained. And he had a lot of problems with which to deal. He and his policies were often fervently disliked. Perhaps nothing annoyed his subjects so much as his constant pursuit of cash. The expedients Philip devised to raise money alienated many, and

troubled his own conscience.¹⁹ The ferocious tactics used by royal commissioners to bring in the money at times more resembled brigandage than the orderly execution of a state duty.²⁰ Philip's efforts to shore up his financial position by manipulating the coinage were also highly unpopular. In 1306 the king's alteration of the value of the kingdom's coinage touched off riots in Châlons, Laon, and Paris. In Paris rioters forced Philip himself to take refuge in the Temple.²¹

Away from Paris in the countryside were royal servants who, few in number and at times isolated from one another, were commonly coerced, harassed, and defied. Two examples will suffice. In 1301 the royal *viguier* of Carcassonne set off into the hills of the county of Foix to levy a tax that had been authorised for the war in Flanders. He found the county's towns closed against him and arrayed as if for war. What money he did manage to raise, he lost, along with his mules, to an ambush by the count's *bayle*. In 1303 the royal *enquêteur* Jean de Picquigny, who had been sent south to investigate the behaviour of Bishop Saisset, was forced by riotous inhabitants of Carcassonne to remove prisoners held in the inquisitors' dungeons and lodge them in the royal prison, an act that earned him excommunication and the personal detestation of Pope Benedict XI.

Some of Philip's subjects may have questioned his fitness to rule. Bishop Saisset was reported to have said that Philip was the handsomest man in the world, but did nothing except stare at men.²² Bernard Délicieux, a Franciscan friar who led an anti-inquisitorial movement in the south of France in the first years of the fourteenth century, proclaimed that the king was more interested in money than justice. He was useless to his subjects, less a king than a pig who wanted nothing else than to be always with his wife.²³ Even within the ranks of dedicated supporters of the Capetian dynasty there were dark thoughts about the king. Jean de Joinville, companion and biographer of Louis IX, in a thinly veiled reference to Philip IV, wrote in his life of the sainted king that Louis' acts promised *great honour to those of his line who were like him in doing well, and equal dishonour to those descendants who did not choose to follow him in performing good works; great dishonour, indeed, to those of his line pursuing the paths of evil, since people would point to them and say that the sainted king from whom they were sprung would never have committed such evil.*²⁴

At a distance of seven centuries Philip may appear to have been a major architect of the French monarchy's governing structure, but to many of his subjects he, or at least his agents, appeared more like reiving brigands than the agents of a "most Christian king".²⁵

To summarise, to be the king of France in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was no easy task. Aspirations and expectations were grand, but the kingdom was an immense patchwork of individuals and institutions that hampered the king and his agents at practically every turn. Philip knew many successes, but he also knew many failures. His reign was a balancing act amidst a host of other power actors: great lords, churchmen, town governments, village communities, and his own nascent bureaucracy. The actual business of governing was messy and carried on in the face of obstructionism, foot-dragging, and endless petty, and sometimes not so petty, challenges.²⁶

In an environment where real men and women remained stubbornly resistant to efforts to rule them, combating and defeating fantastic enemies could have its advantages. By charging people with accusations of demonolatry, witchcraft, and heresy, Philip took on enemies that were at

once terrifying but powerless, since they were mere chimeras of the imagination. In this shadow realm of the fantastic and the imaginary, Philip could symbolically, dramatically, and above all, successfully, act out his crucial role in Christian society.

To do so, however, he and his advisors had to create what one political scientist has called a "zone of terror" within the French political process.²⁷ This article does not argue that Philip was a blood-stained tyrant. He clearly took his role as a sacral king seriously. He took care to portray himself as embodying the loftiest ideas of Christian kingship.²⁸ Philip himself declared that no other kingdom abounded in "such peace, such regard for justice, such prosperity, such happiness" as did France. This prosperity derived from "a highly developed regard for justice, from which in turn, by the grace of God, has come the fullness of our peace".²⁹

Clearly the overwhelming majority of Philip's interactions with his subjects fell within the conventional rules and legitimate techniques of early fourteenth-century politics. Indeed, as J. R. Strayer has put it, Philip was a sort of "constitutional" king who

*tried to conform to the traditions of the French monarchy and the practices of the French government. As far as possible, he governed the realm through a well-established system of courts and administrative officials. He always asked the advice of responsible men; he was influenced by that advice in working out the details of his general policy. He tried to stay at least within the letter of the law; he tried to observe the customs of the kingdom. When he had to go beyond established custom he always sought to justify his action and to obtain the consent of those who were affected.*³⁰

Philip certainly did not institute a regime of terror in the kingdom of France, in which everyone was caught up in one fashion or another in the terror process.³¹ In a few cases, however, his government relied heavily on force and fear. It is not surprising that many of these cases involved ecclesiastics, simultaneously key players in the French political system and members of a transnational hierarchy whose head was in Rome.

