

Patrick Joyce,

“What is the state of things-Reconfiguring political history”

Common understandings of the state - at least in most mainstream political social science and political history:

the concentration of power and sovereignty at a centre

the state as a unitary actor, essentially the state as a “thing”, as real

the state /society distinction

in contradistinction, my short answer to the question what is the state?-the state as multiform, de-centred, dispersed in many institutions and through manifold means, cultural and material, human and nonhuman. That is, no real answer at all...

Therefore, this answer immediately involves another question, namely what are the means by which all this complexity and contradiction are held together in the first place?

I shall come back to this, by the way of, first, considering some of the intellectual currents that have in recent times served to question still dominant notions of what the state is. And then, second, some more concrete answers, answers drawn from my own recent book on the state, and from a joint paper I’m writing with Chandra Mukerji, forthcoming in *Theory and Society*. This is called “The state of things: reconfiguring state history and theory”:

Before this...Comments-the state as unthinkable object because we are penetrated by the very thing we wish to study, and obliged to say in traditional language what goes against the meta-language (Bourdieu). Eg. of the “state effect” idea - the ideological effect of saying the state a unitary actor.

Making use of the existing language in order to dissolve it-this goes for materiality too, in the aim to get away from traditional dualisms, eg culture/material

Bourdieu : the state as a “deus abscondis”, the absent God, in effect the foundation of the hidden, invisible principles of the social order ...and... that form upon which rests not necessarily consensus, but the grounds for as he says “the very existence of the exchanges that lead to a dissension”.

New approaches to the state

I shall indicate only two principle directions: the effect of both, but obviously of other currents too, felt across disciplines, in particular anthropology, geography, cultural studies, social theory, to some extent history.

1. Foucault on power, and the nature of governmentality....

On power -power is not a zero sum, a quantity et cetera; power as productive and not simply coercive; power as a precondition of human action, therefore of all the social interactions that human action eventuates in (where “social” encompasses the nonhuman too).

On the two senses of governmentality - the governmentalisation of the state and the “conduct of conduct.”

On political rationalities and political technologies

On the history of governmentality

sovereign/familial power; the governance of population and biopower; the governance of police; the growth of liberal governance.

Come back to at end...On the new LSE group run by Patrick Joyce and Colin Gordon - the new Foucault, the births of politics/the truth of politics. This group is called “Foucault, political life and history”, commencing June 2015.

2. The new materialism, so-called, it’s very wide meanings

Historiographical (and historical) context -the cultural turn and beyond?

(Reference to new sort of *political history* and their limitations rooted in the text/conceptual models of Cambridge and Bielefeld, also a new political history in France).

The inputs:

Science studies - Latour and the anthropology of science,

the history of science and technology re politics - Ken Alder, Rick Biernacki, Shapin and Shaffer, Shapin on truth,

actor network theory-social theory and the conception of the social as structure-framework and “flat”/the non-existence of the social as foundational and the assembly of

the social/of society. The concept of agency, esp. non human forms, esp. distributed agency, h and non-h.

Ref-Joyce, *Past and Present* article, 2010, “What is the social in social history?”, Joyce and Bennett, *Material Powers* (Routledge, 2010).

Some answers to what the state is:

The approach of my book, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013)

Section 1, the state of things: connecting. The theme of connectivity (on postal and administrative communications and the creation of systems);

Examples of the UK postal system and the India Office

PO- *ch 2. Man is made of the Post Office-Making the social technical* - The postal network becomes a system/Writing and postal technologies

Ch. 3. Postal economy and society-Making the technical social - Economising the state and society/Postal society: learning the state

Ch 4. Shift to India Office - *Filing the Raj-political technologies of the imperial state*. Making centres (of systems) - of things (on the file and file engineering and “The faculty of arrangement”

The overall theme of systems and centres - of communication and of the social life of the governors, also of humans and non-humans - the PO centres the state itself/ as do the physical document, the office and the house as also material entities.

Section 2, The state of men: governing (on the India Office/the public school and the Oxbridge College)

Ch 5. *The work of the state* - on the IO._The common knowledge of the state/The civil service statesman

Ch. 6. *The grammars of governance; pedagogies of the powerful* - Lineages of the liberal governer/Classics and the remaking of liberal education

Ch. 7. “*The fathers govern the nation*”: *the ps and the Oxbridge college* - Making mastery (on school regimes)/the *domus*/another kind of house (on Ireland)

The joint paper with Chandra Mukerji, forthcoming in *Theory and Society*, “The state of things: reconfiguring state history and theory”

- the four elements of our arguments and sections of the essay are as follows:

1. *The distinction between strategic and logistical power;*
2. *State formation and material administration* - explain via India Office, the capturing/black boxing of agencies in writing and by the file;
3. *State histories* - the partial and uneven shift from strategic to logistical power is one element in our history;

the deepening hold of technology and the technical over both everyday and political life;

the parallel strengthening of procedures of standardisation upon which states depend;

the emergence of the idea of self-regulation and the metaphors of the machine and the body, and the relationship of this to liberalism.

