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Responses

There were States in Medieval Europe: A Response to Rees Davies

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Rees Davies's questioning of the current fashion for talking about medieval states (Davies, 2003) is characteristically stimulating and persuasive. Not surprisingly, in view of his references to my essay on the historiography of the medieval state (Reynolds, 1997), I nevertheless find it not persuasive enough.[1] I agree with a lot of what he says but the main thrust of his argument seems to me to perpetuate the tendency of medieval historians to isolate themselves from discussions from which they could profit and to which they could have much to contribute.

I quite agree in deploring the fashion for using the word state in discussions of medieval polities without any explanation of the category to which the supposed state belongs and why it belongs there. I also quite agree that we should not go back to the old political history and its concentration on high politics or join in the teleological search for the origins of modern states. But politics and power matter. Historians who live in societies in which power is exercised in part through states have reason to think about the characteristics of this kind of polity, whether states existed in the periods they study, and the difference between societies with and without states. In other words, we should neither blindly follow the fashion for using the word nor stubbornly avoid it, but, as Davies suggests, think about our "prior category assumptions" when we use it.

Some historians who specify what they see as the defining characteristics of states in their period seem to start from what they think was new or important in that period, as do the early modernists who focus on absolutism, standing armies, regular taxes, bureaucracies, or professional diplomacy, or the later modernists who emphasise communications, education systems, economic policies, and the general contrast with the "traditional" states of the Ancien Régime. All this is fair enough in describing the characteristics of particular sorts of states, though the novelty of the chosen characteristics sometimes suggests that ideas about earlier polities come from old textbooks. Even less adequate is the way that many European (and not just British) historians seem to think

particularly in terms of their own state, its history and characteristics. The last thing I want to do is extend this habit of fitting the definition to particular periods or countries so as to use the word state "in any sense consonant with medieval practice" (Davies, p. 284). Doing that virtually rules out the kind of serious comparisons of polities and periods that we need if we are to turn mere assumptions about variants and changes into solid arguments based on evidence about each of the phenomena that one is comparing. It seems to me easier to compare if one uses a common vocabulary with some definition or recognition of the accepted sense of the key terms in it. The prevalent tendency to equate "state" with "modern state" cannot be accepted or questioned unless one says what one means by state and looks at earlier polities.

It seemed to me when I wrote about the historiography of the medieval state that I needed to start from a definition that would make it possible to compare and contrast polities in any period or continent according to characteristics that look significant whatever the context. I did this by amending Max Weber's definition of the modern state. That seemed to me, as it has seemed to others, to be useful in its focus on the control of the legitimate use of physical force, but it also seemed to need amendment, not so as to fit medieval states, but so as to fit most states in any period, including the modern ones for which he intended it. It would perhaps do better as an ideal type than a class or category into which some empirical examples would fit and others would not. My amended definition, which I adopted, not as the best or only possible one, but simply to make clear how I would use the word, was that a state is an organization of human society within a more or less fixed area in which the ruler or governing body more or less successfully controls the legitimate use of physical force. This differed from Weber's chiefly in the substitution of "control" for "monopoly" and the double addition of "more or less".

There seems to be a significant difference between societies or polities in which the control of the legitimate use of physical force is formally located in specific persons or institutions and those in which it is not. Those in which it is, and which by this measure count as states, admittedly constitute a huge category, with many variations of economy and of social and political structures and ideologies. Even modern polities which seem to be generally accepted as states vary widely in size, internal structures of power, and much else: some are federal, which raises problems (which I shall not discuss here) even about the amended definition. So does the common reference to their impersonal and differentiated institutions: formally impersonal institutions were not invented, and

interpersonal relations among politicians do not seem to have become insignificant, either in 1500 or 1789, while differentiation has become less clear in the age of privatization, quangos, and "private-public partnerships". Medieval polities varied too, and much more widely than the traditional talk of feudalism and universal empire suggests. There are, of course, many other questions to consider about medieval government, as well as about medieval societies in general, but, I suggest, it is nevertheless worth considering whether any medieval polities fell within either my amended definition or a better one. If they did, in what specific ways, without relying on labels like feudalism or vassalage, did they differ from later states?

My conclusion was, and is, that a good many medieval polities, whether kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, other lordships, or city-states, could be classified as states – not because I want to bestow "an almost endless elasticity on the word and concept" (Davies 2003, pp. 283–4), but because the evidence I have looked at suggests that they exercised a more or less successful control of the legitimate use of physical force within their borders. That does not mean that they eliminated crimes or even armed revolts, or even punished all or most of them, or that all their subjects regarded all that their rulers did as legitimate: to demand that would disqualify many modern states. What I argue is that the kind of control they exercised, with varying degrees of success, puts them in the category I have defined. I even included a good deal of post-Carolingian France as an area of unstable mini-states: unstable and very small but still states. To call it a society *sans État* or "stateless" is to ignore academic discussions about the characteristics of stateless societies. In eleventh- and twelfth-century France a very large proportion of the population (maybe 90%?) lived under a coercive control which they are as likely to have accepted as more or less legitimate as their descendants did under larger and more stable units of jurisdiction and government. The impression of statelessness is created by concentrating exclusively on the relatively small number of people whose disputes are recorded in cartularies and chronicles and by assuming that the only possible state in France is one that covers the whole country.[2] The evidence about the way government worked in early medieval France is scarce. Much more is known about the fourteenth-century lordships of the Welsh March, partly because there are more records, but chiefly because of the illuminating way Davies himself has used them. I reckon that his Marcher lordships were states – and not just "virtual states" (Davies 2003, p. 294; Davies 1978, esp. pp. 149–75), and I should have said so in 1997. The fact that they were peripheral to the kingdom of England and to English historians or

that they later lost the independence they had is irrelevant to their classification. Teleological concentration on the manifest destiny of the modern state is unhelpful to the analysis of medieval politics whether in France, the UK, or anywhere else. It is more significant that some of the French or Marcher lords were not completely independent, whether formally or in practice. That, however, calls for closer analysis, rather than rejection of the primary classification merely because the words and concepts strike the casual reader as anachronistic. It might even invite comparison of the phenomena with the actual workings of international politics in the age of supposedly sovereign modern states. One source of power in medieval Europe that I firmly excluded from my category of states was the church (Reynolds 1997, pp. 119–20). As Davies says, its claims were very high and fear of the hereafter formed in medieval circumstances a very potent form of control. I would maintain, however, that it was not the kind of control that would put it (as opposed to the Papal state or other areas ruled by bishops in much the same way as secular rulers) into the category covered by my definition.

