THE ENGLISH "BODY POLITIC": THE ROLE OF A METAPHOR IN RENAISSANCE ENGLISH POLITICAL THEORY

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Abstract: This paper aims at examining the role of a metaphor widely used in English political theory during the Renaissance: that of the "body politic". Tracing its immediate origins in medieval political theory, where it appeared for the first time in the twelfth century, in John of Salisbury’s Policraticus, and with roots in the pagan and Christian antiquity, the analogy between the state and the human body was employed as one method of providing legitimacy and constructing a valid model of government. The specific English terms, "body politic", emerged only in the fifteenth century, in the writings of the famous English political theorist John Fortescue (c. 1394 - c.1480). The concept was embraced by the subsequent English political theory and greatly developed during the next 150 years. Yet, the questions which arise are what was the purpose of this metaphor and how important was it for the English political thinkers? Was it meant to prove or merely illustrate ideas already held? The current paper argues that the concept of "body politic" served a rather similar purpose as it did in medieval political theory: to provide legitimacy, as the human body was held to be an ideal divine creation, and to provide a better understanding of the proposed type of government. The object of this analogy, the human body, will also make it more important than other such analogies, because the way the body is structured and the way it works can even determine the rulership patterns to be followed in the political models proposed by the theorists employing this metaphor.

Keywords: body politic, political disease, England, political thought, rulership.

In European political theory, starting with the twelfth century, with John of Salisbury and his famous treatise Policraticus, one can notice the emergence of a political metaphor consisting in drawing an analogy between the medieval state and the human body. The origins of this metaphor can be traced both in Greek and Latin philosophy, starting with Plato, and in early Church writings, such as the epistles of Saint Paul. According to David George Hale, in his work The Body Politic, "man accepted, in general, a view which saw the universe, the world, the church, the state and the individual, repeating the same pattern of arrangement and therefore exhibiting precise correspondences". The observation is correct, as the medieval and early modern mind was dominated by the idea that man was a microcosm which faithfully mirrored, on a lesser scale, the universal macrocosm. That was the basis for the analogy between the human body and the state and it will be openly acknowledged by writers who employed the respective analogy, such as the (less known) English jurist Edward Forset or the much more famous James I, king of England and Scotland, but also a political theorist in his own right, to name just two from the period which this paper discusses.

The analogy appears in the works of some of the most important political writers of the Middle Ages, such as the already mentioned John of Salisbury, then Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Marsilius of Padua, Jean de Paris, Christine de Pizan or Nicholas of Cusa. True, the respective analogy does not stay confined only to political works: its echoes can be

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found in works of literature as well, but it is in political theory where its use had the most significance. In his *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury asserts that „a republic is, just as Plutarch declares, a sort of body which is animated by the grant divine reward and which is driven by the command of the highest equity and ruled by a sort of rational management”². The purpose of using an analogy was to better illustrate one’s argument, being a rhetorical device often employed during the Middle Ages, but also before or after. And one could say that medieval writers, many of them Catholic clerics, were basically pushed towards using the human body as their object of comparison by the precedent established by Saint Paul, when he wrote in one of his epistles that the Christian community is one body. References to this text of Saint Paul, in the context of the „body politic” metaphor, exist both in medieval and in early modern writings. In addition, the special place given to the body favored this choice even more: a major concern of political writers was to make their political model as legitimate and as unquestionable as possible. The human body, just like nature, was a creation of God: showing a similarity between state and body strengthened one’s case significantly.

According to David George Hale, „the comparison is employed to defend and attack the established church, to promote order and obedience to secular rulers and to criticize political and economic abuses”³. As one can see, the goals pursued by its users can vary a lot, as the comparison lends itself to multiple interpretations. Yet, the common denominator of all the writings approaching this matter is the need for legitimacy. John of Salisbury used this analogy to propose a hierarchical and orderly political template, with the king as head and the clerics as the soul of the „body politic”. More than one century later, another famous political writer, Giles of Rome, proposed in his *De Regimine Principum* different political scheme and, in order to construct his argument and make it as convincing as possible, he drew inspiration from Aristotle’s anatomy as described in *De Animalibus*, which established the heart as the most important part of the body: thus, for Giles of Rome, the king is no longer the head of the „body politic”, but its heart, giver of life. Giles was likely torn between two allegiances: *De Regimine Principum* was a *specula principi*, dedicated to the future king of France Philip IV, but Giles was also connected with the Holy See, which claimed the headship of the Christian community for itself. To avoid the emergence of two heads it was convenient to compare the king with another part of the body – and the heart, which, with the resurgence of the interest in Aristotle’s works during the thirteenth century, was suddenly gaining in importance, was perfectly suitable for this.