Whether or not Philip and his advisors believed in the accusations they brought against his enemies is impossible to know. But in a sense the charges of trafficking with demons, heresy, sodomy and idolatry brought against Saisset, Guichard of Troyes, Boniface VIII, and the Templars can be understood as examples of the "big lie". To prove that one is innocent, not only of an act that one has not committed, but that no one has ever committed, is, paradoxically, difficult.³² To the politically active part of the kingdom's population, the very outlandishness of the accusations may have made them more believable. For who would believe that the *rex christianissimus* would fabricate such accusations?³³

Moreover, the campaigns against these fantastic enemies helped portray the monarchy as competent and effective. Philip's real enemies – the Flemings, the English, angry taxpayers, etc. – were not so easy to deal with. Contending with them was a frustrating, protracted process, one in which it was difficult for a man to make himself appear a capable ruler. But once the king and his ministers escaped the trammels of reality and entered the world of fantasy, they fought

on terrain where victory was assured.³⁴ The advantage of fighting phantom enemies guilty of non-existent crimes is that there is no objective standard by which to judge whether or not they have actually been defeated.

Philip was fortunate in that he did not simply have to proclaim the guilt of his opponents. Legal developments in the thirteenth century had given him and other rulers a tool that allowed them to extract a confession from almost anyone. This was the procedure by inquisition, with its frequent recourse to torture. Moreover, in the case of the inquisition of heretical depravity, many of the normal procedural safeguards were ignored.³⁵ The ability of a judge to proceed with an investigation without a formal accusation being lodged against the suspect and to use torture enabled the king and his ministers to procure whatever admissions of guilt were needed. Many Templars, when given the opportunity of what they thought might be a fair hearing, claimed that their confessions were untrue and had been extracted from them by brutal means. The trappings of legality could be maintained while the accused were deprived of any effective means of demonstrating their innocence. Even the burning of those Templars who offered to defend the order before papal commissioners in Paris, an act that crushed effective resistance to the royal case among the surviving Templars, could be dressed in the mantle of legality.³⁶

The king's triumph over non-existent enemies may have been very satisfying to his subjects. Rulers, of course, undertake many concrete tasks, but much of what they do is theatrical. They strive not so much to achieve real effects as to demonstrate that right order prevails in the world, that the shared universe of moral values endures.³⁷ Philip, in pursuing his fantastic enemies, spectacularly reaffirmed the kingdom's solidarity and restored the sacred moral order.

Philip saw himself, and was seen by his subjects, as a sacral king. In reality he was a sacral king constrained on all sides by determined enemies and recalcitrant subjects; but in the realm of fantasy, he was invincible. By triumphing over chimerical enemies he could truly appear, at least for a few moments, to be that which the abbot of Cluny called him in 1294, "the leader of the cause of God and the church and the fighter for all of Christendom".³⁸

FOOTNOTES

- 1 H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford UP, 1946, p. 51.
- 2 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 2, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 973.
- 3 Joseph R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970.
- 4 Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins*, pp. 6–7.
- 5 Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins*, p. 10.

- 6 See William R. Jones, "Political Uses of Sorcery in Medieval Europe", *The Historian* 34 (1972), pp. 670–687, and Malcolm Barber, "Lepers, Jews and Moslems: The Plot to Overthrow Christendom in 1321", *History* 66 (1981), pp. 1–17.
- 7 J.-M. Vidal, "Bernard Saisset, évêque de Pamiers (1232–1311)", *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 5 (1925), pp. 416–38 and 565–90; 6 (1926), pp. 50–77, 177–98 and 371–93.
- 8 Pierre Dupuy, *Histoire du différend d'entre le pape Boniface VIII et Philippe le Bel roy de France*, Tucson: Audax, 1963 (1655), pp. 635, 638.
- 9 Abel Rigault, *Le Procès de Guichard, évêque de Troyes (1308–1313)*, Paris: Picard, 1896, pp. 81–9, 277.
- 10 Rigault, *Procès*, pp. 74–5.
- 11 Rigault, *Procès*, pp. 283–7.
- 12 This is Thomas S. R. Boase's summary of Guillaume de Plaisians' speech on 14 April 1303, in his *Boniface VIII*, London: Constable, 1933, pp. 333–334.
- 13 Georges Lizerand (ed), *Le Dossier de l'affaire des Templiers*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1964, pp. 16–29; Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978, p. 45.
- 14 For some interesting speculations, see Jacques Chiffolleau, "Dire l'indicible: remarques sur la catégorie du *nefandum* du XIIe au XVe siècle", *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 45:2 (1990), pp. 289–324.
- 15 A staple of textbook generalisations: see Elizabeth M. Hallam, *Capetian France, 987–1328*, London: Longman, 1980, pp. 156–61, 239–47, 291–7. See also Joseph R. Strayer, *The Reign of Philip the Fair*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980, pp. 100–236.
- 16 Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979, pp. 24–33.
- 17 Stephen D. Krasner, "Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics", *Comparative Politics* 16:3 (1984), pp. 230–240; Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984, pp. 54–5, 108–9, 200–2; Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. Timothy O'Hagan, London: Verso, 1973, pp. 255–321.
- 18 E. V. Walter, *Terror and Resistance: A Study of Political Violence, with Case Studies of Some Primitive African Communities*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969, p. 17: "An established power system is a web of resistances as well as a circuit of control, and innovators aflame with the *libido dominandi* often take drastic measures to cut through the web." On the complex and shifting nature of the role of kings' will in shaping justice, see J. C. Holt, *Magna Carta*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965, and J. E. A. Jolliffe, *Angevin Kingship*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1955.
- 19 Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Taxation and Morality in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Conscience and Political Power and the Kings of France", *French Historical Studies* 8 (1973), p. 17.
- 20 Charles-Victor Langlois, "Les doléances des communautés du Toulousain contre Pierre de Latilli et Raoul de Breuille (1297–1298)", *Revue Historique* 95 (1907), pp. 23–53.
- 21 Jean Favier, *Philippe le Bel*, Paris: Fayard, 1978, pp. 164–6, 201–2.
- 22 Dupuy, *Différend*, Preuves, p. 653. This statement should be treated with some caution, coming from the proceedings against Bishop Saisset, which, as we have seen, contain a good deal of the fantastic in them.
- 23 Alan Friedlander (ed.), *Processus Bernardi Delitiosi: The Trial of Fr. Bernard Délicieux, 3 September–8*

