

- Cheah, P., & Robbins, B. (Eds.). (1998). *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Held, D., & Koenig-Archibugi, M. (Eds.). (2005). *Global governance and public accountability*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

COUNSEL

Counsel is one of the activities closely associated with the thought, action, and the institutions of politics. Most cultures and political systems consider counsel in one form or another to be an intrinsic part of the decision-making process. The term encompasses knowledge technologies and intellectual cultures as well as the procedures and processes of communication that enable governments to make informed and advantageous decisions. Counselors (i.e., political advisors or consultants) are those with the experience, expertise, and the authority required to advise on policy development and implementation. They provide advice orally or in written form, with a view to instructing or correcting the governing body or individual. This entry highlights main aspects of the theory and practice of political counsel during the classical, medieval, and early modern periods.

Counsel and Council

The classical and Christian traditions are united in their emphasis on counsel as one of the seminal conditions of good government. Characteristically, the Latin tradition merges the notions of a summoning or assembly (*conclavum*) and counsel (*consilium/concilium*) early on. This blending of deliberative and normative action is reflected terminologically in a number of European languages (e.g., English: *councill/counselor*; Spanish: *consejo/consejero*) as well as institutions like the diocesan and ecumenical councils of the early Christian and medieval Catholic Church. The nature of the surviving evidence can make it difficult to establish the degree to which “conciliar events” invited and allowed vigorous debate or were stage-managed to corroborate predetermined outcomes. Certainly, many ecclesiastical and secular assemblies display a clear sense of gathering for the

purpose of discussion and genuine exchange of ideas as an integral part of making decisions. Equally, there are varying degrees of openness in the “secret councils” (the gathering of aristocrats and functionaries) that advised the rulers of the nascent early modern states. Certainly, the idea that a prince has to seek out and listen to “good counsel” in order to act legitimately and in the best interest of dynasty and people remains fundamental, modified but not diminished by the rise of reason of state.

Characteristics of Counsel

There is no predominant theory, rhetoric, or discourse of counsel. The notion of counsel is pertinent to all fields of political activity. It comprises a wide range of terminologies and media, ranging from the written *consilia* of medieval canon lawyers to Martin Luther’s *Letters of Spiritual Counsel* and Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, from advice rendered during discussions in the assemblies of feudal lords to Girolamo Savonarola’s public sermons. Invariably, it also raises a set of specific questions with regard to the individual counselor, group, or political body dispensing counsel as well as those receiving it.

One common point of debate and concern is that of the qualification of the counselor and nature of expertise brought to the task, for instance, the assumed relationship between age, experience, and authority. The rules of Benedictine monasteries, for instance, insist that if the monastic community gathers to receive and give counsel, the younger brethren have to be given a voice. The presumed lack of experience and insight on the part of the majority of young people is weighed against monastic ideals of shared responsibility and collective action. The gender of the counselor can also affect the authority and mode of delivery of counselor and counsel. The biblical queens Esther and Jezebel permeate medieval and early modern discourse on counsel, exemplifying the gendered nature of notions of what constitutes good and bad counsel and counselors.

The issue of gender is related to the problem of biased or partisan advice. The fawning and corrupt courtier and the scheming aristocrat as perilous sources of advice are staple characters in the mirror-of-princes genre from ancient Greece to

Renaissance Europe. Ideally, counsel had to be rendered solely with the best interest of prince and dynasty in mind. Yet it was equally acknowledged that the courts and counsels of princes were the place to negotiate the agendas and settle the conflicts between the ruling dynasty and the powerful families of the realm. Counselors were among those who had to represent and channel interests from one or more lobby groups. The writings and activities of individuals and groups as diverse as Hincmar (806–886), who was archbishop of Reims and political advisor to the Carolingian ruler Charles the Bald, and the boyars of Renaissance Muscovy testify to the necessity and the predicaments inherent to the task of arbitration and crisis management within political elites largely built on kinship networks.

During the medieval and early modern periods, advisors recruited from the clergy or religious orders frequently appeared or were claimed to be closer to the ideal of the disinterested counselor. Yet the relationship between ecclesiastical “expert” and secular “layman” was also problematic. A prime example is the institution of the Catholic confessor. The latter was recommended as the expert in exploring the relationship between the will of the king and divine law. Thus Cardinal Bellarmine saw the confessor as “judge” and “doctor of the soul.” Mediator between the private and the public sphere, the confessor was distinguished among counselors in that he was particularly sworn to secrecy. The fortunes of confessors at early modern courts, however—as well as manuals for confessors like the Jesuit *De Confessariis Principum* (On the Confessors of Princes) issued by the Jesuit superior general Acquaviva in 1602—illustrate that the boundary between spiritual and political advice, and thus the precise remit of the confessor, remained significantly and perilously blurred, always likely to attract fierce criticism. Equally problematic and often at odds with the confessor in terms of interest and influence was the counselor whose position depended upon the “friendship” of the king; the controversial figure of the favorite. Like the confessor, the favorite combined privileged access to the monarch with a relationship built on trust. Alvaro de Luna in medieval Castile and Cardinal Richelieu in seventeenth-century France exemplify the problematic nature of counsel and influence emanating from a

position of emotional and intellectual dependency on the part of the counseled.

Already during the medieval and early modern periods, there is a trend toward the professionalization of expertise and personnel, counselors, and counsel. Notably, law graduates from the European universities increasingly compete with baronial and ecclesiastical post-holders, reflecting the profound social, cultural, intellectual, and institutional changes from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, such as the rise of universities and academics as sources of expert advice. This trend goes along with the establishment of “politics” and “politician” as independent spheres of human inquiry and action, exemplified in the work and career of individuals as different as the Flemish scholar and political theorist Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) and Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619–1683), minister of finance under Louis XIV of France. Today, specialists in law, economics, and other fields of expertise either join the executive or represent individuals, corporate clients, and public bodies as lobbyists. Political counselors or advisors appointed as civil servants thus continue to walk the narrow tightrope between public service and partisan interest, a dilemma reflected in the controversial figure of the “spin-doctor” and the problematic issue of private-sector employment of former civil servants.

Harald E. Braun

See also Civic Humanism; Consent; Critique; Deliberative Democracy; Disagreement; Governance; Hierocratic Arguments; Institutionalism; Kingship; Legitimacy; Mirror of Princes’ Genre; Parliament; Reason of State; Scholasticism

Further Readings

- Coleman, J. (Ed.). (1996). *The individual in political theory and practice*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Quillet, J. (1988). Community, counsel and representation. In J. H. Burns (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of medieval political thought c. 350–1450*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Reinhard, W. (Ed.). (1996). *Power elites and state building*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rubinstein, N. (1987). The history of the word *politicus* in early modern Europe. In A. Pagden (Ed.), *The languages of political theory in early modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.