

Institutional Perspectives on Early Modern Britain and its Empire

Paper Abstracts

Introductory Roundtable: *Why think with Institutions?*

Was the Glorious Revolution a Constitutional Watershed?

Gary Cox, Stanford University

Douglass North and Barry Weingast's (1989) seminal account of the Glorious Revolution argued that specific constitutional reforms enhanced the credibility of the English Crown, leading to much stronger public finances. Critics have argued that the most important reforms occurred incrementally before the Revolution; and that neither interest rates on sovereign debt nor enforcement of property rights improved sharply after the Revolution. In this essay, I identify a different set of constitutional reforms, explain why precedents for these reforms did not lessen their revolutionary impact, and show that the evidence, properly evaluated, supports a view of the Revolution as a watershed.

Panel One: *Partisan Politics*

1. Slavery, Partisan Politics, and the Royal African Company in the 1690s

Abigail Swingen, Texas Tech

The Royal African Company (RAC) was created in 1672 by a royal charter and was given a monopoly on all trade to and from Africa, including the slave trade to the American colonies. The company was deeply connected to later Stuart Court politics, in large part because of the influence of its governor, the Duke of York, later James II. As a result, the RAC became closely associated with the Tories and their political philosophies promoting the monarch's prerogative. The company reaped the benefits of these connections and exerted a tremendous amount of influence over colonial administration and imperial policies. It also increased its market share over the slave trade relative to Dutch traders and English interlopers during these decades. This economic success directly related to the company's privileged political position. This situation changed dramatically after the Glorious Revolution, however, when all charters that had been granted by the Stuart kings were now under intense scrutiny, and the slave trade was for all intents and purposes open. The RAC's directors were fully aware of this precarious position, and throughout the 1690s repeatedly tried to have the company's monopoly re-affirmed by Parliament. In response, colonial planters and interloping merchants opposed to the company's monopoly combined forces as the "separate traders" and lobbied to keep the slave trade open. The question of how best to manage the transatlantic slave trade thus became the focus of a significant popular political debate throughout the 1690s.

This paper explores the extent to which partisan politics of the 1690s influenced the debate over the slave trade. The 1690s have long been considered a volatile decade in English history. But traditionally, historians have tended to treat the slave trade debates as somewhat isolated from the broader economic and political concerns of the day. This paper will show, however, that the

debates over the slave trade frequently invoked political rhetoric and imagery, and were an important element in broader discussions about the war, revenue, and overseas trade. As Bruce Carruthers and Gary DeKrey have shown, the realms of economics and politics frequently intersected and overlapped in the late seventeenth century as various actors vied for influence and control. Taking a cue from recent literature on how power influences the ways that institutions behave, this paper will culminate with a discussion of a particularly political moment in the history of England's involvement with the slave trade. In 1698, the "Ten Percent Act" became law, which allowed private merchants to trade to Africa upon paying a 10% duty to the RAC on cargoes shipped to and from Africa. Why did this act become law? Was this act a victory for the RAC or the separate trader interest? This paper seeks to answer these questions by placing the act and the slave trade debates within a broader political and economic context of the 1690s. The years 1697-98 were especially precarious ones for the Whig Junto ministry, and the Ten Percent Act represented one manifestation of the Whigs' weakened position in the midst of other conflicts, including the standing army controversy. The slave trade debates and the Ten Percent Act help explain the political paralysis of the Whig Junto ministry by the late 1690s, and also demonstrate the centrality of imperial affairs to domestic political concerns during the early modern period.

2. The Failure of the Country Party in 1734: A Case Study in Institutional Change *Chris Dudley, East Stroudsburg*

This paper considers early eighteenth century political parties as institutions designed to facilitate the passage of economic regulation, which admittedly was just one of many functions they served. It takes this approach in order to challenge the view, shared by the theoretical literature on political parties as institutions and the historical literature on eighteenth century Britain, that parties are constructed and dominated by political elites. The paper argues that ordinary voters exercised more influence over the parties than is generally recognized, and in particular that they effectively resisted an attempt made by opposition leaders in the late 1720s and 1730s to realign the political system.

