

# New Perspectives on State-Building and the Implementation of Rulership in Early Modern European Monarchies

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This article tries to outline some recent approaches which claim to explain the modes the process of state-building took in early modern Europe. A comparison with any of the Asian experiences could not be offered, so this is no attempt to explicate entangled or connected histories between Europe and Asia, but just a comparative note about European monarchies, which is challenging enough.

Traditionally, the state-building process in Europe has been conceptualised as the emergence of the fiscal-military state, characterised by a distinct set of political ideas and religious beliefs, fostered by growing taxes and bureaucracies, and accompanied by increasing numbers of laws and ordinances (Reinhard 1999; Wilson 2000; Contamine 2000). These customary ideas are not incorrect at all, but they are not sufficient to explain all the peculiarities of state-building in Europe. For this reason, in recent decades a number of supplementary approaches have been evolved. Firstly, the impact of personal networks on the process of decision-making at the princely courts and as a means of communication between centres and peripheries has been investigated (Reinhard 1979; Mączak 1988; Giry-Deloison and Mettam 1995; Bulst 1996). Secondly, the question of how justice and “good policy” were implemented has to a large extent now been answered (Stolleis et al. 1996; Härter 2000; Iseli 2003; Simon 2004), not only in central arenas, but on all regional scales, and most importantly on the local scale (Chittolini 1979; Aylmer 1996; Landwehr 2000; Holenstein et al. 2002; Hindle 2004). Thirdly, the concept of “empowering interactions” has most recently been worked out, which links neatly to the first and to the second proposal (Holenstein 2009). And finally, the idea has been amply discussed that ritual, ceremonies, and all kinds of cultural representations shaped princely rule in a way that set early modern politics fundamentally apart from its modern counterparts (Stollberg-Rilinger 2000; Asch and Freist 2005).

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There is no reason to emphasise the differences between these four conceptions. They are all actor-orientated, as they are all interested in the interaction and in the agency of individuals, groups and corporations. Any one of them tries to explain how politics worked, how deference and obedience was installed (Muchembled 1992; Braddick and Walter 2001). But they also try to answer such questions as who was involved in policy-making, what kind of participation was enabled, and what kind of communication errors caused serious trouble (Koenigsberger 1971; Blickle 1997). All added approaches have bid farewell to any kind of teleology. In this perspective, the absolute monarchy is no longer interpreted as a necessary step towards the modern nation-state. As a common goal, these recent approaches try to aggregate their findings into what one could term the specific political culture of the European princely state (Beik 1985; Brewer and Hellmuth 1999; Black 2004; Collins 2009; Blockmans et al. 2009).

Because Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, in her article in this volume on the culturalist perspective of state and political history, gives an insight into the meanings of rituals and ceremonies, my paper centres on the problem of how more or less daily communication between authorities and subjects was established either by personal interaction or by writing, and to what ends it was used (Becker and Clark 2001; Brakensiek and Wunder 2005). All recent research on this area starts from the simple observation that every kind of authority has to rely on the cooperation of at least some of its subjects (Lüdtke 1991). This universal law applies equally to European monarchies, principalities, and noble estates of the early modern period. To rule meant to organise interchanges of rights and liberties between the holders of the ruling power and those affected by them on a more or less regular basis. Moreover, and this was a crucial part of the occidental tradition, princes and lords sought to define themselves as acting not like tyrants, but rather like Christian authorities endowed by God with the office of maintaining the public peace, administering justice, and promoting the common weal (Weber 1998; Reinhard 1999). Certainly, this cannot be understood without examining the communication process as presented by European political theorists (Pagden 1987; Dreitzel 1992; Nitschke 2000; Schorn-Schütte 2004; Goldie and Wokler 2006; Schorn-Schütte and Tode 2006). Furthermore it has been elaborated that encounters with the great Asian powers and increasing knowledge of their political systems shaped European self-understanding in a particular way (Osterhammel 1998).

