Foreword to the Princeton Classic Edition:

Joseph Strayer Revisited

WHAT A PLEASURE to hear Joe Strayer’s thoughtful voice again! In these extensively reworked lectures and papers, we hear him patiently, clearly, wisely drawing on profound knowledge of Western European history to explain where centralized states come from. He vivifies the topic not with exotic examples or stunning stories but with incisive insights into what happened in medieval Europe. In little over a hundred pages, he lays out a fresh interpretation of European state formation.

Strayer even says clearly what he is trying to explain. He seeks the origin of political units exhibiting

- persistence in time;
- fixation in space;
- permanent, impersonal institutions;
- agreement on the need for an authority with power
- to make final judgments;
- acceptance of the idea that subjects should give loyalty to that authority.

Political units possessing these characteristics qualify, in his view, as modern states. Although he hedges his bets with respect to China and Japan while acknowledging the Greek polis and the Roman Empire as predecessors, Strayer makes the basic claim that medieval Europe produced the first and most influential models of political organization in this mode. Surveying Europe between 1100 and 1600, furthermore, he argues for 1300 to 1450 as the
pivot; by the end of the fifteenth century, according to Strayer, England and France had both brought together these elements in effective states, and other European regimes were beginning to emulate English and French innovations.

What was Europe? Compromising between Strayer’s two periods, let us look at Europe as a whole between 1200 and 1500. In 1200, Europe itself fragmented into hundreds of political units. Nominally larger states such as Poland, Hungary, the Holy Roman Empire, and France actually operated as multiple segments only weakly linked by military alliances and ruling dynasties. At almost every royal succession, competing claimants battled each other for the inheritance. Partly as a residue of the Roman Empire, Europe did have a well-connected web of commercial and administrative cities. The roughly eight hundred bishoprics of the Roman Catholic Church spread across those portions of the Roman Empire’s territory that Muslims had not conquered; most Catholic bishops presided over cathedrals in cities descending from Roman settlements.

In 1200, Europe’s urban areas were concentrated especially in northern Italy, Muslim southern Spain, and the zone from southeastern England across the Channel into France and the Low Countries. Europe’s largest cities were then Constantinople, Seville, Córdoba, Paris, Palermo, and Venice. All but one of them (Paris) were tied closely to the Mediterranean, while two of them (Seville and Córdoba) thrived under Muslim rule. Mediterranean connections predominated because they gave Europeans access to Asian craft goods in exchange for gold, silver, precious stones, woolen cloth, linen textiles, and raw materials drawn from Europe and northern Africa.

Notice two crucial implications of this description. First,
taken as a whole, in 1200 the area we now call Europe had little coherence. Economically, politically, and ideologically, much of the southern third belonged to the Muslim world, while significant sections of the east maintained stronger ties with the Central Asian steppe than with central, southern, or Western Europe. A midsection identified roughly with the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches lived on the tattered remains of the Roman Empire. Even those major segments left dozens of fringes and interstices.

Second, social organization varied enormously from one region to another. A band of relatively intense urban life organized around trade and manufacturing ran across the Alps from southeastern England through northern France and the Low Countries, up the Rhine, and down into northern Italy, including Venice. A second more prosperous band tied together cities of the northern Mediterranean and interacted intensely with nearby urban regions of Africa and Asia. In both those bands, zones of high-productivity agriculture supplied their urban populations. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Europe's population—very likely 95 percent—lived in rural areas dominated by agriculture, herding, fishing, or forestry. No country in today's world is nearly as rural as Europe was in 1200.

By 1500, however, Europe was gaining visibly in both internal connectedness and world importance. Within the continent, a decisive shift toward the northwest was occurring. One sign was the advent of Paris—by then some 225,000 inhabitants—becoming Europe's largest city. Constantinople (200,000) still followed closely. The next eight cities in order were Edirne (Adrianople, about two hundred kilometers west of Constantinople), Naples, Venice, Milan, Bruges, Lyon, Ghent, and Rouen. Although the Mediterranean connection still kept Constantinople, Edirne,
Naples, and Venice in play, Muslim power had disappeared from Spain, while northern Italy and the urban axis from Paris to the Low Countries were assuming major importance. Many of those cities wielded independent political power rather than being closely ruled by larger kingdoms or empires. As compared with 1200, furthermore, each of the European urban regions had produced important clusters of manufacturing backed by prosperous agricultural hinterlands.