The argument consists of two parts. The first examines the 1710s and early 1720s, presenting evidence for correlations between voter occupation and preference for the Tory or Whig party and suggesting these correlations can be explained as the conjunction of the voter's economic self-interest and the political economic ideology of the parties. The second part moves on to the late 1720s, when Tories and disaffected Whigs attempted to create a new "Country" opposition to the ruling Whig government. The Country opposition was quite successful among MPs and other political elites, exemplified by the leadership alliance of the Tory Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke and the Whig William Pulteney. But, the paper argues, the Country opposition failed because voters did not go along with the new division of parties. Instead they continued to parse ideological differences between Tories and Whigs and voted accordingly.

Although this paper is a work in progress, my hope is that it will contribute to a wider conversation about the nature of institutions, particularly the role of ideology and interest and the dynamics of institutional change.

Panel Two: *Information Exchange*

1. *How information spread beyond the gentry: the social mediation of information exchange in England, 1603-1640*
Noah Millstone, Harvard

This paper examines information circulation in the early Stuart era. It argues that while historians have generally regarded the circulation of news and manuscript tracts in the decades before the English Civil War as part of elite culture, the social reach of reports and texts was really much greater. This paper presents evidence for the circulation of reports and manuscript texts into less exalted hands. It then tries to explain why such circulation was possible; and how the mechanisms, incentives and expectations that structured information exchange made it likely.

To make the strongest case, this paper focuses on manuscript circulation. Oral transmission is relatively difficult to document, but has also long been acknowledged as a mode of communication among sub-elite groups. Manuscript circulation, by contrast, is still most often treated as the preserve of elites or closed coteries. The relatively higher commercial cost of manuscript reproduction when compared to moveable type, and the importance of manuscript trading for gentle sociability, both encourage this view.

This paper offers a different account. In distinction to the print trade, which was centered in London and concentrated in the hands of a small circle of market oligarchs, manuscripts were reproduced in a huge variety of contexts and places all over the kingdom by a vast army of subaltern clerks and copyists. Manuscript circulation networks were leaky and porous. Individual copies of tracts were passed from hand to hand and read aloud, allowing each to reach multiple recipients. And while some circulation certainly proceeded through gentle and aristocratic sociability, manuscript tracts regularly worked their way both up and down the social scale. The result is a model of political communication whose reach was far more extensive than historians have understood or acknowledged, reaching throughout the kingdom. Large fractions of the populace were not only potentially aware of basic political news, but were also privy to some of the most precise, sophisticated and dangerous material available to anyone.

These are important results partly because they suggest that the audience for illicit or semi-licit political discourse in pre-Civil War England may have been orders of magnitude larger than historians have typically assumed.

2. *Rules of Credibility? Government Officials and Political Informers in Williamite England*
Rachel Weil, Cornell

This paper explores the relationship between government officials responsible for gathering information about anti-government conspiracy and the political informers who provided that information, usually for a price. Intelligence, I argue, was part of politics in Williamite England. How well it was done, or perceived to be done, affected the credit of the government. As the envoy Richard Hill put it in 1694, “a conspiracy discovered and prevented is a very good thing when well managed.” But good management required judgment about what was real. If government officials were too skeptical, they could be accused of insufficient care for the

preservation of the government. If not skeptical enough, they could be seen as the gullible tools of unscrupulous informers, or worse, puppet masters who set the informers on. Thus, officials in Williamite England operated in a context that made the question of what to believe, and how to appear believable themselves, especially vexed. Moreover, intelligence-gatherers and informers operated in a context where the normal rules for establishing credibility did not apply. If, as Steven Shapin has argued, credibility was usually seen in the century as the prerogative of financially secure (and therefore disinterested) gentlemen, the norms governing credibility and were vastly different for those involved in the gathering of intelligence. Informers were often of low status, of questionable political loyalty (they usually participated in the plots about which they informed) and were almost always paid for their information. This paper seeks to understand how officials gathering intelligence made decisions about what to believe, with particular attention to the dilemmas raised by the exchange of money for information that characterized the intelligence-gathering process. It also asks whether and how, given its departure from usual norms of establishing credit, the Williamite state's system of intelligence gathering could itself be credible in the eyes of its subjects.

