

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction: the powers of the state

I The social history of the state

What is the state? In the half-millennium or so since “the state” began to assume its modern form this question has been asked time and time again. On the surface it is a simple question, but below the surface a difficult and a troubling one. Hence the multitude of conflicting answers. This book approaches this question again but it does so in a relatively unusual way. It is concerned with what the state did, how it worked, its mundane operations – often the last things students of the state are concerned with. It is interested in the ordinary *things* of the state. This is a history of the state in terms of what on the face of it seem some pretty unlikely candidates: postage stamps, letterboxes and post offices; dusty government office files and office rooms; well-thumbed primers in ancient Greek and Latin; and the classrooms and sleeping quarters of the schools and colleges in which the ancient languages were taught. It is also a history of the *who* and the *where* of the state, of the kind of people who ran it and of the government offices they sat in and the college halls they dined in. It is by considering these things, people and places that I think we can understand the state better, and this is my justification for adding to the many answers given to the question, “What is the state?”

Imaginative literature is where one will find one version of this history of the mundane state, and it was writers who lived through the rise and fall of great states that knew best that the history of the state was to be revealed in the chronicle of its ordinary things. The great Viennese master Stefan Zweig chose as the emblem of the very ordinariness of life in the Austro-Hungarian Empire the figure of “the post office girl”.¹ The ordinariness of the everyday state apparent in the post office was how he chose to render most effectively the ordinariness of life in the empire. What follows in my

¹ Stefan Zweig, *The Post Office Girl* (Pushkin Press, 2008), published posthumously in German 1982, the author having committed suicide in Brazil in 1942 during exile from Nazi Germany and Austria.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

book includes an account of the very ordinary life of the British postal system, and it is with a quotation from Zweig that I open Chapter 4, where I deal with files and “filing technologies” in another kind of government office, the India Office. The quotation runs as follows: “From the millions and millions of such forms piled up in government offices it may one day be possible to glean the only reliable account of the history of the misfortunes of the Habsburg monarchy.” To Zweig it was indeed the ordinary form rather than the content of the document that mattered, for it was the form that made government possible in the first place. He meant the literal “form”, the standardised document in all its plainness and physical reality, in the shape of what he called “The so-called ‘chancery double’, a folded sheet of paper of prescribed dimensions and format.” This for Zweig was “the most indispensable requisite of the Austrian civil and military administration”,² and it was in *administration* that the true life of the state was to be found.

This life was also to be found in the real lives of the people of the state, above all in this state the military-bureaucratic class that was its backbone. In his “Author’s Note” to the book, in which Zweig mentions the “chancery double”, he remarks: “A short explanation may perhaps be necessary for the English reader. The Austro-Hungarian Army constituted a uniform, homogenous body in an empire composed of a very large number of nations and races. Unlike his English, French, and even German *confrere*, the Austrian officer was not allowed to wear mufti when off-duty, and military regulations prescribed that in his private life he should always act *Standesgemaess*, that is, in accordance with the special etiquette and code of honour of the Austrian military caste . . . The final criterion of an officer’s behaviour was invariably not the moral code of society in general, but the special moral code of his caste”.³ Zweig, in his novel *Beware of Pity*, is a great chronicler of that caste, but there is none greater than Joseph Roth. His unsurpassed account of the trajectory of a state’s history, in this case of the greatness and the tragedy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, is *The Radetzky March*.⁴ This, like the work of Zweig, is centred upon the military-bureaucratic caste, for it was this group of governors that was at the heart of that state’s tragedy.

My book concerns the governors of the British state, who were very different from those of Austria-Hungary, but no less a caste, that of the

² *The Post Office Girl*, pp. 257–8.

³ “Author Note”, *Beware of Pity*, after the title page. Stefan Zweig, *Beware of Pity* (Pushkin Press, 2008).

