

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY – Government

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ANCIENT PERIOD

Etruscans. The culture of Western Europe, in the period prior to the birth of Christ, is for the most part close to its archaic roots—in its undeveloped paganism, its readiness to brawl for territory and goods, and its weak sense of organizational administration. In the case of the Etruscans—a deeply rooted and still little understood culture flourishing on the West coast of Italy during the period of the Roman monarchy and the very early Republican Period—we encounter a highly sophisticated but also archaic western European presence which interacted creatively with Roman culture, and which can, with the limited conditions just sketched, be considered part of Western European culture.

Influence on Rome. The coastal cities of Etruria expressed themselves in a language unrelated to Latin, and outside the Indo-European language family. While the Romans appear to have broken from Etruscan overlordship in the sixth century, BC, the Etruscan cultural bridge was responsible for the introduction to the Romans of many pathways to Hellenistic and later Greek culture, as well of many noteworthy traits of Roman culture: the Romans followed the Etruscans in numbering their citizens in ‘centuries,’ groups of one hundred; in the establishing and avid following of gladiatorial games; in the practice of public reading of auguries, in which animal entrails were consulted as a guide to the future—foreign policy in the public square.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview It is worth starting with the sense that the ‘idea’ of nationality’ came only recently into the western world: such an idea was hardly imaginable to a citizen of the Middle Ages in Europe--for that matter, perhaps, to any earlier citizen of West European society, in which tribalism, monarchy, and regionalism--cf. the city-state in Greece--had hitherto provided the available exemplars. Similarly, it was still to be a good three to four centuries, after the end of the Middle Ages, before Mediaeval culture could fall under the organizational spell of the notion of the nation.

The early mediaeval period, in Western Europe The early mediaeval period, let’s say from 400-1000 C.E., brings together many kinds of governmental process--much of it constructed around the institutions of Feudalism, with its regional agricultural underpinnings. During this period there were significant moments of coming-together, when a competent ruler and a cultural milieu coincided, as during the reign of Charles Martel (686-741 C.E.), in what was a proto-France, or of the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814 C.E.), around whom what we call the Carolingian Renaissance of literature and art took shape. There was the fictive Holy Roman Empire, often traced in origin to Charlemagne himself, sometimes to Otto I (dating from 962 C.E.), and nominally existent until the early 19th century, after having survived dynastic episodes of many varieties. In the larger sense, however, the governments of early mediaeval Europe were fleeting operations, rarely far from the kinds of threat posed by Barbarians to the Late Roman Empire, and frequently harassed almost to death by the incursion of tribal forces like the Huns, Magyars, Vikings, and Anglo Saxons, who appeared out of nowhere and undermined the best efforts of settled life.

The Church It is no surprise that the Catholic Church entered the picture early, by the third and fourth centuries C.E., to provide structure and, increasingly, secular possessions and power. Following on such Church Councils as Nicaea (325 C.E.), in which the Church consolidated its fundamental beliefs, and asserted its primacy as an interpreter, for the civilized world, of the 'mysteries of faith,' the Church in Rome, and its satellite power centers throughout Europe and North Africa, became the firmest structure for communities cut loose, in the earlier centuries of the Middle Age, from any kind of secular governance.

The later Middle Ages The last centuries of the Middle Ages (1000 C.E.-1400 C.E.), while known for such world transforming achievements of mind as Scholastic Philosophy or the Gothic Cathedral, was unfortunately fraught with social-political instability and with such dreadful interventions as the Black Plague, a pandemic thought to have halved the population of Europe in the 14th century. The Frankish Empire pushed its boundaries significantly into northern Europe, as did the equally loosely constituted Germanic empire, which is estimated to have tripled its nominal size during the centuries in question. The expansion of the Franks into Spain, in the 12th and 13th centuries, was directed to (eventually) expulsion of the Moors from Spain.

