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0521783461 - State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1700 - Michael J. Braddick

Excerpt

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This book examines the development of the English state in the long seventeenth century. It is based on a relatively flexible definition of the state which allows for its use in relation to political forms quite different from the nation states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emphasis of the analysis is on the impersonal forces which shape the uses of political power rather than the purposeful actions of individuals or groups – it is, in short, a study of state formation, rather than of state building. Such an approach does not rule out the possibility of discerning patterns in the development of the state, however. On the basis of this flexible definition of the state, it is possible to tell a coherent story about state formation in this period and to offer some new answers to relatively well-established questions. In particular, it is argued that the development of the state in this period was shaped in important ways by social interests – particularly those of class,¹ gender and age. It is also argued that the long seventeenth century saw important changes in the form and functioning of the state, changes which were to some extent modernising.² Overall, therefore, this book offers a grand narrative of the development of the state in the seventeenth century, seeking to address long-standing questions about the relative autonomy of the state and the importance of this particular period in its longer-term history.

¹ This is a controversial term, of course. I use it here in the sense outlined by Keith Wrightson:

If we use a fairly eclectic definition of social class to describe a loose aggregate of individuals of varied though comparable economic position, who are linked by similarities of status, power, lifestyle and opportunities, by shared cultural characteristics and bonds of interaction, then I would argue that social classes, so defined, can be discerned in early modern England

‘The social order of early modern England: three approaches’, in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith and K. Wrightson (eds.), *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure. Essays Presented to Peter Laslett on his Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford, 1986), 177–202, quotation at p. 196. Class was not an exclusive consciousness, however, but a language of ‘differentiation’. There were other languages (those of ‘identification’) which cut across class distinctions – such as neighbourliness, kinship, religious identity or the relationship between patron and client, for example: *ibid.*, p. 199. Similar caveats should be entered regarding the use of the term gender, which was also unfamiliar to contemporaries but which has explanatory value none the less.

² For a discussion of this term see below, pp. 97–8.

An account of the development of the state was implicit in the Whig and Marxist narratives of the seventeenth century. The political crises of the 1640s and 1650s, and of 1688/9, were once seen as crucial to the development of the modern state, but in recent writings on the political history of the seventeenth century this question has largely fallen from view. Older narratives of the rise of bourgeois political power or of constitutional liberty have been demolished without replacement, and for most political historians the most interesting questions have been about the causes of the English civil war rather than its consequences. But one reason why the civil war loomed so large in narratives of English history was because of associated claims about the importance of the experience of the mid-seventeenth century to the development of the English state. For some historians the functional incapacity of the state has replaced ideological difference or social conflict as part of the explanation for political breakdown. There has been an allied account of functional failure in the early work of the ‘county-community school’ too, in this case attributed to the structural problem of local resistance to central authority. More recently, the discussion of the problem of the multiple kingdoms has, again largely implicitly, located the English experience in the context of broader debates about the early modern state. On the whole, however, the state has not been, explicitly, at the centre of the debate. What follows is in one sense a belated attempt to ‘bring the state back’ into our picture of the seventeenth century.

Even as it receded to the background in the writing of the political history of the century before 1640, however, the state was coming to prominence in social histories of the period. Village studies and social histories of crime, social and moral regulation and the prosecution of witchcraft have all made reference to, and illustrated, ‘the rise of the state’ in early modern England. Such accounts have not focused on formal constitutional arrangements but instead on the functioning of the state. Whereas the Whig and Marxist accounts were preoccupied with explaining tensions over the power to make decisions and to initiate legislation, this social history has been concerned with the actual exercise of state authority in the locality. But there is more than one contrast here: not only has the state figured more prominently in social than political histories, it has also been portrayed as a functional and institutional success. Where political historians of the period before 1640 have made reference to the state it has generally been as an explanation for political dysfunction: structural failure and incapacity are the most prominent features of the state in the work of Russell, Morrill and

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others. Claims about the weakness of the state are also implicit in religious histories of the sixteenth century – the functional incapacity of the government forms part of the explanation for the slow progress of Protestantism, the growth of Protestant sectarianism, and the survival and revival of Catholicism, for example. In the work of social historians such as Wrightson, however, the century before 1640 is said to have seen a great growth in the authority of the state and historians of crime have placed considerable emphasis on the displacement of informal means of dispute resolution by the use of the law.³

Historians of eighteenth-century Britain have been more explicitly interested in the development of the state than their seventeenth-century colleagues. Recent work has drawn attention to the state and to the importance or otherwise of the Glorious Revolution in its development. But here, too, there are contrasting accounts of the nature and purpose of the state. In much of this literature, fiscal-military functions are given great emphasis, as they are in much recent writing on many other European states in the early modern period. Typical of such accounts is Tilly's claim that 'war made the state and vice versa': that the escalating cost and complexity of warfare forced the development of elaborate bureaucratic systems, and the successful development of such systems enabled further bellicosity. This set of interests has been most clearly laid out for eighteenth-century Britain by Brewer in his influential study of the *Sinews of Power*. Clark, by contrast, has drawn attention