To different forms of rule corresponded different kinds of military organization. Independent cities commonly created their own militias and obliged citizens to serve. (Citizens never included all of the urban population, and often narrowed to elected members of self-renewing guilds or councils:) In the case of Venice and many other maritime cities, military duties included not only militia but also naval service. In manorial systems, landlords often formed military units of their own vassals, tenants, and serfs, sometimes carrying on their own feuds and private wars, at other times joining an overlord’s armies for a season of combat before returning to the country. Supposedly national armies actually consisted of aggregations of troops called up in this way, including a ruler’s own personal followers.

Powers that had money but insufficient population commonly hired mercenaries, professional soldiers headed or recruited by military entrepreneurs. For centuries, Switzerland provided mercenaries to fight other people’s wars when the Swiss themselves were not warring in and around the Alps. Only late in the period did rulers—France’s kings prominent among them—start building regular, salaried national armies. Over the three centuries from 1200 to 1500, militias and feudal levies declined in
military importance, while the expanding economy made mercenaries more feasible and attractive. By 1500, however, nuclei of national armies were also forming in many parts of Europe. Increasingly, troops in major wars combined small numbers of nationally recruited career soldiers with larger but variable numbers of mercenaries hired for the campaign.

The competing forms of military organization had different political consequences. Militias worked well for defense, but put serious strains on citizens' other activities when employed offensively. They empowered citizens who had the right and obligation to serve, but provided urban leaders with potent means of internal repression against noncitizens. Fighting wars with feudal levies reinforced the positions of vassals within their own domains while facilitating resistance to royal service or even military competition for royal power. Mercenaries frequently fought better than militias and feudal levies, but only so long as they received their pay; disbanded or unpaid mercenaries regularly turned to extortion, pillage, and banditry. Like mercenaries, however, genuine national armies depended on the ability of rulers to raise money and supplies to keep them going. Army-building rulers borrowed in the short run, seized vulnerable property in the medium run, and taxed in the long run. Choices of military organization and strategy therefore had fateful consequences for the character of states.

Within this world, both landlords and princes consolidated their power over peasants and town dwellers whenever they could. From a master's perspective, the ideal arrangement imposed centralized control on farmers who produced surplus food and on merchants who shipped taxable goods. At a local scale, the manorial system embodied
just such a logic: peasants tied to the land produced rents and supplies for landlords whose agents sold them for the lord's benefit. At a regional scale, a similar logic produced centralized, oppressive regimes. In periods and regions where demand for agricultural products was rising and rival political authorities weak, both landlords and princes regularly attempted to build such systems of power.

The Holy Roman emperors who seized grain-rich Sicily at the twelfth century's end built a repressive regime there at the cost of expelling or containing much of the island's Muslim population. Authoritarian successors of the Sicilian regime endured for centuries. Through much of Catalonia to the north of Barcelona, landlords of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries succeeded in making near serfs of their peasants by usurping local and regional public power. Noble castles in northern Catalonia stood, on average, only six to eight kilometers apart, an astonishing density. Peasant producers supported those castles and their occupants. All this happened despite the fact—or, more accurately, because of the fact—that from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries Barcelona was one of the western Mediterranean's dominant trading cities. Landlords in Barcelona's hinterland who extracted food from their peasants had a ready market for that food. Catalonia's landlord-dominated system finally disappeared in a bloody civil war and peasant uprising between 1462 and 1486.

About the time of that struggle, in contrast, Polish landlords who benefited from the insatiable demand of Western Europeans for Polish wheat were creating their own versions of manors and serfs. Historians of Eastern Europe often call that process the Second Serfdom. Even cities, strange as it may seem, engaged in these forms of oppression. Despite priding themselves on self-govern-
ment and independence of higher authorities, patricians of Swiss cities controlled the crafts and agriculture of their dependent rural territories ruthlessly. Although in the long run and on the average expanding markets eroded landlord power and promoted urban growth, in many instances landlords, princes, and patricians got to the markets first.

Forty years of historical research and synthesis lie between this sketch of medieval Europe and the evidence available to Joseph Strayer as he wrote during the 1960s. Partly in response to Strayer’s contribution, several waves of scholars have written comparative-historical analyses of state formation. Against the backdrop of political histories dominated by kings, battles, and constitutions, Strayer’s analysis brought a welcome treatment of political processes onto the stage.

