

**Great Arches Viewed from the Coasts of Bohemia: Reflections Inspired by Tables of  
Kings\***

**Derek Sayer**

\*This essay has had a long gestation. It began life as a presentation for the invited panel on "The State" at the American Anthropology Association annual meetings in Chicago in November 2003, which I never published. I returned to it in 2012 when David Nugent invited me to contribute to a book on Andean state formation. It soon became apparent to both of us that it didn't belong in such a collection. Rather than lose the Czech content, I withdrew it. I am nonetheless grateful to David for stimulating me to revisit the text. An earlier version of the present essay was first published in *New Perspectives*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2016, 73-92. I have made further revisions and additions for this reprint.

*This is after all the country that gave the world the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, the right to own property, the English Language, and the free market...*

Andrea Leadsom<sup>1</sup>

## 1

Let me begin off-center, and possibly a little off-key, with state effect/affect writ exceeding small in the minutiae of what Philip Corrigan called "the making of the boy."<sup>2</sup> Educated in the dying days of the British Empire at a minor English public school—which is to say, not Eton or Harrow but nevertheless an exclusive and expensive private school, from whose civilizing mission I was able to benefit thanks to a choral scholarship at Rochester Cathedral—I could once upon a time recite the succession of English monarchs with scarcely a stumble. King's School, Rochester, where I imbibed the royal rollcall along with declensions of Latin verbs and my times tables, gained its present name in 1541, when in the course of his quarrels with the Papacy Henry VIII reconstituted the cathedral foundation, providing for a Dean and Chapter, a full choral establishment, a Master and an Under-Master, and "twenty Scholars to be taught Grammar."<sup>3</sup> Henry's nationalization of the Church and dissolution of the monasteries, Philip and I followed G. R. Elton in arguing in *The Great Arch*, was a crucial moment in the making of England as a sovereign nation state in the modern sense of the term. "This realm of England is an Empire," began the preamble to the Act of Appeals of 1533, "governed by one Supreme Head and King having the dignity and royal estate of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ashley Cowburn, "Andrea Leadsom: I didn't like gay marriage law because it hurts Christians, admits Tory contender to be PM," *The Independent*, 6 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Philip R. D. Corrigan, "The Making of the Boy: Meditations on What Grammar School Did With, To, and For My Body," in *Journal of Education*, Vol. 170, No. 3, 1988. I address similar themes in Derek Sayer, *Going Down for Air: A Memoir in Search of a Subject*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations and other information on King's School Rochester are taken from the school's website at <http://www.kings-rochester.co.uk> (accessed 29 August 2016). Senior school fees were then £18,210 p.a. (for day pupils, boarders' fees were higher).

imperial Crown of the same, unto whom a body politic ... be bounden and owe next to God a natural and humble obedience." <sup>4</sup>

King's School itself claims its origin not in Elton's Tudor revolution in government but in Saint Justus's founding in 604, nearly a thousand years earlier, of the monastery Henry dissolved, to which a choir school had been attached. By this reckoning, according to its website, "King's is the oldest choir school and the second oldest school in the world." Other, more plausible dates for when Henry's foundation became a bona fide English public school might be hazarded: the appointment of the reforming headmaster the Rev. Robert Whiston, whose conflict with the Dean and Chapter formed the basis for Anthony Trollope's novel *The Warden*, in 1841; the promulgation of an Instrument of Governance for the school at the Court of Windsor in 1877; or perhaps its election to the Headmasters' Conference, representing "the leading independent schools in the United Kingdom, and, indeed, the world"<sup>5</sup> in 1909. The latter claim cannot help but recall John Ruskin's description of the view from the church brow of St Mary's in Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria, as "one of the loveliest in England and, therefore, the world."<sup>6</sup> Like beauty, origins are in the eye of the beholder.

More recent reforms under headmaster Ian Walker (who served from 1986 to 2012) have undoubtedly created an institution that differs greatly from the one I attended from 1959-1968. Nowadays masters (as the teachers were called) no longer cane small boys' bottoms, a sensation I was first acquainted with at the tender age of eight.<sup>7</sup> Today the school admits girls—many of them foreign. Proud of its high A-level achievement

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, p. 43. See also G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953.