Observation The history of the centuries that precede the Renaissance, and follow the Greco-Roman, are hard to beat into intellectual shape. Huge cultural achievements there were, the greatest of them powered by the strange risk of faith, and both science and innovation, as well as the explosion of universities, marking new growth points for humanity. However the thread of social-cultural maturing had been snipped, and it would be here, if anywhere, that the word 'dark' could be invoked for these ages.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Perspectives. The early modern period may be viewed either as a distinct break from the 'mediaeval,' or as a more or less covert continuation of that earlier millennium. One easily notes—in reviewing the developments of trade, gender relations, or military affairs, during the three hundred year period in question—conspicuous features of change, evolution, of what with the 19th century came increasingly to be called 'progress.' These are the milestones of the future, for sure, and concern our brief survey, but such a survey should not fail to mention the important relics of the past, which cling inside the 'early modern story.'

Vestiges. The corporate view of society, with the conviction that certain classes enjoyed certain legal rights and protections—and the corresponding confidence that an underlying servant class (serfs) were the appropriate underpinning of society—this view prevailed without major challenge through the three centuries in question, centuries (in western Europe) which preceded a truly revolutionary era, in France and the United States, not to mention globe-influencing revolutions in Russia, China, Mexico. In 1800, as in 1500, the Holy Roman Empire (though just a vestige of its old self) still existed, while the Pope still exercised considerable temporal power. A descendant of the Capetians was still King of France. In most European countries it was still assumed that religion and the state were tightly interinvolved with each other, the ruler—typically a monarch—serving as and support to the Church.

'Progress.' To nineteenth century thinkers like Bury, who framed the notion of progress as they surveyed the centuries that preceded them, the drift toward centralized secular government, the secular bureaucratic state as Weber analyzed it, was the keynote of development. The servant state, there to shape policy, administer powers, and guarantee the laws; this state was to be the stepping stone for all post-mediaeval development. (Though the Ottoman Empire was a frequent rival to the European West, during the Early Modern Period, there was no sense of a unity of 'Christendom' activated to preserve 'European culture,' but rather the powerful self-confidence, of the newly self-realizing Western States, served as the perceived bulwark against Islam or the nations supported by it.)

Servant state. It was a hallmark of this servant state, with its power concentrated in a fatherly ruling monarch, that it was able to create the laws it needed and wanted, uninhibited by the Mediaeval governmental assumption, that God (or our transcendent condition) was the ultimate maker and guarantor of the laws. It should be added that this authority, which the post classical government arrogated to itself, was fortified by the power of the national exchequer. National banks, a generative

creation of the early modern economy, became storage centers for vast expendable sums, from which armies could be subsidized, and increasingly heavy bureaucracies subsidized.

19TH CENTURY

The directions adopted by the servant state, in the following century, were intricately diverse; a look at the new century's unfolding patterns of government, in England and France, illustrates the variety of societal shapings the two dominant Western European nations were destined to take.

England. England, it is said, decided to modernize itself through the Corn Laws, the repeal of which the Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel agreed to in 1846, thereby greatly reducing the power of the landed gentry to regulate agricultural practice and policy in this first modern century. This move was part of an important tendency, in British government of the nineteenth century, to consolidate the national respect for traditional solutions, while learning from other countries what **not to do**. (Fear of the French revolution was so widespread, in Britain, that the very notion of democracy had become hated; and order and hierarchy in government were sharply defended, everywhere the British Crown held sway.)

Constitution. Accordingly the British government, as reflected in its Constitution of 1800, was not based on democracy, but on the Crown and its legislative powers, and yet as that foundation evolved it became evident that nineteenth century Britain was attributing increasing power to the House of Commons—a center of legislation with increasing availability to the vote and needs of 'the people.' This legislative approach to 'giving power to the people' was to remain the trademark of the British project of governing, throughout the 19th century, and would, in alliance with the many directed moves by the government—to improve the state of education, of the postal service, to guarantee the integrity of free trade, so essential to the mercantile elements of the society—would bring Britain into the next century liberal enough to satisfy its social constituency but untouched by radicalism.