When I first read *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* in 1970, to be sure, I was already following a trail to contrary views. I thought—and still think—that as of the thirteenth century five different political outcomes remained open for Europe as a whole: "(1) the form of national state which actually emerged; (2) a political federation or empire controlled, if only loosely, from a single center; (3) a theocratic federation—a commonwealth—held together by the structure of the Catholic Church; (4) an intensive trading network without large-scale, central political organization; (5) the persistence of the "feudal" structure which prevailed in the thirteenth century." As it happens, I spent the academic year 1970–71 in Princeton, and had a chance to air my differences—very respectfully!—with Strayer; we finally agreed to disagree. Despite this reservation on my part, let me acknowledge my debt and admiration: Strayer's essay of 1970 brilliantly makes

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the case that England, France, and other European
regimes were creating novel, durable political arrange-
ments between 1300 and 1450, arrangements that strongly
affected later political change within their own territories
and across most of Europe.

How, in his account, did that happen? Strayer invokes a
convergence of conditions during the centuries after 1000
CE: spreading influence of the Roman Church, its doc-
trines, and its personnel; rising political stability on the
large scale coupled with political fragmentation that in-
hibited large-scale warfare and diplomacy; growth in the
number of educated men; an increase in both the supply
and the demand for lay justice. In these conditions, kings
(no queens and only one woman, Joan of Arc, figure in the
Strayer story) built up their power by adjudicating dis-
putes more than through conquest. As that happened,
literate, legally trained royal staffs built sturdy central
organizations.

The very process of lawgiving and payment for that ser-
tice, Strayer continues, built up political units character-
ized by persistence in time; fixation in space; permanent,
impersonal institutions; agreement on the need for an au-
thority with power to make final judgments; and accep-
tance of the idea that subjects should give loyalty to that
authority—in short, the cores of modern states as we now
recognize them. England and France created those cores
earlier than their European neighbors for different rea-
sons. English kings from the Norman Conquest onward
faced few internal obstacles to the extension of their sover-
eignty, says Strayer, while French kings (notably Philip Au-
gustus) invented the telling combination of negotiated
provincial customs and institutions with viceroys strongly
controlled by the central power. As a consequence, En-
England prospered politically, but the French system became a more influential model for states elsewhere in Europe.

At this point in his largely political analysis, Strayer resorts to a combination of teleology and external causes. On the teleological side, we learn that fledgling states could acquire strong wings only by extending sovereignty from their centers outward, which inevitably brought struggle with subjects inside their jurisdictions and wars with competitors outside. External causes include the Black Death and the economic downturn of the fourteenth century, which shook the fragile fiscal structure built during the previous century and displayed the limits of state power. Out of the resulting struggles and compromises with regional magnates emerged representative institutions. So did princely opportunism and an increasing gap between what Strayer calls “policymakers” and “bureaucrats.” Nevertheless, the core held, and by 1500 or so recognizably modern states were beginning to prevail across much of Europe.

From today’s historical perspectives, Strayer’s account displays a top-down bias. When he wrote in the 1960s, populist social history, the history of mentalities, demographic history, and econometric history were just beginning to reveal the possibilities of history from the bottom up. Few contemporary historians would rewrite Strayer’s 1970 book without much greater emphasis on changes in climate, population, trade, economic organization, and popular culture. Students of state formation have since grown much more accustomed to systematic comparisons among multiple political units, with variable economic bases in different regions usually figuring as at least part of the explanation for differences in political organization.

A rereading of Strayer reveals how little importance he
attributed to relations between monarchs and merchants, hence to cities and trading networks as independent bases of power. As a further consequence, by today's lights his explanations understate the importance of expanding European connections with the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific; the quickening of commerce along the Atlantic, North Sea, and Baltic coasts; and the growing involvement of English producers in the continental wool trade. Warfare figures in his account primarily as a result of the political negotiations he describes rather than as a cause of changes in state structure, which means that he pays no attention to the fateful introduction of gunpowder into Europe by invading Mongols. He wrote during the 1960s, after all, not in the twenty-first century.

What, then, do we gain from reading these lectures from the 1960s today? First, we receive an exposure to calm, sensible lucidity based on deep knowledge of the sources. Second, we learn how much comparison of national experiences—here especially those of England and France—can teach when sustained by extensive evidence. Third, we discover that Strayer has, indeed, identified a compelling mystery: how unprecedented forms of government including representative institutions took shape at a relatively poor periphery of the Eurasian land mass, and eventually spread widely through the world. We cheer a pioneering effort to solve that mystery.