Panel Three: *Empire*

1. *Sinews of Empire: Taxation as Imperial Institution* *Justin duRivage, Yale*

The development of Britain's eighteenth-century fiscal-military state, and the tax regime that supported it, is well known among historians. However, as historians, we largely think about taxation as a domestic issue, with the exception, perhaps, of the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 70s. This paper argues that eighteenth-century British taxation ought to be understood as an imperial, rather than as a domestic, institution. The British state raised—or attempted to raise—considerable revenue through colonial legislatures, its possessions in India, as well as through myriad taxes within metropolitan Britain. Furthermore, taxes levied in Britain had imperial connotations: both colonial import duties and excise taxes affected British subjects overseas. Taxes raised by colonial legislatures also had clear implications for the welfare of people in Britain. These taxes, while they affected Britain's economy, were also widely understood as social institutions. In the absence of a modern welfare state, taxes were a powerful means of shaping both behavior and social relations. They prompted intellectuals, politicians, and a wider public to consider the political economic effects of the ways in which the state paid for itself. And because taxes affected different social and economic groups, they were fiercely political. Indeed, they raised some of the sharpest controversies of the eighteenth century and were a constant staple of political opposition. Thinking about taxes as both an imperial institution and as one that emerged through a political process invites us to reconsider the development of the British state, its empire, and the origins of American independence.

2. *Are All Men Philosophers? A Pluralist Institutional Perspective on the History of British Imperial Thought* (please see paper for note.)
Philip Stern, Duke

Long the history of theorists' ideas about the making of the British polity, the history of British political thought has only relatively recently come to comprehend imperial ideology as a crucial component of its brief and mission. Meanwhile, a number of early modern historians have also come to recognize just how fragmented and hybrid the constitutional, institutional, and jurisdictional foundations for early modern empire were in fact. Yet, these two conversations have not been terribly well integrated. Like the bifurcated histories that preceded it, the intertwined intellectual history of state and empire has tended to be far more concerned with its own teleology — that is, theories and debates about those national forms of state and empire — than taking seriously as political actors in their own right the vast variety of agencies, networks, corporations, and non-state bodies that were in fact at the core of directing and shaping early modern overseas expansion. Conversely, the history of imperial institutions has often centered largely on questions of praxis or on the ways in which those institutions extend and reflect of debates of “national” proportions. Not denying the use and value of either of these approaches, this paper nonetheless proposes an alternative perspective: a pluralist history of modern imperial political thought, which takes seriously on their own terms the political cultures of institutions, both within and apart from the state, that shaped debates over questions of law, governance, and authority at the intellectual and political heart of British overseas expansion.

Panel Four: Credit

1. *Financial Innovations and Political Development: Evidence from Revolutionary England*
Saumitra Jha, Stanford

The English Parliament's struggle for supremacy in the seventeenth century was crucial for the development of representative government in the English-speaking world, yet its lessons continue to be debated. This paper provides the first systematic evidence on the determinants of individuals' decisions to join the coalition for revolutionary reform. The paper employs a novel micro-dataset on the endowments of each member of the Long Parliament (1640-60) that initiated England's institutional transformation and finds that the key determinants of support for reform were overseas interests and other factors over which the executive enjoyed discretion under the existing constitution. Further, investment in newly available shares in overseas companies appears central in fostering support for reform, chiefly among those lacking prior overseas interests. The paper argues that the innovation of shares allowed new investors to take advantage of emerging economic opportunities overseas, aligning their interests with overseas traders. However, since these shared opportunities were heavily exposed to executive discretion, financial innovation broadened support for parliamentary control of government.

2. *The Culture of Credit: Institutions and Trust in Seventeenth-Century England*
Carl Wennerlind, Barnard

Recognizing the necessity of implementing a solution to the stubborn scarcity of money problem, Hartlibian-inspired political economists debated the best design for a generally circulating credit currency during the decades leading up to the creation of the Bank of England. Drawing insights from the epistemological discussions carried out among natural philosophers and experimental scientists, political economists proposed various measures to facilitate the formation of trust in their proposed schemes. My paper explores the various institutional mechanisms designed to enable people to develop trust and confidence in credit money.