The changing relationship between territory and communication; the emergence of the state as a systematic reality.

To give the flavour of the argument, I present here part of our section on what we call

4. *“State imaginaries”also a section of our conclusion*

“State imaginaries” : Because states are diffuse and distributed entities, they gain a sense of coherence and direction by generating cultural imaginaries about what they are and what they can do -- aspiration for the future that turns political goals into ways of life. As much as states need modes of social coordination, they also depend on cultural modes of imagination -- not only the imagined communities of Benedict Anderson, but also imagined histories and destinies attached to the state. Administrations develop projects to build these cultural imaginaries, characterizing their dreams and their power through the impersonal environments they construct. They build a political identity with government buildings, infrastructures like roads, canals, and urban amenities, and public spaces like parks or public artwork. How these are designed and work is important to how politics is imagined. And how they work, as in effect scaffolding for thought and action, is explained by figured world theory. They provide cultural contexts for social worlds of action that treat cultural imaginaries as real and make them real in their consequences.

The political effectiveness of these programs is illustrated particularly well in the history of the French state. Mukerji has shown how art and architecture were under Louis



XIV used to imagine the French state as the carrier of the classical tradition and as heir to the imperial legacy of Rome. Mukerji uses figured world theory to expand upon Foucault's ideas about the Panopticon by explaining how people can learn from the symbolic and material spaces they inhabit. Enacting roles within the dream world of Roman revival forced nobles to inhabit these political logics, and entertain them as real. They were not forced to learn the lessons, per se, but in a controlled space like Versailles where courtiers lived, the lessons embedded in the chateau and park were hard to escape.

Mukerji argues that the architecture, art, and classical stories that were materialized in the park, performed for the different parties involved the dream of a French military empire like that of Rome, serving in effect as so many “props” or cognitive “scaffolding”. The activities seemed innocent enough, but had radical political effects. Dreams of Rome stood as a secular contrast to the older, sacred political imaginary underlying patrimonial politics, and the dreams of imperial glory made the rejection of traditional aspirations seem worthwhile for the nobles of the sword. The baroque and neo-classical art developed under Louis XIV had semiotic ties to the ancient world, and silently contributed to a political culture emphasizing military prowess, legal documentation/archiving, infrastructural development using natural knowledge, and mathematical precision in thought and design. The equation of France with Rome was revolutionarily modernizing, so it was not so easy to promote. Verbal assertions about France as heir to Roman greatness and descriptions of Louis XIV as a new emperor failed, but neo-classical architecture did not. Buildings indexing Rome semiotically made France more like the ancient empire and seem more likely to carry its mantle. The capacity to demonstrate material practices like those of Rome was quite different from representing the king as Apollo or Hercules. As Peter Burke points out, it was easy for critics to argue that Louis XIV was no Augustus, but as Mukerji has shown, it was harder to discount a triumphal arch in Paris. Architectural forms like triumphal arches created semiotic chains, connecting ancient Gaul, classical Rome, and France of the 17th century.

Figured world theory, as a cultural theory of learning, helps explain how the new political imaginary could be taught through things. And understanding the revolutionary character of dreams of Rome in French politics helps explain the meteoric rise in state power under Louis XIV. France had become a weak state dominated by the clergy under



Richelieu and Mazarin, and run by noble officials with independent powers alienated from the crown. But within twenty five years under Louis XIV the state became such a powerful one that it was called absolutist. The court did not starve nobles of their riches, as Elias asserted. And although Colbert worked on gaining power for the king through economic policies, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes destroyed the economy as Huguenots fled to England, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The French military was also not the cause of this change. The military was never fully taken from noble control, nor was it able to expand French territory to serve Louis XIV's dreams of empire. What changed in this regime was the turn to logistical politics in the name of Rome. As Mukerji has shown, the administration used territorial infrastructure to loosen noble control of land, and as Soll has demonstrated, Colbert used legal archives to revive precedents from the Holy Roman Empire to empower the state. In addition, the administration patronized academies and artisans at the Louvre to build dream worlds of classical revival at Versailles and in Paris. The dreams of Rome legitimated territorial practices, also the use of legal precedents from Rome, and set out a more worldly logic of power. In other words, the ancient world was used to construct by logistical means a modern dream of power.