<sup>5</sup> Headmasters' and Headmistresses Conference website, at <http://www.hmc.org.uk/> (accessed March 15, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Plaque at site, personal observation.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the discipline did not have the desired effects. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the same age, I discovered "in the pain, in even the shame, a mixture of sensuality that left me with more desire than fear of feeling it once again." (*Les Confessions de J.-J. Rousseau*, ed. George Sand, Paris: Charpentier, 1841, pp. 14-15). The school fetishized the cane long before I did. The rituals of *getting the cane* were integral to the embodiment of England's ruling class over centuries; corporal punishment was made illegal in English state schools only in 1986 and private schools only in 1998. I have explored this fetish—as it undoubtedly is, in both the psychoanalytic and the anthropological senses of the term—further in *Going Down for Air*.

rate for a "broad-ability school," King's boasts that its "star performers ... take up places at top universities." Back in the sixties there used to be less emphasis on academics and more on "the whole man," and the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst was at least as desirable destination as Oxford and Cambridge (not that many of us made it to either). A good deal about King's nevertheless remains (un)comfortably familiar—including Dr Walker's possession of a Licentiate in Theology, albeit from Melbourne (the headmaster in my day, Douglas Vicary, was a Canon of the Church of England). They still play cricket and rugby on playing fields named the Paddock and the Alps, organize school life in "tightly-knit Houses" named after former headmasters, and hold annual prize days in Rochester Cathedral. Straw boaters remain as embarrassing a part of the school uniform as they did fifty years ago, setting King's pupils irrevocably apart from regular folks. Much may have changed, but King's still *feels* in some difficult but undeniable sense *the same place*.

To return to the dignified parts of the Constitution, of which the monarch was ever the capstone: the Crown in Parliament, the Order in Council, the body in the politic and the face on the coin of the realm. In the table of royal succession there were five-and-a-half reigning queens (Mary I, Elizabeth I, [William and] Mary II, Anne, Victoria, Elizabeth II), eight Henrys and Edwards, six Georges, four Williams, three Richards, two Charleses and Jameses, one Stephen, and one John, who famously lost the crown jewels in the Wash. No King David, although (I learned later) Edward VIII, who infamously abdicated in 1936 to marry "an American divorcee" and became the Duke of Windsor, went by that Biblical but perhaps a wee bit too Semitic name in family circles, Edward being a Nazi sympathizer. Before the Norman Conquest of 1066—the one date in English history that everyone knows—things got hazier and the names in the table sounded less English, even if, from an ethno-linguistic point of view, they were more authentically Anglo-Saxon than most of those who came after. Apart from King Alfred, who burned the cakes and was king not of England (which didn't yet exist) but of Wessex, I likely could have named only Ethelred the Unready (who paid protection money to the Danes), Canute (who set his throne on the beach and commanded the waves to retreat), and Edward the Confessor. Like two still earlier Edwards, the Elder (899-924) and the Martyr (975-978), the Confessor does not merit a number—Edward *the*

*First* came to the throne in 1272. There have actually been eleven Edwards, not eight. Progressive order came to the sceptered isle, it would appear, only with the Norman Yoke.<sup>8</sup> But thereafter everything went swimmingly. Royal "houses" (Norman, Angevin, Plantagenet, Lancaster, York, Tudor, Stuart, Hanover, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Windsor) follow one another in stately procession and every sovereign has his or her appointed number, which is relentlessly ordinal.

Later, I became aware of the extent to which this image was an amiable fiction that covered up a multitude of sins. There were the small matters of Matilda, proclaimed queen for a few months in 1141 before Stephen recaptured the throne, and Lady Jane Grey, queen for nine days in 1553 before she was deposed and eventually beheaded; the rather larger matter, of which Christopher Hill and other Marxist historians made possibly too much, of the "interregnum" years of 1649-60 when England was a Commonwealth under the authority first of Parliament, then of a Rump, then of Lords Protector Oliver and Richard Cromwell. In the genealogical tables of my schooldays the reign of Charles II, who was "restored" to a throne he had never occupied in 1660, was backdated to 1649, the year his father Charles I was executed for high treason. Several medieval reigns also ended violently, in the case of Edward II with a red-hot poker up the royal rectum, while during the Wars of the Roses—does not the very name conjure up the scent of English country gardens and the crack of leather on willow on the village green?—the crown changed hands no less than six times in twenty-four bloody years before Henry Tudor ended the Middle Ages on Bosworth Field in 1485 and ascended the throne as Henry VII. Two centuries later, during the gloriously misnamed Glorious Revolution of 1688 that was anything but, Parliament booted out the Catholic James II, invited in Dutch William (of Orange, a town and onetime principality in Provence), and settled the royal succession (in 1701) on the descendants of Sophia of Hanover, saddling England with German Georges who spoke little or no English. Finding the Teutonic connection inexpedient in a time when blood-red poppies were blooming in Flanders Fields, the present so-called "royal family" of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (the house of Prince Consort Albert: "Queen Victoria herself remained a member of the House of Hanover," sniffs the