To facilitate interchanges between the rulers and the ruled, specific institutional arrangements were set up that included policies specifically designed for these purposes, administrative bodies (or other kinds of organisations) that could implement the policies, and channels of communication to articulate consensus or conflict. The actual type of rule that resulted in specific cases thus rested on prevailing ruling concepts and their symbolic representations, as well as on bureaucratic developments, and no less on customary habits of communication. Looking at this institutional arrangement, the term “state-formation” is not entirely comfortable, since recent research has failed to reveal any kind of demiurge that could have directed any such process in a coherent way. Instead, we can observe a tacit process of trial and error that involved not only the governors, but also their public servants

and many of their subjects at every step (Reinhard 2001; Emich 2005). This process affected the whole arrangement of a given ruler's policies, public offices, and channels of communication.

To reformulate it with André Holenstein: "One of the most specific characteristics of the early modern state was the absence of a uniform state authority. We observe instead a complicated, fragmented and multi-layered structure of authority and political agency; [...] the houses, the guilds and corporations, the communities, the estates and various groups of functional elites participated in the process of rule, thereby inducing a significant layering and fragmentation of political power" (Holenstein 2009: 5). Several attempts have been made to explore these complex relations. Since the 1980s, a number of studies have shown that the state-building process can be interpreted as resulting from personal interactions at the princely courts (Asch 1991; Cosandey and Descimon 2002; Duindam 2003; Hengerer 2004), and between the centres of rule and administrative peripheries (Kettering 1986; Windler 2000; Reinhard 2004). These studies focusing on the impact of personal networks contribute in a specific way to understanding political culture. Wolfgang Reinhard describes the role of power elites in the papal state and in secular monarchies, as reliable supporters of the expansion of state authority: by serving the crown, these elites were able to climb up the social hierarchy; in consequence, increasing the power of their employer would have seemed to be in their own best interest (Reinhard 1996). Correspondingly, Heiko Droste suggests comprehending the early modern state as a joint enterprise of crown and servants, held together by common benefits and common values, structured by a culture of patronage and loyalty (Droste 2003).

These considerations can be substantiated if one looks at how relations between peripheries and centres were shaped by certain local holders of office who functioned as an interface between central authorities and the local population. Such studies have been carried out for a number of regions in the Habsburg Empire (Neugebauer 1996; Mat'a and Winkelbauer 2006; Brakensiek 2009b), in some German territories (Robisheaux 1989; Holenstein 2003), in Spain (Lambert-Gorges 1993), France (Fontaine 2003), Italy (Grendi 1993; Astarita 1999; Castiglione 2005), England (Wrightson 1996; Hindle 2004) and Scandinavia (Gustafsson 1994; Kujala 2003). All these studies have highlighted the ability of local or regional holders of office to integrate their own activities as commissioners of the crown within the complex network of relations and local power structures as crucial for the state-building process (Brakensiek and Wunder 2005). As Christian Windler states, using a large Andalusian dominion as an example, local holders of office were the critical interfaces between local systems and larger entities (Windler 1992). Lower officials, in particular, had to balance the demands and requirements of their office against their considerations of local circumstances. Michael Braddick states for the English case that the great strength of government by holders of office was their discretion, their ability of fitting central policy to local needs (Braddick 2000). From a central European perspective, this judgement can be accepted with no reservations: *Herrschaftsvermittlung*, the mediating of power, was far more important than any kind of direct rule managed by state bureaucracies or the armed forces (Brakensiek 2009a).