The use of this analogy, started in the twelfth century, continued during the early modern period and it became widespread in English political literature, from the late fifteenth century until the seventeenth century. According to Jonathan Gil Harris, „no matter how seemingly insignificant the body part, English writers from the Norman conquest to the Revolution proved themselves extraordinarily deft in establishing connections between the components of bodies natural and politic”⁴. Harris is correct in pointing out the popularity of this analogy in England, yet he exaggerated when it extended the time span to include the

Norman period as well. It is possible that Harris had John of Salisbury in mind when he made this assertion, yet to consider the latter an „English writer” is quite questionable, despite his anglo-saxon origins, while Henry Bracton, author of *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, did not use the concept of „body politic”. Yet, Harris’ remarks about the development of this metaphor during the English Renaissance, that „political writers of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries transformed the standard comparison between body and society into a highly sophisticated similitude informed by new developments in anatomical medicine and pathology”

5, are completely spot on. In medieval political literature, the analogy body/state was used mostly as support for the writer’s main argument; but in the English Renaissance literature, not only such use continues, but, in some cases, this analogy basically became an argument in itself, capable of standing on its own feet and engulfing the entire treatise: such are Thomas Starkey’s *A Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset* or Edward Forset’s *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique*.

A more ambivalent opinion regarding the worth of analogies was expressed by J.P. Sommerville, who points out that they „meant far more to people in the early seventeenth century than they would today”

6, but he also urges caution, because analogies „reinforced conclusions which had been reached by other means”, without generating conclusions themselves.

Yet, the difference between illustration and evidence often becomes more blurred over the argument and, besides, not all analogies have the same weight, thus bulking them together, as Sommerville does, is a mistake. The analogy with the human body, in particular, is clearly special and it goes further than merely establishing a parallel between the compared objects. In medieval political and theological literature, the Church (and the kingdom) were not merely analogous to the body – they actually were a body, a *corpus mysticum*, not just a simile, but „a sociological, organological or juristic notion”

8. A similar approach can also be noticed in early modern English political thought, which held that the king possessed two bodies: a „body natural”, mortal and subject to man’s infirmities, and an immortal „body politic”, defined as his „policy and government”

9. As such, the existing similitude between the body and the realm tended to transform into an actual identity: and if such a close connection was established between the body and the polity (or parts of them), then one could also draw even conclusions regarding how certain aspects of the „body politic” were supposed to work, based on the examples provided by the knowledge of the human body.

The English term „body politic” was coined for the first time by John Fortescue, in his work *On the Governance of England* (also known as *The Difference between an Absolute and a Limited Monarchy*) and similar analogies between the state and the body can be found in his other work, *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*. Fortescue’s two treatises brought two significant changes to the old corporal template devised by John of Salisbury and developed further by other medieval writers. First and foremost, the „body politic” changed from an universal

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7*Ibidem*, p. 48.
8Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, p. 202. For an analysis of the political concept of *corpus mysticum* (and its transition from a liturgical to a sociological and juristic meaning), see Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, pp. 193-272.
model, which was basically a general template which could have been applied to any Christian polity, to a „national” one. Second, Fortescue had a more pragmatic approach regarding the problems which can afflict the „body politic”, problems which have an economic character.

The concept of „body politic” is mentioned for the first time in the second chapter of On the Governance of England, a short constitutional treaty, describing the (idealized) characteristics of the English government, as seen by John Fortescue, and contrasting them with the less perfect ones of the French government. In the respective chapter, Fortescue explains the origins of the two types of constitutions described in his book, dominium regale, where the king rules „by no other laws than his own will”, and the dominium politicum et regale, which emerged as a result of a covenant between a community and its future king. The English constitution obviously belongs to the second type, which Fortescue considers far more preferable, and a mythological story of its establishment is provided by the author. It is in this context that the concept of „body politic” appears for the first time: „But afterwards, when mankind was more civilized and better disposed to virtue, [there arose] great communities, as was the fellowship that came in to this land with Brutus, willing to be united and made abody politic called a realm, having a head to govern it – since, following the saying of the Philosopher, every community united of many parts must needs have a head – then they chose the same Brutus to be their head and king”10.