France. In contrast to the relatively consistent and purpose shaped development of English government, in the nineteenth century, the government of France went through many stages, beginning, of course, with the most rabidly democratic event of the century in Europe, the French Revolution ((1789-92). This violent protest against monarchical indifference might seem to have heralded a century in which French government would come down forcefully on the side of the people, in which the tactical caution of the British, who worked their way through legislation and the vote, would be overturned by direct action. The fact is, however, complicated. There were to be moments of radical ardor, in say the Revolution of 1848, when France joined much of western Europe in a revolutionary mode, and there was to be a staunch growth of Socialism among French intellectuals in the second half of the century, yet by and large France remained more conservative than Britain through the century; in 1850, for example, only one third as many Frenchmen (as Englishmen) could vote for national representatives.

20TH CENTURY

Parliamentary fine points, within the governments of Western Europe in the twentieth century, were destined to be overshadowed—because of the nature of the news, not because of inherent significance—during the eventful first half of the twentieth century. In our remarks on France and England, in the nineteenth century, we found ourselves dwelling on governmental issues like voting participation, parliamentary representation, and the balance of the classes; issues of substantial importance for governments treading into the complexities of a modern state.

Sources of war. These micro issues were not less important in the first decade of the twentieth century, than they were in the preceding century, but the conjunction of macro forces—the Prussian juggernaut forming into the reminiscence-filled German Empire—and the buildup of territorial appetites in a Western Europe widely empowered, increasingly well armed—and fully conscious of the mutual wrongs done one another by the states (in Alsace Lorraine, the Balkans) jammed up against one another in the corner of Western Europe. Given this set of affairs the conditions for armed conflict, but conflict with unprecedented implications, were satisfied, and needed just the spark of a royal murder to set fire to them. Governments were going to be dependent, for a few decades, on the capacities and endurance of their people, as well

as on the potent leadership of their administrators; among whose main actors—Chamberlain, Churchill, Petain, De Gaulle, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels—were to be cowards, madmen, perverts and visionaries rich enough to people the greatest of Shakespearian dramas.

Government. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Western European society continued to develop around the governmental issues defining themselves in the previous century—issues of the vote and the processes of political representation, of armaments and their funding, of rights for women, of choices among economic systems—of the government's degree of responsibility to its citizens, its welfare policies. Needless to say, the reigning ideologies of the major nations involved—France, England, Germany—diverged sharply, as did, accordingly, the kinds of governmental style they found themselves choosing. Apart from their seeming agreement on mutual battlefield self-destruction, and their mutual disagreement on major issues of social policy, these mega states continued rendering themselves candidates for an oncoming fifty years in which compellingly global issues seemed destined to consume all local national issues.

Future. The governments of Western Europe recovered from the fury of two wars, to find many cities—especially in Germany and England—flattened, a consumer class in full fervor, hungry for goods that wars had made unavailable, and a population explosion. While coping with the public events that made for this new social cocktail, the governments of Western Europe prosecuted diverse directions—steering through a *Wirtschaftswunder* in Germany, adjusting to the reality of loss of Empire in England, and, in France, taking on the first challenges of the immigration issues (out of Algeria) which were destined—along with nuclear destruction, Cold War, and Integrated Global Technology—to trademark the second half of the century for Western European Governments.

Reading

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Discussion questions

Many causes are given, for the political fragmentation of Mediaeval Europe: barbarian invasions; plagues and famines; the unbalance between Church and State; the Islamic eruptions into European polity. What do you think? Have you other explanations to suggest?

Did human culture emerge enriched from the 'mediaeval experience'? Did that experience stamp a new readiness and openness on the mankind that made its way over the sill into the Renaissance? In a broader sense, do you see the history of western culture as a meaningful and 'thoughtfully' unfolded plan of human events—what used to be called 'God's hand'—in which one stage opens the way to another?

What role did international trade play, in building a sense of common values and common political will in mediaeval Europe? Did the international alliances, created by such trade, build new and larger political communities?

What do you see as the role of the Catholic Church in the development of western European government? Did the Church, at some periods, function like a state? Or was its 'function' profoundly different at different stages in its development?

How have western European governments reacted to the globalization enhanced in the last century by the internet and by the transportation revolution with its globalizing effects? Has it made the notion of the nation state obsolete? Has it brought a deepening of human relations, and a mutual harmony among peoples?

Do you see the early modern western European state as a bridge to the modern state? If so, what was it we had to cross to, or discover through, the early modern experience, before we could find our way to the 'modern state'?