⁴ Published originally in German as the *Radetzky marsch*, 1932. Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March* (Granta, 2003).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

public school- and Oxbridge-educated high bureaucracy. From this caste the high political class was also drawn. While the book is a history of the British state, I am aware of the value of looking beyond Britain. This I do, chiefly to Europe and the USA, and so I am concerned only with “Western” forms of the state. However, I make no claim to write anything like an adequate comparative history. Nor do I draw much on literary representations of the British state. This is because unlike the history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its great German-language writers, the relative stability of the British state seems to have produced a far less penetrating literature on the subject. My avenue into the mundane is the social history one, social history being about the mundane anyway; however, unlike older versions of social history this is not history with the power and politics left out, but with these centre stage. It is also a social history that questions what the “social” is in the first place.

More particularly this is a book about the mundane state in its liberal forms, of which the British example, because it was so early and so complete, was of enormous historical significance. I take the long view in considering this history, not hesitating at times to go beyond my already rather long period of detailed examination. This extends from around 1800 and the beginnings of the rise of the liberal state to a situation by about the 1920s when, particularly after 1880, this form had been consolidated. By the term “liberal state” I mean the sort of state that systematically deploys political freedom as a means of governance. This is not the only means it employs but it is the principal one. And I employ ‘freedom’ in two senses, the mainstream one of political liberty as used in academic and everyday discourse alike, but also to denote governmental techniques that allowed, and still allow, designated governed entities (persons, places, things) to operate ostensibly on their own, without outside interference. Technique is the operative word here, for I am concerned with the micro-technologies and the micro-operations of power. How do these set up zones of ostensible self-regulation, in individuals, families, “publics”, markets and so on?

This takes investigation into, on the surface, such unlikely areas as city streets and country roads, public libraries and parks, and particularly in this book, the economic and social use of postal systems. This second sense of freedom, what I call “organised freedom”, cuts across established use because it cuts across the established political categories – Liberal, Conservative, Labour and so on. All political parties deployed organised freedom, and in most essential respects (and there were of course important political differences which I recognise) they also deployed freedom as political liberty in the usual sense of freedom. Because this was so, because there was so much overlap between these two senses of freedom in Britain, I use the above-mentioned term “liberal state”. I make no

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

apology for doing so, even though this usage may seem indiscriminating to some, as the state in this period went through many different manifestations and was marked by real differences within the governing classes. For example differences in political thought, especially between what have been called “organic” and “inorganic individualism”,⁵ a collectivist against an anti-statist tradition, positions that also correspond with positive and negative freedom.

However, without labouring the obvious, these are all versions of individualism, taking as their common ground “the individual”. This “individual” only makes sense in terms of the freedom which is its *raison d’être* to practice. The Conservative Party has of course been in power for long periods in British history, yet for most of this time it was no less liberal than its various oppositions, no less concerned to practice freedom. Of course, there was a Conservative philosophy of a more organic sort less favourable to individualism, but what is striking is what little practical effect this has had historically, economic protectionism aside, something which itself has been only of intermittent importance. And if we look more closely at actual politics, we find that the supposedly organic Conservatives were very often the most market-driven “inorganic” individualists, and the supposedly individualist liberals the exponents of a more collectivist state. Thatcherite Conservatism, for example, was ironically more to do with a rather paranoiac, late-nineteenth-century Tory aristocratic anti-statist individualism than with civically conscious, liberal “Victorian values” (to the extent that Thatcher herself was not, as a child of the Cold War, a product of an equally paranoiac age).⁶ Therefore, on balance, the underlying similarities mean more than the differences. The liberal state as I describe it here has been the basic, the most fundamentally significant, form of the British state from 1800 to the present. The term begs to be used therefore. It is this basic continuity of the state that I aim to establish and explore, characterisations of the state as *laissez-faire*, welfare, social and market aside. When I employ the term liberal state I therefore mean freedom in both senses of the word. However, the intricacies of this argument are explained in much more detail in the second section of this chapter, but it is as well to make the matter plain from the start.

⁵ Michael Bentley, “‘Boundaries’ in Theoretical Language about the British State” in S. J. G. Green and R. C. Whiting (eds.), *The Boundaries of the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Jose Harris, “Political Thought about the State in Britain” in the same volume.