At the very end of the chain of command, communal officials in towns and villages were increasingly integrated into regular communication with the authorities of the princely states (*Les communautés rurales*—Rural communities 1987; Blickle 1997, 2000). Traditionally, this has been interpreted as a loss of autonomous power of the communes, which is certainly true. But alongside the rising power of the princely states, the functions of the communes increased, because the few local state officials could not avoid relying upon communal functionaries to implement the multiplied state agenda. In the villages, this could be the parish priest as the traditional provider of writing, but normally peasant village officials were held responsible for the collection of taxes and tithes, the construction and maintenance of paths and ditches, the recruitment of soldiers, and the organisation of schools and poor-relief. From the sixteenth century onwards, these communal officials were obliged to record their transactions, and from the seventeenth century they were increasingly able to do so. Usually, these were unsalaried offices, only occasionally remunerated by reduction of taxes and services, or by exemption from military service. The early modern rural commune was thus deeply integrated into the emerging territorial state. And this was also increasingly true in the case of the urban communes. There, communal politics lay in the hands of local dignitaries who attained their positions by cooptation, normally combined with princely confirmation.

Territorial authorities maintained regular cooperation with towns and villages to such an extent that communal authorities became increasingly integrated into their hierarchies. But the emerging states also depended to a great extent on the functioning of the communities. For this relation, German historiography has coined the term *beauftragte Selbstverwaltung* (Wiese-Schorn 1976) which may be translated as “local self-government at the prince’s command, mandated self-government, self-government mandated by the ruler, *vel sim.*” (Hindle 2001). It must be emphasised that even those mayors, town councillors and village officials who were involved in permanent cooperation with the territorial states could scarcely claim to hold fixed and documented rights of political participation. But they could rely on pragmatic habits of participation, which were a by-product of the everyday business of governing.

Interaction between centres and peripheries was not confined to princely holders of office and communal officials. Recent research emphasises that state governance rested on selective cooperation between these officials and a great number of individual people, normally the heads of households, who were made responsible for delivering taxes, labour, military services, and information. But again, this was no communicational one-way street. Subjects in subordinate positions participated in the political process, sometimes through violent conflicts, frequently through legal disputes, mostly in the form of consensual proceedings (Lüdtkke 1991). A great variety of means enabled and shaped the communication between the bureaucracies, the local notables of towns and villages, and individual subjects: visitations by commissions (Zeeden and Molitor 1977; Zeeden and Lang 1984; Menne 2007), reports by office-holders (Holenstein 2003; Tantner 2007), written petitions (Kümin and Würigler 1997; Nubola and Würigler 2005), “running to court”

(Blickle 1998), accusations and censure by the subjects (Ulbrich and Hohkamp 2001; Collin and Horstmann 2004). All these means contributed to a lively process of communication between the governments and the population.

These interactions of subjects with communal and princely officials permitted considerable opportunities for participation; local dignitaries as well as “ordinary people” could address themselves to state authorities using these legal proceedings. Recent research on the practices of the *gute Policey* has detected that many statutes promulgated by the German principalities had been substantially influenced by the persons affected (Landwehr 2000; Holenstein et al. 2002). On the one hand, the expanding agenda of “good policy” and the existence of several competing authorities, which was typical for the situation in the Holy Roman Empire, created an institutional framework that widened the scope of action for the subjects, and, to some extent, opened the gates for their participation. On the other hand, these interactions contributed to the intensification of dominion: a petition from “ordinary” villagers and town-dwellers only had a chance of being received if it complied with legal proceedings, respected a humble style, and used a “permitted” political language. One has to take into account that all these forms of participation were embedded in a non-egalitarian concept of a *societas civilis cum imperio*. In this concept, the growing lower classes normally were viewed as clear objects for discipline, and not as possible partners in the bargaining process. Consequently, the offer to participate was first and foremost addressed to the better-off heads of households (Shennan 1986).

Another important area of bargaining was jurisdiction, which was used by subjects on their own initiative (Dinges 2000). By appealing to courts, subjects took up an offer and an opportunity provided by the public authorities. In doing so, they pushed the state into the position of a mediator with sufficient authority and legitimacy to decide a conflict. Communities, corporations and individuals were most likely to adopt such instruments when local mechanisms to maintain order and to settle disputes were under pressure and reaching their limits. By calling in the state’s legal authority, the litigating parties from a local society sanctioned state authority as a whole.