³ For excellent accounts of the debate about the causes of the civil war, see A. Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (London, 1998 edn), esp. chs. 1, 3; and R. Cust and A. Hughes (eds.), *The English Civil War* (London, 1997), Introduction. For the functional incapacity of the state, see C. Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 7; Russell, 'Monarchies, wars, and estates in England, France and Spain, c. 1580–c. 1640', in Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (London, 1990), 121–36; Russell, 'The British Problem and the English Civil War', *ibid.*, 231–51, esp. pp. 233–4; J. Morrill, *Revolt in the Provinces: The People of England and the Tragedies of War 1630–1648* (London, 1999), esp. 'Introduction'. For the effectiveness of state authority in local life see K. Wrightson, 'The politics of the parish in early modern England', in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London, 1996), 10–46, esp. pp. 25–31; K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1995), esp. pp. 201–3. For an overview of the history of crime in the light of the 'growth of the state', see J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750* (London, 1984), ch. 8. For Europe as a whole, see B. Lenman and G. Parker, 'The state, the community and the criminal law in early modern Europe', in V. A. C. Gatrell, B. Lenman and G. Parker (eds.), *Crime and the Law: A Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500* (London, 1980), 11–48. For social regulation see, now, S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England c. 1550–1640* (London, 2000). I am grateful to Dr Hindle for letting me see this book prior to publication. R. B. Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex: A Study of the Enforcement of the Religious Settlement 1558–1603* (Leicester, 1969); M. C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625* (Cambridge, 1996).

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to the importance of Tory-Anglican ideology to the legitimisation of political authority in the eighteenth century, and there are few points of contact between these interpretations. Clark's account, for example, gives emphasis to the transformative effects of Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform in the early nineteenth century as the moments in the modernisation of the state, rather than to the functional and institutional changes consequent upon the Glorious Revolution.⁴

Implicit in much work on the early modern state, of course, are such arguments about modernity and modernisation. We might discern two terminal dates for claims about the modernisation of the English state – Elton's claims for the 1530s and Clark's for the 1820s.⁵ In the intervening 300 years a number of other periods have been singled out as particularly important in this respect. The seventeenth-century revolutions, in particular, are often said to be important in the development of the modern state. It has been claimed, for example, that the 1640s and 1650s saw the assertion of constitutional safeguards of individual liberty, through a reduction in the executive power of the monarch. Those decades have also been seen as crucial to the rising political influence of agrarian and merchant capitalists, who took greater control over legislative authority.⁶ The 1690s too have been seen as significant in the triumph of capital or constitutionalism, and also in bringing the military revolution to England.⁷ The contrast, here as elsewhere, is not so much a result of empirical disagreement (although there is, of course, plenty of empirical disagreement about the importance of the 'Tudor

⁴ J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989); L. Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689–1815* (London, 1994); C. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford, 1992); T. Ertman, *Birth of Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997); B. M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, 1992); J. E. Thompson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extra-Territorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, 1994). It should be noted, of course, that Brewer is well aware of issues arising from legitimisation. J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985); Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁵ For a sense of this debate, see G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1953); C. Coleman and D. Starkey (eds.), *Revolution Reassessed: Revisions in the History of Tudor Government and Administration* (Oxford, 1986); and J. Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 6.

⁶ For the debate about the civil war, see Hughes, *Causes*; Cust and Hughes (eds.), *English Civil War*. For the importance of the 1640s for the propagation of a new concept of the state and of political obligation, see R. Tuck, *Philosophy and Government 1572–1651* (Cambridge, 1993). A similar case is made by K. Sharpe, 'A commonwealth of meanings: languages, analogues, ideas and politics', reprinted in Sharpe, *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England: Essays and Studies* (London, 1989), 3–71. ⁷ For the fiscal-military state see Brewer, *Sinews*.

revolution in government'). Instead, it arises from contrasting assumptions about what a discussion of the state involves. Elton's concern, for example, is with the bureaucratisation of decision-making at the centre of government; Clark's with the legitimisation of political power; others are more concerned with the effectiveness of its expression in relation to particular functions.