Charles Tilly

Columbia University
June 2004
Foreword to the Princeton Classic Edition:

Medieval Origins

"A PROMINENT HISTORIAN of the medieval period tells political scientists what they need to know in a very brief and lively read"—these words may be found on a syllabus for a politics department course offered at the University of Virginia in the fall semester of 2002. The prominent historian referred to, who died in 1987, was Joseph R. Strayer and the brief and lively read that made up one assignment in the course was On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State, originally published in 1970. The quotation captures several properties of the book. It is a work of history that, uncharacteristically, attracts professional political scientists. It is a book with a need-to-know quality, a phrase that evokes something like an intelligence debriefing. Its prose is economical, hence its brevity; and the choice of analogies, historical anecdotes, and examples not only enlightens but evokes strong emotional responses—surprise, humor, even, occasionally, disgust—making it a very lively read indeed.

If the University of Virginia course syllabus expresses explicitly the continuing attraction of the book for political scientists, the presence of Medieval Origins, as I shall call it for short, on a large number of contemporary course reading lists demonstrates that the teaching of political science in the Old Dominion state is in no way atypical. The

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1 The posted syllabus may be found at http://www.people.virginia.edu/~daw4h/PLCP-806-Fall-2002.pdf. The other information on course offerings has been garnered from other posted syllabi.
book can be found on reading lists for political science, international relations, and political sociology courses at, among other institutions, the New School for Social Research, the University of Pennsylvania, the Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Chicago. That it continues to have its devotees among historians as well is evident from its presence on history department course reading syllabi at colleges and universities as diverse as Fordham, Rutgers, Michigan State, Westminster of Pennsylvania, Saint Benedict of Minnesota, and California (both Berkeley and Los Angeles), to name just a few.

It is rare that a book achieves anything remotely akin to its author’s hopes. Yet, in this instance, this is precisely what has occurred. Many history books, like books in other scholarly fields, get sketched out early in settings appropriate to the author’s academic discipline. *Medieval Origins* in part began its life in this way—in various lectures before learned audiences of historians—but its arguments were also presented in preliminary form a good five years before publication at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1965. This did not mean that political science journals were to be uncritical of the book. The review in the *American Political Science Review* was laudatory in part but highly critical as well because of the subjects ignored in *Medieval Origins*, an issue to which we shall have to return.²

The need-to-know content of the book owed a great deal to the author’s fascination with decolonization and the formation of new states in the 1950s and 1960s. He believed that it was possible to learn from the past experi-

ence of the medieval state-building process, and carefully and selectively to apply the insights gleaned to the experience of the "underdeveloped" world of the newly liberated colonies. Strayer taught a graduate seminar at Princeton University (where he spent almost his entire career) that emphasized the similarities of the two experiences, a course offered in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. The seminar attracted medieval and other historians as well as graduate students in the politics department, but it seemed that a significant proportion of the students were a special class of policy analysts, "mid-careerists" in the parlance of the time, who were on short leaves from the State Department to refresh themselves before returning to the field to administer foreign aid or to carry out other services for the United States government in the Third World.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there was a significant tension between the historians, on the one side, and the political scientists and mid-careerists, on the other. The former wanted to immerse themselves in what they regarded as the endlessly fascinating details of the development of early parliaments and representation, and to linger over the subtle theorizations of suzerainty and sovereignty characteristic of medieval juristic thinkers. The latter wanted to know how it was possible to get a parliament to work effectively in a recently colonial political culture where civil society as Western theorists understood it was rudimentary at best and at worst was regarded by radical nationalists as a repugnant, alien, and imperial vestige. In a word, they seemed to want to know how history could be bypassed or foreshortened. To the surprise and even horror of some of the historians (I include myself at the time), Strayer offered advice to them as to how it might be possi-
ble to trump history. His own service for the State Department and his membership among the small group of Princeton academics who advised Allen Dulles, the first director of the Central Intelligence Agency, undoubtedly explains his willingness to do so. He knew that the newly emergent states in Africa and Asia did not have three hundred years to “perfect” their parliaments or any other distinctly liberal institutions; and he and others felt that, if there was not a way to move more quickly than, say, medieval England in the process, those states would implode, with all the deleterious consequences Cold War liberals could imagine. The history he offered in the seminar separated the essential from the nonessential in constitutional development. This is what policy analysts “needed to know.” In a way this is also what Medieval Origins might be understood as providing them in written form.

