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"When and What was the State?" Some Introductory Comments

The papers that appear here are those which were pre-circulated for the twentieth (and final?) annual meeting of the Oxford Discussion Group on the State (DGOS) which took place at St Peter's College, Oxford on 29-31 March 2001. This semi-formal seminar was originally convened under the auspices of Philip Corrigan, Derek Sayer and the late Gerald Aylmer, and has latterly (since 1996) been organised by Steve Hindle, Joanna Innes and Gavin Williams. Throughout its history, DGOS has sought to explore the social, political and cultural dynamics of the English state over the long historical period from the ninth to the nineteenth century, and its idiosyncratic format has contributed to a sense of an on-going conversation between new and old friends over the ways in which 'state forms' have been manifested and appropriated in English political culture.

Corrigan and Sayer's *The Great Arch*[1] reflected the collaborative and eclectic tone of the group's discussions and served as an early summation of the intellectual and historiographical ethos of the seminar.[1] One (among many) of the merits of that book was its reflection of extraordinarily wide range of expertise on which Corrigan and Sayer were able to draw. Each annual meeting has had a specific theme—'The State and Information'; 'The State and Education'; 'The State and Towns'; 'The State and its Agents'; 'The State and Punishment'; 'The State and its Representation'—and the usual format has been that six or seven pairs of speakers are invited to pre-circulate to an invited audience of perhaps two-dozen regular participants discussion papers which, while reflecting their own research expertise in specific chronological periods, are also

intended to facilitate chronological comparison across and between the epochs into which the historiography of English political development is conventionally periodised. Several sessions have, moreover, explicitly sought to place the English experience in a broader geographical perspective by emphasising the British and Imperial dimensions of English state forms. In encouraging participants to 'chance their arm' in this way, the convenors have welcomed working papers which (although they might well grow which grow out of long-standing research projects) serve the purpose of stimulating discussion, rather than polished chapters, articles or essays which are immediately destined for publication elsewhere.

Accordingly (as the papers published here suggest), the format of contributions has varied widely, some of the submissions being full (article-length and fully-referenced), others running merely to a number of suggestive bullet points. In either case, participants are usually given only a very few minutes to speak to the themes of their paper as a prelude to discussion. Of course, some of the papers first aired at St Peters have subsequently appeared in print (several of them in this journal) and have helped shape the historiography not only of the specific chronological periods from which they emerged but also of the comparative sociology of state formation.[2] I am sure that I speak for most (if not all) of the participants—who over the years have included (among many more others) James Campbell, Patrick Wormald, John Gillingham, Douglas Hay, Caroline Barron, Sir Keith Thomas, Philip Morgan, Daniel Nugent, Gerald Harris, Rosemary Horrox, Patrick Carroll-Burke, Sudipta Sen, John Watts, Cliff Davies, Penry Williams, Steve Ellis, Mark Pittaway, Mike Braddick, Victor Kearnan, Jenny Wormald, Penry Williams, Hugh Kearney, Colin Brooks, Peter Marshall, Gill Sutherland, and

David Eastwood—in suggesting that the format of the papers and the atmosphere of the discussion not only congenial but stimulating. All the contributors to this special issue have kindly agreed to the publication of their papers in the 'loose' format in which they were originally submitted, and it is hoped that the readers of this journal will respect the generous spirit in which that gesture was intended. The editors of *JHS* feel that the range and diversity of style as well as content of these discussion papers greatly enhance their appeal.

Other than the rather peculiar format of the papers themselves, there have been two other unspoken conventions (or 'invented traditions') of DGOS meetings which might usefully be borne in mind in reading the contributions collected here. In the first place, the discussions have provoked a cumulative backlash against the teleological fallacy that has long characterised the historiography of the development of the English state. Participants at DGOS take it for granted that the English state has been, in Michael Mann's useful formulation, 'polymorphous' -- that is, that it has taken various forms at various times. Most contributions have conveyed some discomfort with the notions that the state has grown gradually stronger, or that its roots have penetrated gradually deeper into English society, over time. At its extreme, this attack on the Whig interpretation has led some of the regularly-attending early modernists and modernists to feel that the Anglo-Saxonists and medievalists are suggesting that most (if not all!) the defining structures of the English state were in place by AD1500 (or even by AD1000!), and that the subsequent history of English governance has been merely one of consolidation (or even of declension). Indeed, this tension is reflected in the papers collected here, some of which argue for the decisiveness of their own historical period, others of which recognise

that there have been successive waves of English social and political development, none of them sufficiently significant in and of themselves to account for the distinctiveness of the English polity. Better, perhaps to think of 'state formation' as an incremental process in which cumulative tides of historical change, some of them rising higher, some lower, have reshaped the contours of English governance.

The second assumption has been that comparative discussion of changes in the nature of the state over time have been inhibited by an over-emphasis on the terminological problem of providing an agreed definition of what the state was at any given point in the past. Accordingly, participants have tended to talk in terms of 'state forms' or of 'state formation' as a process rather than of 'the state' as an entity in itself. For the twentieth meeting, however, it was decided that the definitional question could no longer be avoided, and participants were explicitly invited to discuss 'when and what was the state?'. As the papers themselves suggest, the participants answered that question in numerous conflicting ways. It would, of course, be counter-intuitive to suggest that anything like a coherent view of the process of state formation emerges from these contributions. It would surely not, however, be an exaggeration to suggest that they demonstrate the extraordinary fruitfulness of thinking about 'state forms' in a flexible and comparative framework.

Steve Hindle

November 11, 2001

Notes

[1] Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985)

[2] Those which have appeared in this journal include Colin Richmond, 'Hand and Mouth: Information Gathering and Use in England in the Later Middle Ages', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1:3 (September 1988), 233-52; Gerald Aylmer, 'The Peculiarities of the English State', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3:2 (June 1990), 91-108; and Steven G. Ellis, 'Civilising Northumberland: Representations of Englishness in the Tudor State', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12:2 (June 1999), 103-27. Those appearing elsewhere include Gerald Harris, 'Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England', *Past & Present* 138 (February 1993), 28-57; Michael J. Braddick, 'The Early Modern English State and the Question of Differentiation, from 1550 to 1700', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (1996), 92-111; Joanna Innes, 'The Domestic Face of the Military-Fiscal State: Government and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War: Britain From 1689-1815* (London, 1994), pp.96-127; and David Eastwood, '"Amplifying the Province of the Legislature": The Flow of Information and the English State in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Historical Research* 62 (1989), 276-94.