Before considering, however briefly, how polities changed at whatever time they are thought to have given way to "modern states", it may be useful to emphasise the distinction Davies draws between words, concepts, and phenomena.[3] We are both, in this context, primarily concerned with phenomena, that is, the existence or non-existence of medieval polities that we would either of us call states. To object to the use of the word state for medieval polities because the Latin word *status* then had different connotations from the modern English "state" is worse than "obtuse academic pedantry" (Davies 2003, p. 283). It is an obtuse confusion of categories. The notions or concepts that words represent are more important in this context, and it is important to distinguish one's own notions from those of people in the past. I am not sure that the middle ages had none that corresponded to any of the various modern notions of the state. Though not all the medieval polities that I consider states were kingdoms, and not all kingdoms were states, some references to kingdoms or discussions of kingdoms seem to me to suggest something close to modern ideas of the "nation-state" (Reynolds 1998). Whether that is so or not, it remains a different issue from whether any medieval polities came within my – or any better – definition: political structures can, after all, exist quite well without academic discussion about them.

It is no part of my argument to say that the structures and workings of governments in the middle ages were the same as those that came later. They were different, and not just because they were more primitive (whatever that means) or contained the seeds

(whatever that means) of later developments. It would obviously be pointless to try to summarize here how and when medieval polities were transformed into modern states, even if I had the knowledge to do it. Here, however, are a few suggestions of a wildly broad kind which pay a bit more attention to what is known about the middle ages than modernists generally pay and to academic discussions of states in other periods and continents than medievalists generally pay. Medieval government was both hierarchical and collective, relying heavily, in theory and practice, both on voluntary submission and active popular participation. Popular participation of course means, as it generally meant until the twentieth century, only the participation of respectable, adult, male householders. Hierarchy, I suggest, became stricter in the later middle ages and after as increasingly professional law and bureaucratic government defined, enforced, and recorded it. The same forces meanwhile weakened collective government, though maybe less than was suggested in the nineteenth century by those who looked back disapprovingly on the Ancien Régime. With the eighteenth century wholly new ideas of a different kind of popular or collective government appeared that would shape new structures of government. Many of all these various changes in ideas and structures were influenced, perhaps at least partly determined, by economic changes and new technologies of communication and war. It is all too complicated to fit the Rankean picture of "the first states in the world" appearing in fifteenth-century Italy (quoted in Reynolds 1997, p. 117).

Excluding medieval structures from the history of statehood, or allowing one or two in simply as the prehistory of particular modern states, impoverishes the discussion of both medieval and later history. Using a common vocabulary, with care and thought for the concepts and phenomena one is comparing, ought to enrich both. In this kind of comparative discussion "lordship", though absolutely suitable in other discussions about medieval polities, is no substitute. As a word applied peculiarly to the middle ages, it discourages comparisons. It is also ambiguous, being used both for what I would call government and for relations of patronage ("good lordship" etc), which are surely quite different. Whether, given the different national historiographical traditions, it conveys quite the same as *Herrschaft* or *seigneurie,* or they convey the same as each other, I doubt. The reason Davies found French and German scholarship so refreshing when he was studying the Marchers after a diet of English works focusing on royal administration and Strong Central Government was, I suspect, not the words but the phenomena that the French and Germans were studying. The conditions they described looked more like his.

Professor Davies and I agree in wanting more comparisons. The only thing, I suspect, that we really disagree about is the vocabulary. He is afraid, to quote from an email he sent me, that using "a common vocabulary can lead to an unthinking assumption about concepts and phenomena" so that historians "unthinkingly equate the state with the modern state." I share his fears but I would rather be more optimistic. I want to believe that medievalists may gradually come to pay more attention to what non-European historians and scholars in other disciplines have to say about states and learn to use the vocabulary more critically and analytically. I also cling to the hope that modernists may gradually learn to pay more attention to a great chunk of European history that has more in it than they learned at school or as undergraduates. Maybe the kind of discussion that Rees Davies has inaugurated will help.

Notes

[1] I shall not repeat here what I said then beyond what is necessary to reply to particular points Davies makes, and shall not repeat the references I gave there to other works.

[2] Patrick Geary, "Vivre en conflit dans une France sans État, 1050–1200", *Annales ESC* 41 (1986), pp. 1107–33, to whom Davies refers, himself uses the expression *sans État* only in his title and acknowledges the coercive control over the lower classes, though he suggests that it covered only the unfree, which seems debatable.

[3] The difference between them (using different terminology) was discussed by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The meaning of meaning* (K. Paul, Trench, Trubner: London, 1923), pp. 13–15; further discussions in e.g. J. Lyons, *Semantics* (University Press: Cambridge, 1977), vol. I, pp. 95–119, 175: R. Tallis, *Not Saussure* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1988), 114–16. As applied to medieval history: R. Schmidt-Wiegand, 'Historische Onomasiologie und Mittelalterforschung' *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 9 (1982), 49–78; S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and vassals* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1994), pp. 12–14.

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