December 1319 (= Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 86:1), Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996, fols. 71r–71v (pp. 116–17). See also Friedlander's biography of Délicieux, *The Hammer of the Inquisitors: Brother Bernard Délicieux and the Struggle against the Inquisition in Fourteenth-Century France*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

- 24 Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Prince is Father of the King: The Character and Childhood of Philip the Fair of France", *Mediaeval Studies* 49 (1987), p. 320.
- 25 Langlois, "Doléances", pp. 23–53. Cf. the remarks on the contemporary English royal government and its dealings with its subjects in J. R. Maddicott, *The English Peasantry and the Demands of the Crown, 1294–1341*, Oxford: Past and Present Society, 1975.
- 26 For a detailed discussion of a plot hatched in Languedoc by leading citizens of Carcassonne and Albi to throw off royal rule, see Friedlander, *Hammer of the Inquisitors*.
- 27 Walter, *Terror and Resistance*, pp. 5–7.
- 28 Brown, "The Prince is Father of the King", p. 288.
- 29 Joseph R. Strayer, "France: The Holy Land, the Chosen People, and the Most Christian King", in Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft and the Perspectives of History*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971, pp. 310–11.
- 30 Joseph R. Strayer, "Philip the Fair – A 'Constitutional' King", in Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft*, p. 209.
- 31 My argument relies heavily on the work of E. V. Walter, for whom terrorism or organised terror is not a single entity. Instead it is a process, involving the act of violence itself, the emotional reactions to that act, and its social consequences. Walter also makes a distinction between "systems of terror" and "zones of terror". A "system of terror" may be broadly defined to include certain states of war as well as certain political communities, as long as the term refers to a sphere of relationships controlled by the terror process. To designate such a sphere as a 'system of terror,' however, implies that all the individuals within it are involved, in one role or another, actually or potentially in the terror process." In the case of societies where terror is applied only to a specific category of people, such as criminals, slaves, particular ethnic groups, etc., it is more appropriate to speak of a "zone of terror". Outside this zone, "power relations follow the rules of an ordinary system of authority". Yet at times, "instead of relying entirely on authority, conventional rules, and legitimate techniques, the men in power ... choose to initiate the process of terror. The form may be called a *regime of terror*" Walter, *Terror and Resistance*, p. 5
- 32 Gavin I. Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder", in his *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, pp. 209–36 and, in the same volume, "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln", pp. 237–62. That medieval Europe had no monopoly on such thinking, see, for a discussion of events in the modern United States, Lawrence Wright, *Remembering Satan*, New York: Knopf, 1994.
- 33 Many contemporaries, like Giovanni Villani, doubted the truth of the charges against the Templars, and believed that it had been greed and rancour that had led to the attack on the order., *Selections from the First Nine Books of the Croniche Fiorentine of Giovanni Villani*, trans. R. E. Selfe and P. H. Wicksteed, London: Archibald Constable, 1896, p. 378; cited in Barber, *Trial*, p. 230. But what mattered was public opinion in France, which largely supported the king.
- 34 Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1981, p. 195, makes a similar observation, remarking that the persecution of witches helped solidify the legitimacy of early modern states.

- 35 James Given, "The Inquisitors of Languedoc and the Medieval Technology of Power," *American Historical Review* 94 (1989), pp. 336–59.
- 36 In many ways, E. V. Walter's words about the Zulu kingdom apply equally well to early fourteenth-century France: "The conditions of legality imply that there must be a way of being innocent. If there is no path left open to avoid transgression, or if people are bound to be charged falsely with offences they did not commit, then it is not possible to be innocent. In the terror process, no one can be secure, for the category of transgression is, in reality, abolished. Anyone may be a victim, no matter what action he chooses. Innocence is irrelevant." Walter, *Terror and Resistance*, p. 26.
- 37 Émile Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*, trans. Everett K. Wilson and Herman Schnurer, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961, p. 162. Cf. Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.
- 38 Strayer, "France: The Holy Land", p. 308.