On the basis of these accounts quite different conclusions arise about the functions of the English state, its institutional forms and the chronology of its development. In social histories emphasis is given to the domestic functions of the state carried out by the institutions of county and parish governance – magistrates, constables and vestries. The operations of these institutions were closely tied to vested social interests. In these accounts, then, the state appears to have been far from autonomous and its institutional forms and legitimating languages were far from 'modern'. In political histories, by contrast, emphasis is given to the enforcement of confessional identities and the pursuit of fiscal-military effectiveness. Discussion of fiscal-military change gives emphasis to emerging bureaucracies and the increasingly modern languages of political legitimisation. The state, in such accounts, appears to be relatively autonomous of social interest and there is an emphasis on the relative modernity of state forms. These accounts are sometimes difficult to reconcile. For example, Tilly's account, with the exception of its sensitivity to the variations in the economic resources available to fund military effort, imputes a degree of autonomy to the state which contrasts sharply with the account of patriarchal, magisterial government in many social histories. Other such accounts, which include discussion of the English case, are equally indifferent to domestic governance and legitimisation. The accounts of social historians, on the other hand, have given much greater emphasis to these issues, but hardly any to the importance of fiscal-military developments.

Behind these historiographical debates, therefore, lie a number of more fundamental questions. Clearly there are varying accounts of what the state was used for and who benefited from its activities – the functional purpose and degree of autonomy of state power. Secondly, a related problem, there is clearly disagreement about what or who drove the development of state institutions. Here there are combinations of relatively determinist explanations or relatively ideological explanations. For example, explanations of the upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s in terms of class interest, or of those of the 1690s in terms of changing military technology, are open to charges of determinism. On

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the other hand, some explanations of the civil war and both seveneenth-century revolutions give much greater emphasis to the independent power of ideology, concentrating instead on arguments about how to secure political liberty. Similarly, changing conceptions of the proper sphere of legitimate political activity or the necessity of propagating and enforcing the true religion place the pressure for political change more clearly in the realm of ideas. In practice, of course, explanations (including the current one) pick a path somewhere between these rather stark extremes. Thirdly, there are varying accounts of which were the key moments in the development of the state and these disagreements are related to arguments about its 'modernity'. All the periods of development singled out for particular attention in the historiography have been said to be important to the development of the 'modern' state. Finally, for reasons particular to the way in which the history of this period has been written, these questions consistently raise the issue of the relationship between centre and locality, or between state and community. This book addresses these four related issues arising from these historiographical disputes: the nature of the relationship between centre and locality; the changing institutional form of the state (including its modernisation); the uses and degree of autonomy of state power; and the need for a more satisfactory chronological framework for the analysis of its development.

Clearly, in trying to readdress these questions, it is first necessary to tackle the problem of defining the state. The difficulty is to arrive at a definition which is useful in an early modern context, but which does not empty the term of meaning for us. In chapter 1 the state is defined as a 'coordinated and territorially bounded network of agents exercising political power', a definition which is coherent in modern sociological terms but sufficiently flexible to comprehend pre-modern state forms. Crucial to this definition is the idea that there is a distinct kind of 'political' power. The state is a network of agencies distinguished by the kind of power that they exercise, rather than the precise form of these agencies (there is no insistence that they be bureaucratic, for example) or the ends to which they were employed. Thus, the definition of the state as a general category is separate from the description of the institutions that comprised the state in early modern England. Having defined the state in general terms, therefore, chapter 1 goes on to describe the institutions which comprised the early modern state.

The principal concern of this book, however, is to describe how the institutions of the state were used, with what effect and by whom.

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Because the process of state formation is continuous, to describe the uses of political power is simultaneously to describe changes in the form and uses of the state. Chapter 2 outlines a model of political change to explain these changes. Looking at the whole range of institutions embodying political power, it is clear that no single will, or group interest, lay behind all the uses made of these offices. Different groups, responding to a variety of challenges and opportunities, sought to make use of the resources at their disposal. They attempted to redefine the scope of existing offices, or to invent new ones, and in doing so they appealed to legitimating ideas current in society at large. As a consequence, the uses of existing offices changed and it was the shortcomings of existing offices that called forth the creation of new ones. This process was undirected, there was no defined end in view and, in the absence of a single blue-print or design, the term ‘state building’ seems inappropriate. Instead, the more neutral term ‘state formation’ is preferred. But, although they were not the result of conscious design there were, none the less, patterns in these developments. Firstly, there were regularities in the kinds of challenges and opportunities which prompted new uses of political power. There were also regularities in the kinds of task for which particular forms of office were useful and for which particular legitimating languages proved most effective. We can, therefore, trace affinities between particular kinds of functional purpose, particular forms of office and the legitimating languages which offered the most effective explanations or justifications. This model does not presume that innovation derived only from the centre and at the expense of the locality, that there was a single pressure for change, or that a single interest or will lay behind it. It therefore provides the basis for a narrative of the changing form of the state in seventeenth-century England, but it is a narrative free of the weaknesses usually attributed to the Marxist and Whig accounts of this issue.