In his own preface to the book, Strayer launched preemptive strikes against two criticisms that he knew could be made of his work. After explaining how Medieval Origins had its own origins in his teaching (it “convinced [him] that [he] could say something useful about a vast subject in a small number of pages”), he explained how his teaching was informed by his research, which was mostly focused on France and England. To critics who might think that the concentration on France and England skewed the story, he declared that there was “some reason” beyond the accident of his own research interests to support his focus on France and England. His justification—that medieval Frenchmen and Englishmen created

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states that “have endured to our own time” and that “all other European states were strongly influenced by the example of these precursors”—is not entirely persuasive, and he knew it. (It did not persuade the reviewer in the American Political Science Review.) There have been times, particularly since the eighteenth century, when political liberals looked to England and, in very different and often negative ways, to France as examples or warnings, but this oversimplifies a complex history of imitation, repulsion, and independent streams of development. Realizing this, Strayer immediately retreated, conceding that England and France might not have been “unique,” by which he meant “the only appropriate” examples of state-building to study, but that they made excellent examples anyway. Certainly, if one were to rewrite the book, one would have to treat at the very least Spain (or the Spains), the Papal States, and even the Universal Church. Strayer occasionally gestured to one or more of these other cases, showing his continuing awareness of the limitations of his own effort, but he never fully addressed them or why it made any real sense to him to leave them out.

An even more troubling criticism to Strayer was the accusation that he had turned the state into something like one of Francis Bacon’s IDOLS, that he believed, as he implied his detractors suggested, “that the chief end of man is to create states [and] that all means of preserving and strengthening states are desirable.” He averred quite the contrary. As far as he was concerned, or so he insisted, the state was one form of organization in which human beings cooperated in order to achieve more or less commonly agreed upon goals. There were other forms of organization, of course. But states made large-scale projects possible in ways that families, clans, tribes, and the like
could not. And, equally important, although smaller units of organization continued to coexist with states, Strayer reminded readers of *Medieval Origins* that the state was in his day (and remains in ours, despite the pressure of globalization) the “dominant way” of securing cooperation for large-scale collective efforts. “There is some reason,” he concluded, using the same phrase—“some reason”—that he employed in justifying his focus on France and England, “to try to see what the state is and how it became what it is.”

It is easy to say that Strayer’s disclaimer, “to describe a phenomenon is not to praise it,” is contradicted or at least unsettled by the enthusiasm with which he writes about the achievements of the state in the course of the book and particularly on the concluding two pages of *Medieval Origins*, where in the broadest of strokes he sketches the transition from medieval to modern, from authoritarian to democratic regimes. Words and phrases like “competent,” “workable relationship,” “skill,” “securing the cooperation,” “[p]olicy had to be explained and justified,” “due process of law,” etc., appear over and over. The state in the year 1700, the approximate date in which he ended his study, may not yet have been a democracy, Strayer conceded, but his description of it—despite some caveats offered—sounds very positive indeed and teleological (the mentioned but undiscussed post-1700 culmination in liberal democracy has a certain flavor of inevitability about it in these pages). Moreover, there is one clause in the closing paragraph of the book that helps explain why some thoughtful readers have remained critics. According to Strayer, “the state had become a necessity” by 1700. Readers who dislike this statement have never needed additional evidence to convince them of Strayer’s teleological
approach to and morally uncritical assessment of the nature of the modern state. I have some sympathy with this view, for I do believe that the sentence “the state had become a necessity” is too powerful a conclusion to draw from the sketch of state formation Strayer offered in the book, and I do believe he idealized the modern state, at least in its liberal democratic form.

That this strain of criticism clearly bothered Strayer is evidenced by the almost dialogic sensibilities of his text. One of the endearing and enduring qualities of the book, indeed, is that it is written in a style that always seems to evoke a sense of conversation with its readers, whether they are sympathetic or critical. The book not only emerged from Strayer’s teaching; the book has the best quality of a great teacher: it never treats its audience with condescension. Its author throughout the book always seems to be listening and willing to learn. Joseph Strayer thought—indeed, he believed deeply—that he was right, but he also knew that the writing of history was a work in progress. In all the time I knew him he never used the word “definitive” to describe a work of history; his favorite laudatory phrase was, rather, “the work has held up pretty well,” implying admiration but that the case was never closed. A good book acknowledges its critics. Indeed, one expects this from classics, and there is, to use one of Strayer’s own favorite locutions, “some reason” to believe that a classic is what On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State has shown itself to be.

WILLIAM CHESTER JORDAN

Princeton University
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