In his second work, De LaudibusLegumAngliae, Fortescue gives further hints as to what purpose these analogies between state and human body could serve. In imitating the structure of the body, the English political writer is able to deliver a strong argument in favor of the unicity of power: „Such a people does not deserve to be called a body whilst it is acephalous, i.e without a head. Because, just as in natural bodies, what is left over after decapitation is not a body, but is what we call a trunk, so in bodies politic a community without a head is not by any means a body”11. Appealing to the authority of Aristotle and his Politics, Fortescue argues that a people wishing to become a „body politic must always set up one man for the government of all thatbody politic”, yet his rulership is not automatically the tyranny decried by ancient and medieval writers, not even the dominium regale, because the will of the people and the laws of the realm, which cannot be changed without the consent of the subjects, should restrain the ability of the ruler to govern according to his own pleasure only. Both these points are made with the help of corporal analogies: in a „body politic” where the king is the head, the will of the people represents the heart the body would wither and die without and the laws are the nerves which keep the body together.

The use of the „body politic” concept and of the analogies between state and body continued after John Fortescue as well. One of the most developed instances of this analogy can be found in the treatise of Thomas Starkey, A Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset, written somewhere between 1529 and 1536, where the author describes in great detail the „diseases” afflicting the metaphorical body of the state. The purpose of the

author was to ingratiate himself to Henry VIII, whom Starkey’s treatise was dedicated to, but also to provide solutions for improving the „health” of the realm. In his case, one could say that Starkey’s analogies are not mere illustrations, but they are meant to suggest certain patterns of government. Starkey himself explains, albeit rather briefly and without going into much detail, the main motivation in choosing the human body as the object of this comparison with the state. The rationale behind this option is the fact that the body represented an ideal of harmony and proportions and, thus, „in thysprocesse we wyl take nature for our exampul& as nere as we can follow hyrstepps”\(^\text{12}\). Within the framework provided by the „body politic” concept, Starkey makes use of a subsidiary analogy, that between physical disease and „disease” of the state. He identifies a set of eight major diseases afflicting, in his opinion, the English „body politic” and proceeds to recommend all kind of remedies for them, according to the medical principles of that age (which were dominated by the Galenic theories). Basically, one could say that the corporal analogy helped Starkey build a very thorough metaphor of „political medicine”. In *A Dialogue*, Starkey’s medical analogies serve as evidence, not as mere illustration: each „political disease” and the remedies brought up by Starkey, through the words of Reginald Pole, are questioned by Thomas Lupset in a „socratic” dialogue and the demonstrations of the former are constructed with the help of analogies.

Starkey was what one could call a proto-constitutionalist, but still loyal to Henry VIII. Yet, similar analogies can be employed from completely opposite perspectives, which shows the flexibility of the „body politic” concept. One such case was that of John Ponet, an English reformer who had to go into exile during the reign of Mary I Tudor. Ponet will refer to the old idea that a corrupt member which could not be healed had to be removed so that the rest of the body be saved in order to argue that even the head of the „body politic” (in that specific case, the king turned tyrant) could have such a fate – an unheard of idea and a very daring one. In Ponet’s case, using the concept of „body politic” allows him to find an answer to the old question, what could and should be done if the king becomes a tyrant, by emphasizing the idea that obedience to one’s sovereign must be limited: „if the sinewes be to much racked and stretched out, or to much shrinked together, it briedethwonderfullpaynes and deformities in manes body; so if Obedience be to muche or to litell in a common wealthe, it causethmuche evil and disordre”\(^\text{13}\). Ponet’s opinion is an outlier, as the typical English political theory emphasized that rebellion was never justified, regardless of the king’s flaws. As such, we could argue that, in Ponet’s case, the corporal analogies were supposed to illustrate and provide evidence; because, while Ponet might have already held such opinions regarding the limits of obedience, the mainstream English political theory clearly did not\(^\text{14}\). Thus, Ponet had to make a very good case in order for his argument to have any chance to stick – and the corporal analogy was the tool he picked for this purpose.

The corporal analogies entailed by the concept of „body politic” can be employed not only to promote an ideal way of governing (like Starkey) or attack a hostile *status quo* (like Ponet), but also to defend an already established polity. For instance, in 1595, the English


cleric Richard Hooker made use, in his work *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*, of similar analogies in order to defend the organization of the Anglican Church against the attacks of the radical puritans. According to Hooker, the Church of Rome was indeed afflicted by „very foule and grosse corruptions”, but the puritan reformers lacked „the exact skill and knowledge to discerne”\(^\text{15}\). As a „body politic”, the Church of England could and should be healed, but Hooker distanced himself from the radicalism of the puritans. The explanation for this attitude resides in the fact that Richard Hooker wrote as a representative of the Elizabethan Church, which, while denying the Pope’s authority, still preserved many Catholic elements, with regard to its organization and rituals. By referring to the medical principles of that age, Hooker tried to show the dangers involved in the solutions recommended by the puritans – „the ground of which politi que position is that evils must be cured by their contraries –, pointing out that „he that will take away extreme heate by setting the body in extremitie of cold, shall undoubtedly remove the disease, but together with it the diseased too”\(^\text{16}\).