Whereas in absolutist France the aim was to fuse state and society in liberal Britain it was to separate them. Therefore, state imaginaries took a different form than in France. I have considered the role of communications in doing this work of separation, in the form of the British Post Office. If people in the liberal state were to be “freed” in the realms of the market this was also so in civil society. Yet the “freeing” of these zones was accompanied by the invention of a whole series of attempts to shape and manage conduct within them in desirable ways. On the one hand, the public activities of free citizens were to be regulated by codes of civility, reason and orderliness. On the other, the private conduct of these citizens was to be civilized by equipping them with languages and techniques of self-understanding and self-mastery. As well as being one of the agents that facilitated commerce and industry, the Post Office was therefore also involved in the creation of the kind of subjects capable of existing and acting freely. The most crucial aspect of this was the ability to cultivate ethical subjects capable of self-subjection. The act of letter writing was itself an important aspect of this cultivation of self and external



awareness. Among other technologies the governance of the letter was the means through which the liberal state imaginary was constructed.

One of the particular features of the Post Office was the way it acted to extend the connections between the state, its land and the citizen, establishing its presence in every town and most villages in the country, embedding itself thoroughly in the practice of daily life. As connections were established over greater distance, the state and its systems of communication became essential to more and more of the citizen's life. The state and its communications' infrastructure was engineered into the lives of its citizens to the extent that much of the life of the nation came to depend upon its services. The transition from impermanent postal connectedness to permanent connectedness was of great significance in this regard. It meant that the network was always available, ever-present, in the sense that postal communications are always open for use, even if in practice their use may be limited. The correspondent is in theory always accessible, even if the letter is not written. The routes, links and stations of the network are always there.

Permanent connectedness could now be more fully “taught”, and learned. What evolved was a technology of trust in the state produced by human and machine-made predictability and reliability. Trust was performed in action, in use, the action of trusting in the use of the postbox for example, a receptacle often lone and isolated, and seemingly unprotected from theft and vandalism. The actual use of the system, its material embodiment in human practice, performed the state. Embedded in things and practices -in offices themselves, in uniforms- the post system became in time the object of a certain veneration, as something inherently British, efficient, unobtrusive and yet dependable, the ideal vehicle to represent the rights and liberties of the freeborn British letter writer.

As the network became increasingly systematic it took on the shape of both an actual and an imagined system. The postal network was therefore one element of the liberal state imaginary, increasingly looming large over contemporary life as a strange kind of entity, invisible and abstract on the one hand, but real and concrete at the same time.

However, in performing the state people also performed “society” and thus the separation of the two entities, unlike France. “Society” was partly formatted by the state, as in people's understanding something distinct from the state, and like the economy a

“naturally” occurring reality. This reality was the very sphere they were now enabled as citizens to operate in, part of a “free” liberal society, that part made possible by the free communication of information they could now enter into thanks to the Post Office. This political ledgermain depended not only on the state’s projection of distance between state and society, but precisely the opposite in many ways, namely the reiteration of presence, but of presence in the British case as something restrained and conditional, dependable and firm. Something that was present but not overwhelming, illiberal, and arbitrary. In short, the liberal state as a benign form of the liberal state imaginary (there were of course less benign versions).

Thus it is that in both cases, political imaginaries were embedded in things. This allowed material manifestations of the state to teach political aspirations and logics, and most of the time these operated below the level of conscious awareness. At other times they gave symbolic content, all too evident to people’s awareness, to state imaginaries. And while they brought coherence to the state, most states were and are fissiparous and complex. The coherence they brought was always qualified and conditional. In the liberal state disciplinary freedoms might be taken at face value and turned back upon the state. Nonetheless, the success and power of state imaginaries is apparent also, as in the case of absolutist France

Our joint work on Britain and France therefore demonstrates in different ways the importance of sociomaterial analysis to make sense of what states are and how they work. We both study impersonal modes of governance, distributed practices, and material tools of impersonal rule. We are building a materialist theory of the state, but not a teleological one. What makes state distinctive and powerful lies in their capacity for impersonal rule, but no one form of impersonal rule. This gives states a flexibility that is important to the longevity of states as institutions. The kind of analysis we propose allows us to understand states not as institutional forms with structural variants so much but as systems of impersonal rule that use material means of addressing emergent and changing problems of power. Some material practices promote dreams of political possibility, and others manage social hierarchy in political decision-making. This makes state power more like power as it is described by Foucault, distributed across people and things as well as laws and offices, the latter only being fully understandable in the former terms. Sociomaterial

analysis illustrates how important it is to study tools of impersonal rule like buildings, archives and canals to explain how power works, and to recognize that power is even more robust when it is made inarticulate through logistical activities, entering the figured worlds, the cultural forms, that operate often over extended periods of time, in what Braudel called the *longue duree*.

From the paper's conclusion...