Panel Five: Labor

1. *“Her Honest Labor” : Married Women’s Work in Early Modern London*
Eleanor Hubbard, Princeton

For many poor and middling women in early modern London, working “to get a penny” was an unquestioned duty, and a source of neighborhood respect. However, just as the demands of one institution, the household, drove women into market labor, others strove to protect male citizens from what they perceived as illegitimate female competition. Rather than being relegated to a domestic “private sphere,” poor London women often worked very much in the public eye, in shops, streets, and markets, but they were confined to a narrow range of unregulated and ill-paid occupations. Citizens’ wives and widows had more options, but their ambiguous legal positions, while useful, made it difficult for them to establish themselves as creditworthy tradeswomen.

2. *Why the Workhouse in the Eighteenth Century?*
Susannah Ottaway, Carleton College

The eighteenth century witnessed a new and important twist on the Old Poor Law system: the rise of indoor relief and the practice of mandating entry into institutions such as the workhouse as a prerequisite to the receipt of parish assistance. Although in the end, this practice “won out” over traditional methods of assistance to the poor in their own homes, and was adopted under the aegis of the New Poor Law of 1834, eighteenth-century writers, vestrymen and political figures quarreled mightily over the utility and ethical value of these institutions. Thus workhouses can serve as a powerful lens through which to refract eighteenth-century values and from which to gain further understanding of the play between such belief systems and factors such as demographic and economic change and legislation.

This paper will start with a fresh look at data on poor relief that was collected in 1776 and 1802-3 by Parliament. Rarely used in a systematic manner, the information available in these Parliamentary Returns is exceptionally revealing of the nature and spread of the workhouse across England in the last half of the eighteenth century. We can then turn to micro-level analysis to gain a better understanding of why some parishes chose to adopt workhouses for their poor, and others refused to do so. Contrasts between the use of the workhouse in small agrarian parishes such as

Terling, Essex and the Liberty of the Rolls, in London, shed further light on the nature of the changing use of and interpretations of the Old Poor Law in this important period.

Panel Six: Corporations

1. *Corporations and the state: creating allegiance and corporate identity in early Stuart England*
Rupali Mishra, Auburn

Most of England's overseas trading activity was mediated by chartered companies in the early century. These companies, by virtue of their charters, were franchises of state authority, yet exactly what their relationship to the state was remained contested in the period. East India Company leaders, for example, argued that their trade constituted a business of state, and as such, protection of their trade and charter was a matter of state policy. Despite occasional critiques of the company's actions, numerous people in government agreed or came to agree with the company's assessment of itself. They treated company affairs as a matter of state, though they continued to wrangle with Company leaders over what policies would best guarantee the needs of the state. This paper explores how companies, particularly the East India Company, created a corporate identity, and how they cultivated a sense of allegiance even from people who were not directly engaged in the day-to-day activities of the company. It examines how merchant leaders could then become drawn into contestations about what that shared corporate identity really guaranteed to the varied group of people who made up the corporate whole, and how their one corporation fit into the larger commonwealth of the state.

2. *The Constellation of Noble Designs: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Corporate Anglican Philanthropy, 1699-1720*
Brent S. Sirota, North Carolina State

The SPCK was something of a free radical within the body of the eighteenth century Church of England, bonding with pre-existent religious forms and catalyzing new modes of Anglican revivalism. Eschewing incorporation, the SPCK preferred to remain a mere "society of private gentlemen," a voluntary association possessed of no official status or mandate in the constitutions of either Church or state. And yet, this voluntary association was arguably the most dynamic force in the religious life of eighteenth century England. Indeed, it is difficult to find any significant developments in the social profile of eighteenth century Anglicanism that did not ultimately derive, either directly or indirectly, from the SPCK and "the constellation of noble designs" (in White Kennet's memorable phrase) of which it was unquestionably the brightest star. This paper will explore the enterprises, networks and politics of the SPCK in its first two decades, with an eye toward assessing the importance of its unincorporated status in explaining its dynamism, creativity and influence. In doing so, this paper will attempt to rethink the importance of religious and philanthropic voluntarism (and corporatism) in the constitution of eighteenth century English civil society.