It would be quite impossible to mention all the writers who used the concept of „body politic” in their books, due to their impressive number, yet there is one case which deserves a special attention, from the perspective of this paper’s purpose. Albeit most writers inserted the respective analogy in their texts without any additional explanations, as if the similarity between the human body and the state was an obvious and natural thing, there is at least one author who felt the need to provide a justification for his choice – justification which, luckily, is extremely thorough. That author is Edward Forset, an English jurist who lived between 1553 and 1630 and published in 1606 a treatise called *A Comparative Discourse between Bodies Natural and Politique*. The treatise was written immediately after the infamous Gunpowder’s Plot and Forset was involved in its prosecution – some allusions to that event can be noticed in the text of the treatise. Its preface, called *To the Reader*, provides the main explanation in favor of using the similarity between the human body and the state as an argument in political debates. The first (self-confessed) reason would be the better illustration of one’s point with the help of analogies, because „the Commonweale with all her parts, orders, qualities and requisites whatsoever is (for better apprehension and illustration) set forth by sundry fit resemblances”\(^\text{17}\). That was a common trope in medieval and early political literature: in order to cater to an audience as large as possible and, especially, in order to remove all possible doubts or misinterpretations, the clarity of one’s argument was paramount. In addition, the main target audience of this sort of treatises consisted usually of people whose education was far above the average (for instance, in Forset’s case, *A Comparative Discourse* would have had first and foremost a parliamentary and juridical audience). Since many books of this kind were polemical or supported controversial position, their authors could expect them to come under serious attack – thus, they had to make them as less vulnerable as possible. Forset’s opinions as expressed in *A Comparative Discourse* could be rather easily labeled as absolutist and that could have drawn the ire of the Parliament, especially the House of Commons, who was extremely sensitive to suggestions that the king


\(^{16}\)Ibidem, p. 183.

could give or change laws at his own discretion – the main tenet of absolutist rule. A rather similar case occurred several years later, in 1609, when another English lawyer, John Cowell, was bitterly attacked in Parliament for several statements in his book *Interpreter* that the king was above the law and had his book banned.

An analogy with the body was considered more suitable than any other because the body itself was regarded, in medieval and early modern mindset, as representing a microcosm which was faithfully mirroring the organization and the workings of the universal macrocosm. Forset is aware of this as well and states as much in his introduction, writing that the best analogy was „cyther by the universall masse of the whole world (consisting of all the severallsubsistances in that great frame by the high wisdome and might of God compact and united) or else by the body of man, being the lesser world, even the diminutive and modell of that wide extending universall”

Another fundamental reason why a writer would pick the analogy with the human body in order to construct his argument and which is pointed out by Edward Forset in no uncertain terms is that of legitimacy. According to the medieval outlook, both the human body and the universe were the direct creations of God and, as such, they were (originally) flawless. If the human body happened to display some failure, it was the fault of the man himself, with direct or indirect divine intervention (as the medieval mindset often established a connection between sin and bodily flaws or afflictions). In such circumstances, making a comparison with the human body was extremely tempting. If the author managed to prove that his political model followed God’s patterns as seen within the body, then his argument gained significantly more weight: „the uttermost extent of mans understanding can shape no better forme of ordering the affayres of a state, than by marking and matching of the workes of the finger of God, eyther in the larger volume of the universall, or in the abridgement thereof, the body of man”

Forset commented that an analogy between the state and the universe would also be apt: it would certainly satisfy one’s desire to provide his argument with an object of comparison of the greatest possible dignity, in this relentless search for legitimacy. Yet, in his opinion, the comparison with the human body is far more preferable, „being of more facilite to bee understood (as deduced from a more familiar example) and equalling the other both in dignitie (having the same author) and in certayntie (respecting the fitnesse of their relation) may also sort both agreeably with other mens likings (as bred in their bosomes) and with mine intentions, which seeketh wholly a demonstrative plainenesse”

The universe was a much more vague concept, which (and that was a major problem) could not be easily visualized and, as such, accurately describing its structure and workings to an audience was far more problematic. Moreso, it was easier for Forset himself to resort to the analogy with the body: he had studied at Cambridge at a time when Galenic medicine and anatomy enjoyed widespread attention and, thus, it is likely he had become greatly familiar with them. It is plain from the text of the treatise itself that Forset was not a novice in this regard, as he used extensive medical terminology and displays great knowledge of the Galenic principles.