To summarise, the early modern state was not a result of princely will, but the outcome of a multitude of practices, which succeeded in transforming individual or group interests into court judgements, laws, or administrative measures, so that these particular interests gained authoritative validity and legitimacy. In this perspective, the early modern state resulted from communicative processes which André Holenstein suggests characterising as “empowering interactions.” There was a strong, empowering reciprocity between the use of state power as embodied in the holders of office and incorporated in state authorities by groups and members of the local society, on the one hand, and the increasing authority and legitimised power of the state, on the other hand. Whether these “empowering interactions” resulted in a global change of common attitudes towards the emerging states, or, to use Michel Foucault’s term, whether *gouvernementalité* arose, is a matter for discussion (Foucault 1989).

One should bear in mind that early modern Europe was not as uniform as this paper, for the sake of making some general remarks, suggests. If one compares different territories, it becomes clear how the diverging institutional arrangements shaped the scope for action available to the various estates, groups and individuals. Important variations can be detected by investigating comparatively small territories like most of the German principalities, but also the Danish or the English monarchies on the one hand, compared with larger, more complex empires like the Spanish or the Austrian Habsburg monarchies on the other hand (Elliott 1992). In the latter, the population was usually left in the custody of their aristocratic lordships. It was the local lords, and not the crown, who directed the maintenance of public order (Evans 1979; Schramm 1996).

In the lands of the Habsburg monarchy, it was not before the middle of the eighteenth century that regional courts and administrative offices were built that opened the gates for empowering interactions between the court in Vienna and individual subjects or corporations, for example, in Bohemia or Lower Austria (Winkelbauer 2003). And if we look at Hungary, the situation is even more complex, because of the deeply segmented structure of this country. There, Hungarians of the Calvinist or Catholic creeds lived alongside Catholic Swabians who spoke German, Wallachians of the Romanian Orthodox Church who spoke Romanian, Ruthenians of the Uniate church, and smaller groups of Greeks, Gypsies, Jews and Armenians (Radvánszky 1990; Fata 2000). This profoundly affected the communication between the authorities and their different subjects, because each of the populations acted as a corporate and privileged group, rather than individually or as village communities, which might have formed larger unified associations. The segmented units of society raised the agreed tributes and paid them to the nobility, but apart from that, they sustained church and communal life on their own (Vári 2005).

Under these conditions it becomes clear why the self-governing bodies of the gentry, called *comitatus*, were absolutely central to the administration, jurisdiction and politics of the Hungarian kingdom (Schimert 1995; Dominkovits 2006). The assemblies of these counties elected representatives to the Diet of the kingdom, which met at Pressburg (modern Bratislava), and this Diet was the counterpart for the bargaining process with the Habsburg crown (Bérenger 1973; Tóth 1996; Pálffy 2003). Because of the long distances between each county and the government departments at Vienna or Pressburg, and because of the denominationally, ethnically, and socially segmented character of Hungarian society, the *comitatus* became the essential unit in the indirect rule of the Habsburg monarchs (Kubinyi 1996). This might sound familiar to historians dealing with the history of empires in Asia. There seems to be a common experience of “indirect rule” inside empires, which is far older than the colonial policies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It should be remembered that this may well have nothing to do with connected histories, but with the trivial point that size matters. Compared to complex empires mostly consisting of unions of monarchies, in most German principalities (Burkhardt 2006; Brakensiek 2009a), but also in the comparatively small and uniformly structured Danish monarchy (Gustafsson 1994), empowering

interactions between the central and the local spheres were more easily undertaken. Here, jurisdiction and administration was in the hands of legally trained officials, who were appointed by the prince and controlled by central government bodies. The small scale of administrative districts made it possible for the subjects to contact the local officials of the prince directly. The same holds true in a reverse direction. The individual subject could be integrated much more deeply into communication, which enhanced the ability of the princes and their bureaucracy to penetrate the country to a high degree, exceeding the possibilities of the greater European empires. This style of government was of some importance for the survival of minor powers, which cannot completely be explained by their position in the system of the European military powers.

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