Reimagining the state not as a thing, but as a shape-shifting assemblage of people and things allows us to understand state power differently. Rather than having the power of a totalizing system, a single bureaucratic embodiment of social rationality from which there is no escape, the state as we see it is powerful because it is multi-sited, material and technical. We call attention to the impersonal powers of the state, but are mindful of the personal ones too. However, we emphasise how the impersonal so often implements and augments the personal, rather than the usual story—the prescient personal merely setting the impersonal in motion. Being like this, the state is adaptable. It has many faces and forms so it is hard to identify and therefore hard to shape, whether the aim is to support or oppose it. People can object to policies or want to shrink government, but they want roads and functioning sewer and garbage collection systems. Even if they do not like what they perceive as the state system overall they want the things it brings and indeed take these for granted. Moreover, the state continually changes as new demands are made on it, for example making Internet access available in rural areas, or supporting wind farms or solar energy. It exists in subsidies to companies in some places as well as wires and generators in other places.

This flexibility and materiality make the state's presence in social life hard to pin down, hard to intellectually comprehend, and so hard to instrumentalize, making it difficult to change or oppose. The materiality of the state depersonalizes power far more than bureaucratization. Even faceless bureaucrats are more personable than computers, canals, roads, and sewers. And it makes little sense to blow up a sewer because you hate the government if you live where that sewer operates. So, the state becomes complicitous in everyday life through things. The power of habits turn into the powers of the state.

It is also the case that the state has no core or center because it is at heart a communication complex, one that keeps reweaving the fabric of government with changing lines of communication. This gives the state power over information and its flows, implementing as it does an internal process of negotiation, struggle and sharing that helps produce the flexibility and durability of the state, especially in the case of the liberal state. It may be hard to say what it is, but it is even harder to say what the state does because much of what it does is acquire and move information.

However, we do not replace one totalization of the state by another, recognizing as we do the state's contingency. The state is realized *in use*, as it were, as it eventuates historically. Mukerji has analyzed this in terms of what she calls the “unintended state”, different forms of the state coming into being not through some preordained plan but by means of the interactions (and so frequent contradictions) of different individuals, groups, technical processes, material objects, and so on. To extend the metaphor we earlier used, what matters is not the design but the engineering of the state, engineering frequently not being an exact science, and sometimes indeed “impossible”. Not only is the state historically contingent but it is also vulnerable and unstable. When things fall apart the centre cannot hold, or at least is hard put to it. Pipes leak, roads collapse, information in wires goes missing, people stop believing. Things, including humans, have in their operation unexpected consequences, and the new solutions created for these consequences in turn produce more problems.

Personal and impersonal power may gell but also contradict one another, as in the case of seventeenth-century France where the proto-technocrat and the king's agents as different human modalities of power collided. Personal power mobilizes the technosocial in its own defence-is indeed produced by the it- as Mukerji shows for French royal governance and Joyce for the new emerging forms of a “professional” civil service in nineteenth-century Britain. These modalities of personal state power, which we have not concentrated upon so much in this essay, have much in common with the *Lebensführungen*, ethical styles of life, that Weber wrote about and Foucault was so interested in. These styles of life are themselves not only supported but may be undermined by the errant workings of impersonal power. Also, the veil of secrecy that keeps state information flows mainly out of public view may only partly mask the nature

of the personal power operating at particular times, as in the case of the nineteenth-century British high civil service where the code of “honourable secrecy”, itself maintained by a whole new technology of “administration”, could be broken to reveal the (post-) aristocratic, part-patrimonial, powers it rested upon (David Vincent ref). Slippage of the veil also reveals often highly *dishonourable* exchanges of information and favours by which political work gets done inside government.

The strength of the state is therefore often bought at the price of dispersed power and muddled intentions and practices. It is not the all-seeing Leviathan it is sometimes taken to be. And, as part of the manifold assemblages that hold the state together human agency comes powerfully into the picture, not however in our account as solely or even mainly as intentional action, but nonetheless as actions reproduced and directed by humans, but now in the *habitus*, as part of the carrying on of daily life. In this sense what holds the state together is *us*. The state has grown to embrace so much of our existence that our daily life is inconceivable without it. This is not simply a matter of health, security, education and welfare, but "the state" regulates the air we breathe, the water we drink, the roads we walk on, the houses we live in, and much of what we do in our supposedly ‘private’ houses.

State power is therefore grounded in our bodies, our human relationships and in our links to the material, natural world. It is for example profoundly shaped by infrastructural systems we take so much for granted (until the machine stops). It is in the world of daily experience that the state exists as well as in the formal centres of power, so that the more this experience is given over to private and corporate capitalism the more we are imbued with the outlook and values of this rather than the collective and corporate values that the better nature of the state upholds. Realising that the power of our habits turns into the powers of the state, the aim of our essay has political as well as intellectual lessons. The silent powers of the state are around us and need to be named.