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18Ibidem, Preface.
19Ibidem, Preface.
20Ibidem, Preface.
Finally, the existence of a strong tradition for this analogy, as we have seen, must have encouraged Forset in the same direction: in undertaking this task, to draw a parallel between the state and the human body and use it to support his political ideas, Forset treads on familiar ground. In this regard, he is clearly not an outlier, but someone who continues, albeit to a greater extent than most of his predecessors, an already existing and well-established trend.

Still, there are limitations in the usefulness of such analogies, which the contemporary writers were aware of. Forset himself admits as much, by acknowledging that one could not seriously expect to find similarities for absolutely every detail in the structure of the state and the human body: „That it be not exacted or expected of me, so mincingly to manage this matter, as that unto every particular part or facultie of our human nature, I must needs find out in the States bodie some severall members or braunches entirely matchable to the same”\textsuperscript{21}. Yet, while a perfect similarity was very unlikely, Forset considered that such a thing should not have impeded his overall argument. If a resemblance exists, then, according to Forset, it should make that particular assertion valid\textsuperscript{22}.

How much significance did this analogy have in the political debates of that time can be seen from the very fact that this kind of arguments did not remain consigned to the pages of political treatises. A reference to the concept of „body politic” appears, for instance, shortly after its introduction in English political thought by John Fortescue, in the draft of a sermon which bishop John Russell, chancellor of University of Oxford and Chancellor of England, proposed to deliver before the first Parliament of Richard III, in 1483. The bishop „extracted” the notion of „body politic” from the famous assertion of Saint Paul, which served as inspiration for so many instances when the respective metaphor was employed. In the words of Russell, Saint Paul „lykkenythe the mystik or the politike body of congregacione of peuple to the naturalle body of man, concludynge that, lyke as yn the body naturalle every membre hath compassion of other, yn so moche that the moste noble membre may not sey to the lest or vileste of them alle, I have no need of the”\textsuperscript{23}. Russell did not use only the already established expression corpus mysticum, but also made room for the new one of „body politic”. The rest of Russell’s statement is classic corporal analogy, quoting directly from Saint Paul: the body is a functioning whole, every part has need of the other and the „body politic” faithfully mirrors the physical body, with every estate being ordained to support the other and avoiding all manner of „strife and division”. Russell is a cleric and, as such, he drew upon Saint Paul’s words, which referred to the Church as the body of Christ, to assert a metaphor which defined the realm in similar terms: a theological construct became thus a political one.

Going further in time, closer to the end of the period discussed in this article, in 1609, no one other than James I himself made a direct reference to this analogy between the state and the human body, emphasizing the unique and special status of the king, in a speech delivered in front of his Parliament. At that time, the Parliament’s attention had been caught by the so-called „Cowell case”, an English lawyer who had written a book, Interpreter,

\textsuperscript{21}Ibidem, Preface.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibidem, Preface.
including some statements that the king was above the law. The debate over Cowell and his book was not particularly pleasant for James I, for two reasons: first, because it brought into the spotlight the matter of the king’s special powers, the so-called royal prerogative, which James did not want discussed, undoubtedly aware how sensitive an issue could this be. Second, James I wanted the Parliament to vote new subsidies and did not want the Parliament’s attention to be distracted by other matters. The speech itself was mostly devoted to the financial question. Yet, at the very beginning, James I also touched the subject of the relationship between king and law and the concept of „body politic”. In this analogy, he asserted, „kings are compared to the head of this Microcosme of the body of man”24. James’ reference to this concept was brief, but it mentioned the king’s special position as „physician of the realm”, position emerging from his role as the head of the body: „And lastly, as for the head of the naturall body, the head hath the power of directing all the members of the body to that use which the judgement in the head thinkes most convenient. It may apply sharpe cures, or cut off corrupt members, let blood in what proportion it thinkes fit, and as the body may spare”25.

The conclusion which can rightfully be drawn from all the examples provided is that analogies in early modern England were a very powerful tool for conveying a message. And using such an impactful term like the „body politic” was certain to impress upon the audience the weight of the argument. When James I wanted to convince his Parliament to vote for new subsidies, he did not proclaim his right to tax his people at will – assertion which could have been met with hostility in the Parliament and especially in the House of Commons. But he took care to emphasize the special status of the monarch, by a threefold analogy: with God, with the father of a family and the head of the body. The other two comparisons used by James I clearly reveal the significance of the „body politic” metaphor. Similarly, when English political writers wanted to strengthen their argument, argue a more controversial idea or provide an ideal pattern of governance which should have been followed, the „body politic” and the corporal analogies which it entailed was their choice.

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