⁶ Bentley, “Boundaries”, *ibid.*, pp. 43–5.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The book was completed at a time when the liberal state in Britain appeared to be in trouble. The dissolution of social bonds and disaffection with politics that have everywhere resulted from economic and political neoliberalism have taken a particularly acute form in a Britain where neoliberalism was endemic. There the financial crises of 2008 and 2011 framed a series of events that have discredited the political classes, the police and the media, and provoked the urban rioting of the summer of 2011. There has been considerable discussion about the causes and origins of these phenomena, but relatively little informed, long-term historical consideration. There is thus limited appreciation that if one is to understand the present neoliberal state better then it would be no bad idea to know more about the history of the liberal one. For, as I indicate in the book, the former is but an extension of the latter, and “neo” only on the surface.

Comparatively speaking British history has been marked by extraordinary continuity and considerable social stability, and this combination, at times paradoxically, has been highly conducive to the successful management of change. This is evident above all in the capacity of old-established elites and institutions to harbour the growth of capitalism and what has recently been called “liberal modernity”.⁷ This capacity is very much a theme of the book, though I approach it in a new way. Living in an old country has resulted in other consequences too, one of which is a certain public complacency – not a lack of interest – about British history, for unlike other historical experiences the British one has been less disrupted and less tragic so that history in Britain does not touch the quick of the present to the degree it does elsewhere. This has also meant that there is a fair degree not only of consensus but of approval about what are held to be the core values of British history and British society, namely those that can be said to be “liberal” – chiefly freedom, tolerance and individual self-determination.

My interrogation of “freedom” and of the liberal state it gave rise to will show that both were rather less benign than is sometimes thought. Contrary to many views, both have, historically, always been more about governing people than releasing them from government. The seemingly distant and remote liberal state has over time constantly intervened in people’s daily lives, public and private, so that citizens might lead lives that actively practice freedom – freedom, that is, as those in political authority view it. As will be seen, the state actively helps make the spheres of the public and the private in the first place, rather than just being the neutral

⁷ Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds.), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (University of California Press, 2011).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

guardian of these things. It also helps *make* freedom, so that freedom as well as being a value is always a political *practice* and a way of governing, involving making us self-governing and “responsible” citizens. The state of Britain has therefore historically been in essence a state of freedom.

Freedom is not only a mode of government, however, for its sources also come from a civil society the state only partly controls and comprehends. Once politically deployed, civil society has its own momentum, serving to criticise the very political institutions that gave it shape. No one should doubt the strength of British civil society historically, and in the present, but while this strength has served to shape the liberal state it has failed to fashion a truly democratic and egalitarian version of the state. Historically, it is the absence of any meaningful challenge to the fundamentals of the liberal state that is striking, something reflected in the lack of any true participatory democracy in the British system, and something compounded by the warped nature of its representative system of democracy, with for example its unelected second chamber and head of state, single-member voting system and (mostly) two-party system. So, in the end, it is the liberal state that fashions civil society, setting its parameters if not controlling it. Therefore civil society does not stand “outside” the state, again contrary to many views on the subject. Often beyond our immediate public and private lives, but nonetheless deeply involved with them, the state not only fashions persons but also structures markets, whole economies indeed. It also configures “society” itself, so that economies and societies are “free” because the liberal state has made them so. Political freedom and power are different sides of the same coin. Thus it is often the case that when we think we are most free it is then we are most governed.

Other nations and states see the relationship between state and society differently of course, and these differences are always the outcome of the social history of the state. In Scandinavia for example, while the state decidedly configures society, because of the different cultural and historical circumstances involved state and society are in a different relationship than is the case in the UK, and elsewhere. Culturally, state and society are far closer than in the UK, something echoed in language itself, for in Swedish for example there is much less difference in meaning between the words “state” and “society” than there is in English.

Because freedom and authority are complements of one another and not opposites, liberalism, whether political liberalism or organised freedom, is in no sense a stranger to order and especially so in the British context, where social hierarchy has been marked. Some have to govern, others have to be governed. Therefore, the kinds of human relations that go with the exercise of authority and the act of governing have historically

been central to the liberal state. This is why none of the supposed bastions of hierarchy and “tradition” – the monarchy, the Established Church, the Armed Forces, the Conservative Party, the House of Lords, the public schools (the list in Britain is very long) – is inimical to the liberal state for the simple fact that they are an integral part of it. They are the other side of the same liberal coin, that of authority, order and control. Again, I do not wish to downplay the reality of political differences, and the force of tensions within different versions of the state, but the reality of underlying similarities demands to be recognised. When this recognition is given it is apparent, especially in the British case, that the supposed dualities of “tradition” and “modernity”, reaction and progress, and political irrationality and rationality in fact make little sense.

