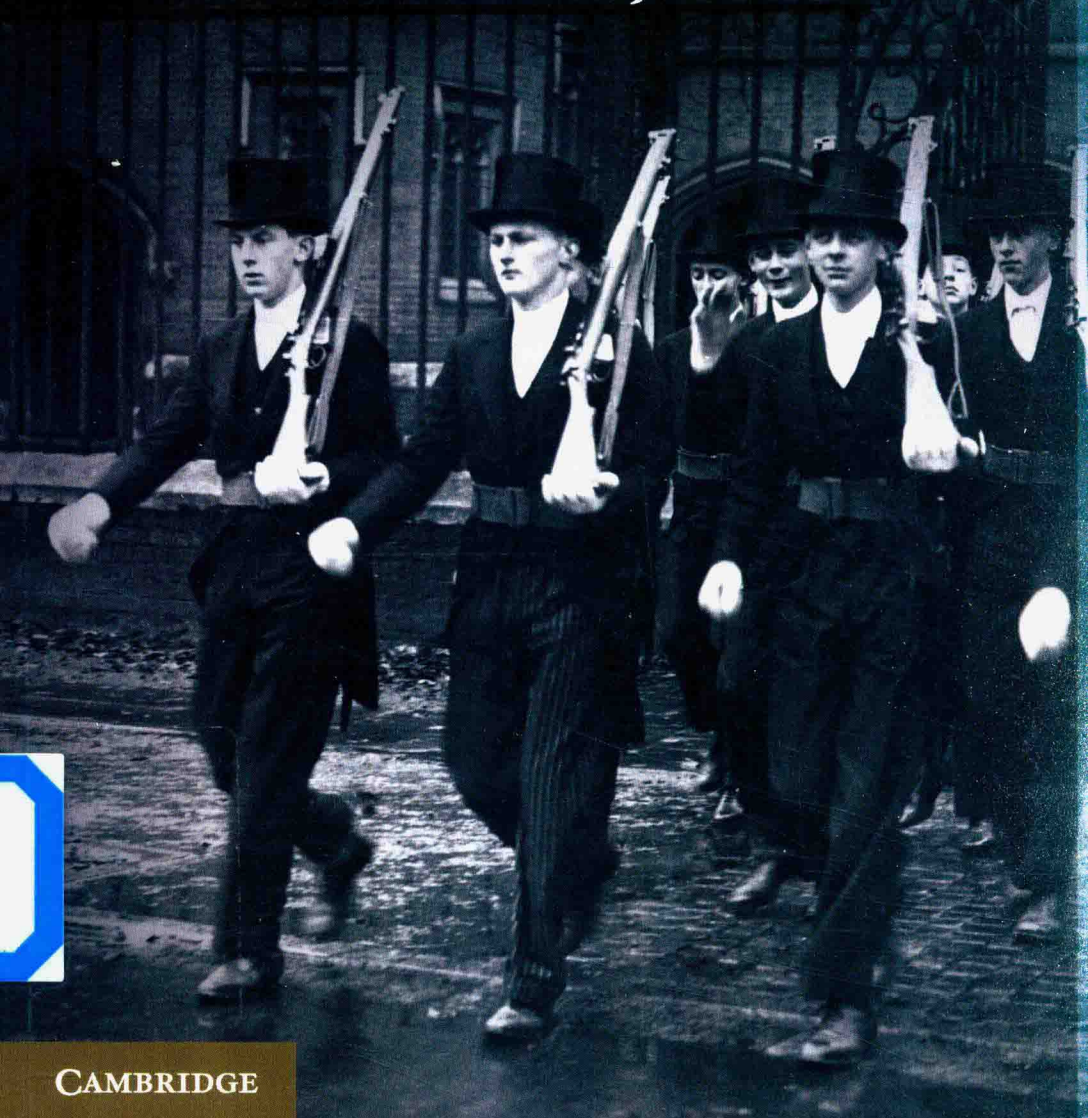


THE STATE OF FREEDOM

A Social History of the British State
since 1800

PATRICK JOYCE



CAMBRIDGE

The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800

Patrick Joyce



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The State of Freedom

What is the state? *The State of Freedom* offers an important new take on this classic question by exploring what exactly the state did and how it worked. Patrick Joyce asks us to re-examine the ordinary *things* of the British state from dusty government files and post offices to well-thumbed primers in ancient Greek and Latin and the classrooms and dormitories of the public schools and Oxbridge colleges. This is also a history of the “who” and the “where” of the state, of the people who ran the state, the government offices they sat in and the college halls they dined in. Patrick Joyce argues that only by considering these things, people and places can we really understand the nature of the modern state. This is both a pioneering new approach to political history in which social and material factors are centre stage and a highly original history of modern Britain.

PATRICK JOYCE is Professorial Fellow in History, University of Edinburgh and Emeritus Professor of History, University of Manchester. He is a leading British historian and has written and edited numerous books of social and political history, including *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), *The Oxford Reader on Class* (1995), *The Rule of Freedom* (2003) and *Material Powers* (2010).

For Simon Gunn and James Vernon, friends, teachers,
students

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PATRICK JOYCE,
Broadbottom and Manchester

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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.

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).

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

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.

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).