The first part of the book, therefore, is unavoidably concerned with issues of definition and with the conceptual underpinnings of the argument that follows. The rest of the book sets out to analyse the development of the state, so defined, in the long seventeenth century. Not all the agencies of state power were performing similar functions and neither were they legitimated in the same way, so that within the total network of offices we can discern semi-distinct sub-sets of offices or administrative initiatives. Three distinct ‘crystallisations’ of political power within the network of state agencies in England are distinguished – the patriarchal, military-fiscal and confessional states – each of which was

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experienced differently in the localities. In each case, differing patterns in development can be discerned – in the material conditions prompting innovation, the forms of office through which power was exercised and the languages in which this was legitimated. In each case different conclusions arise about the origins of the impetus for change, its chronology, the interests that lay behind the use of political power and the degree to which change was modernising. An important characteristic of political power is that it is territorially based, and a dramatic change in the early modern state was the transformation of the scale of this territorial base. Part v therefore considers this expansion, the development of the ‘dynastic’ state. In this expansion can be seen the working out of similar processes over new territories – in particular, parallels can be drawn with the experience of the patriarchal and fiscal-military states in the English core.

These categories are, of course, terms of art and they would have had little meaning for contemporaries. While useful for the analytic purposes laid out here, the main purpose of this book is to argue not for the usefulness of these particular categories, but for the model of political change laid out in chapter 2. The conclusion, in addition to drawing the threads of the analysis together in order to answer the questions set out above, also seeks to knit the understanding of political power back together again. Clearly, this model of political change provides a means to integrate quite disparate kinds of history – of social policy, financial, military and religious history, for example – but also to make connections between largely separate national historiographies – of the three kingdoms, Wales and the Americas. Of course, the treatment of all these historiographies is partial, driven as it is by a particular set of questions, and more than one narrative of the seventeenth century is possible. ‘Bringing the state back in’ in this way, however, not only offers some new answers to old questions but also provides a fruitful way of thinking across the boundaries set by our professional specialisations.

PART I

*State formation in early modern England**Introduction*

In seeking to ‘bring the state back in’ this book draws on a wealth of specialised work dealing with a great variety of aspects of seventeenth-century government. The state has been discussed in a variety of contexts, and quite different conclusions have been drawn about its form, the uses of state power, the chronology of its development and the interests that it represented. At the same time, some historians would deny the usefulness of the term in discussing early modern government altogether. Chapter 1 therefore sets about the problem of definition – in what sense was there a ‘state’ in early modern England? The answer offered here is that there was a coordinated and territorially bounded network of agencies exercising political power, and this network was exclusive of the authority of other political organisations within those bounds. It is argued both that it is reasonable to refer to this as a state in terms of modern social theory – it is not a definition which empties the term of meaning for us – and that it is a view that would have been comprehensible to increasing numbers of contemporaries. What separates the early modern polity from the modern one is not the absence of a state, but the specific forms of political power embodied in the state. This chapter also, therefore, describes the offices that made up the early modern state, and their responsibilities. In doing so, it defines the limits of the present study, describing which institutions are the proper subject of a study of the state in early modern England.

The definition of political power is, clearly, crucial to this approach since the control of political power is the essence of definition of the state. Political power is distinctive in being territorially based, functionally limited and backed by the threat of legitimate physical force. Other kinds of power may have one or more of these qualities, but political power is unique in its combination of all three. Normally, compliance with political power does not result from the use of force but from a recognition of the essential legitimacy of the action in hand. For these

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reasons, chapter 2 gives a more detailed account of legitimation, and of how the uses of their office by individual officeholders were represented as legitimate. In legitimating exercises of political power individuals justified their activities both in terms of the formal limits of their office and in terms of beliefs current in society at large. In order for this latter justification to be credible their actions had to be made to conform to some extent to those claims. Officeholders who claimed to be defenders of the Protestant religion, for example, had to sustain their credibility by acting in ways which appeared to do that. In effect, legitimation gave force to ideas whose generally understood meanings were not determined by the officeholders themselves. As a result, the extent to which individual and group interests could be given free rein was limited. Secondly, some forms of legitimation were more useful for particular purposes than others, and some were more modern than others, so that an account of the legitimation of administrative acts helps to explain both the effectiveness of state power in relation to particular functions, and the pressures leading to changes in the forms of state office. A discussion of legitimation, therefore, introduces the approach to the principal questions to be addressed – what gives shape and purpose to these offices of the state? Whose interests lay behind the use of state power and what were the important periods in its development? Some of the embodiments of the state in early modern England pretty clearly served particular interests, some of them were relatively autonomous and some were coming to resemble more closely the forms of the modern state. In exploring the ways in which political power was legitimated chapter 2 therefore lays out a model of political change in early modern England.