One essential point about the modern state is that it has tended to rely more and more on everyday life as the ground upon which it operates and creates legitimation and “consent”, in this case the consent of citizens who will practice freedom. The antique state aim of security increasingly but not exclusively comes to be located in the soul of the citizen. All of life comes within the remit of the state, and is thereby ordered and reproduced under the sway of what can be regarded as “normal” or “proper” thought and behaviour. Another way of looking at this is with the idea of the “habitus”, and this is used at several times throughout the book. “Habitus” is a complex concept and its ramifications need not detain us, but the term is useful in denoting the force of habituation, which is akin to “normalisation” and another term I use much more frequently than both, “naturalisation”, which involves making what is anything but natural seem perfectly so. The term “habitus” itself essentially means the set of socially acquired dispositions, skills and schemes of behaviour which are acquired by people in the activities of everyday life.⁸ It highlights the non-discursive, taken-for-granted aspects of social life that often operate outside conscious awareness.

This “normalisation” enables the ordering and the sanctioning of what would otherwise be regarded as abnormal. This eventually extends to the abnormal in extreme forms, so that the state has been enabled through the routines it has established in its mundane operation to order and

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu is the great exponent of the concept. See for example his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). The connections of the term with other ones in Bourdieu’s conceptual arsenal link it to a social reading of power at variance with the one employed in this book as a whole. However, when reworked the concept can be complementary. See Tony Bennett, Mike Savage et al., *Culture, Class, Distinction* (Routledge, 2009). On *habitus* see also Richard Shusterman (ed.), *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, 1999).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00710-9 - The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800

Patrick Joyce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

incorporate not only injustice and inequality as “normal” but famine, social conflict, and eventually if with some difficulty, mass war and the mass extermination of human beings. In this the liberal state was no exception, for in the period of the book the British state incorporated mass starvation in Ireland and India into its administrative routines. Whether in the form of the secular or the Christian political economy that informed the detail of state policy, famine was either an act of nature or one of God⁹. Thus distanced from the state in liberal fashion, millions were fated to die.

The great architect of the liberal state Charles Trevelyan, whom we shall meet again in the book, was the chief “administrator” of famine. In fact, Trevelyan was perhaps the principal British inventor of “administration” itself, and administration was the science of making the business of the state routine, of making it “normal”. Like other, non-liberal as well as liberal, states the state in Britain therefore practised what has been called the violence of order, even as, in the main, it left the order of violence behind. There is little of state violence and social disorder in mainland Britain in this book, though across the Irish Sea the matter was different, as will be demonstrated, especially at the end of Chapter 7. In large part this is simply because in mainland Britain, comparatively speaking, after 1815 and before 1914 there was not a great deal of either state violence or social disorder. However, the essential point is that the violence of the state was only made effective by the routinisation of the mundane seen in the everyday life of the state, so it is to this life that I pay attention. The banality of government explains the banality of state violence, the violence of the state itself becoming mundane.

Of course Britain did not leave the violence of war behind, but after 1815 for almost a century war occurred “elsewhere”, in the empire. This served to reinforce the fact that unlike other European states the British one was not dominated by military values or a military class. Prussia, for example, has been called an army with a land, not a land with an army. In 1870 the regular British Army numbered only 135,000, the Prussian army over a million, and this imbalance continued up to the Great War. Also, there was nothing like the tradition of European state service, as in the aristocratic-military Prussian tradition, where public administration emerged out of aristocratic landed estate administration very early on,

⁹ Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845–52* (Gill and Macmillan, 1994), and for another view, Robin F. Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Four Courts Press, 2004); Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (Verso, 2002); James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

in the shape of the so-called cameralist tradition.¹⁰ Unlike in continental Europe the British Army was not a closed organisation, with its own laws and its own technological systems. Nor did it have a system of values specific to army life, like the bureaucratic and professional European armies, so marked as these were by versions of honour such as the Austrian *Standesgemaess*.

Rather, it drew its values from the same sources as the prosperous middle classes more widely, above all those enshrined in the public schools and Oxbridge, as did the higher bureaucracy and the political class.¹¹ Alone among the well-to-do middle classes in Europe the British sent their children away from home to be educated (something seen in liberal America too). They did this en masse, and this too little remarked and remarkable fact has been fundamental to the particular historical path British society and the British state have followed. Where European children were sent away it was in much smaller numbers and to military school. The educational elite in Britain, those who did the educating that is, was as a consequence more broadly influential across the ranks of the well-to-do than was usually the case in Europe (in Germany the pedagogues were more directly part of the state-service tradition than in Britain). However, all this does not mean that the ruthless creation of systems of order by means of organised coercion was foreign to the British state. This was at home in Britain, but even more so in the empire and in Ireland. What it does mean however is that unlike in other states, where the bureaucracy did not have a culture in common with the rest of the elites, in Britain governance in society and in the state drew strength from this cultural unity, a strength that made it all the better at the practice of ordering others.

However, if these remarks may serve to check complacency and consensus, they can easily give the wrong impression of the state. First of all, the state itself is in question in this book: what this means is that when we begin to interrogate its actual operations it turns out to be something rather less organised, sentient and strong than it is often taken to be. Indeed the very use of the definite article in “the state” begins to look questionable as we go further into the book. If the state is a distinct entity, a “thing”, its ‘thingness’ turns out to be decidedly more indeterminate and problematic than is usually imagined. By the same token, if the powers of “the state” should not be exaggerated, nor should its negative,

¹⁰ E. N. Gladden, *A History of Public Administration* (Cass, 1972), vol. II, Ch. 5 on Europe, and Ch. 6 comparing the UK and USA. See also G. K. Fry, *Statesman in Disguise: the Changing Role of the Administrative Class of the British Home Civil Service 1853–1966* (Macmillan, 1969).

¹¹ Gwynn Harries-Jenkins, *The Army in Victorian Society* (Routledge, 1977).

10 Introduction

disciplinary and repressive aspects be the only part of the picture. Like power itself the state is productive. It confers on us identities, rights and values, enabling us as citizens to criticise and refashion it.¹² It should be plain that this book is not a critique of the state as somehow inherently repressive, though it is a book that is very critical of the liberal form of the state and of how it has got off the historical hook. The state, on the contrary, is the greatest and most necessary of all human inventions; and one likely to be with us for some time yet, for neoliberal attempts to “roll it back” paradoxically make state regulation and oversight of the “privatised state” ever more necessary, not less so. Despite these attempts it is also the case that the size of the state has stubbornly refused to decrease in line with neoliberal expectations.

In considering both the powers of the state and of freedom, as alike their limitations, we usually think about them in terms of people and what they think, do and say. However, the powers and limits of the state also owe a very great deal to the importance of the inanimate, material world. Until recently this has hardly been recognised. In fact, most historians, not just political historians, write as if things themselves do not exist and do not have agency in the world, indeed when harnessed to human designs do not have their own “material powers”.¹³ “Things” here are human things, human bodies as well as non-human, especially inanimate, things. However, it is the importance of non-human things and their place in history that needs to be most urgently recognised, for it is through these that power and social relations, and hence the state, are made *real*.

Above all perhaps this interest in the material world is important for political history and the history of the state in pointing to the significance of *technique* and technology. Technology is perhaps the overarching theme that gives shape to the book. My concern is with technology in the usual sense of the term, but also in a much broader sense, that of the techniques of governing oneself and governing others. Political techniques in fact, although it quickly becomes apparent that the seemingly neutral world of science and technology is eminently political, just as the political world partakes of science and technology. Therefore, I am concerned with the making of the state, with its production and its assembling. For this reason I from time to time employ the term “technostate”. If the term “modern state” has any significance it needs to encompass this deepening reach of the technical and techniques of power into all of life. However contrary to many present-centred understandings of technique and the technical the

¹² See below, pp. 30, 84, 171–4.

¹³ Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (eds.), *Material Powers: History, Cultural Studies and the Material Turn* (Routledge, 2010).