---

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke," in his *Puritanism and Revolution*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1958.

royal website)<sup>9</sup> morphed into thoroughly English Windsors by Royal Proclamation in 1917, around the time the Battenbergs changed their name to Mountbatten.

Yet still the *image* endures. A quintessentially English image of millennial continuities, deep structures, and *longues durées*, abiding as the plainspoken Norman arches in Rochester Cathedral nave. Despite our emphasis on what we called "the 'long waves' of English state formation—moments or periods of substantial revolution in government, above all the Norman/Angevin period, the 1530s, the seventeenth-century Civil Wars, and the 1830s—followed by long periods of consolidation and eventual stalling,"<sup>10</sup> this image haunts *The Great Arch*. And not only *The Great Arch*. We took the metaphor that provided our title not from my childhood memories of school assemblies in Rochester Cathedral but from E. P. Thompson's celebrated essay "The Peculiarities of the English."<sup>11</sup> For all its virtues, Thompson's entire oeuvre, including above all that great romantic epic *The Making of the English Working Class*—a million-seller that had a profound influence on my generation of left-wing British intellectuals—partakes in the same structure of feeling, cementing the great things and the small in an unspoken conviction of English exceptionalism.<sup>12</sup> "The 475th anniversary of the re-founding of King's by Henry VIII," relates a recent item on my old school website, was marked on 20 June 2016 with a "celebration service" in Rochester Cathedral where "It was wonderful to hear pupils of all ages singing the School song and the National Anthem together."<sup>13</sup>

## 2

---

<sup>9</sup> I quote from the official royal website:

<http://www.royal.gov.uk/HistoryoftheMonarchy/KingsandQueensoftheUnitedKingdom/Saxe-Coburg-Gotha/Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.aspx> (accessed August 18, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> *The Great Arch*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," in his *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: Merlin, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> See Philip Corrigan, "Bread and Knowledge Politics: E. P. Thompson (1924-1993)," *left history*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> "Happy 475th Anniversary," <https://kingsrochester.fluencycms.co.uk/Happy-475th-Anniversary> (accessed 28 August 2016).

I first began to research the history of Bohemia<sup>14</sup> in the early 1990s. I had just finished a work of social theory, *Capitalism and Modernity*, and it struck me during my first visit to Prague that the Czech capital might provide an alternative vantage-point from which to re-examine "the modern condition" as sociologists had construed it.<sup>15</sup> Comparisons with Marx's "classic ground" of "the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode"<sup>16</sup> looked intriguing. Like England, Bohemia is an old European polity. Also, like England, Bohemia was "a remarkably centralized country" (the description is Marc Bloch's)<sup>17</sup> from an early date: its first recorded sovereigns claimed jurisdiction over all within their realm including (to 1221) clergy, demanded taxes of all free citizens, and governed through appointed castellans. Only from the thirteenth century, when land began to be granted with office, did a true feudal aristocracy emerge. A case can also be made—albeit a contentious one—that in Bohemia, as in England, a self-conscious *national* community, focused on language and ethnicity and articulated through a religious reformation, was in existence by the time of the fifteenth-century Hussite Wars.<sup>18</sup> But there—on the face of it—any similarities with Shakespeare's "sceptered isle" came to an abrupt end.

Bohemia's table of royal succession is a very different kettle of fish to its English counterpart.<sup>19</sup> An indigenous Czech dynasty, the Přemyslids, ruled as dukes (*knížata*)

---

<sup>14</sup> I call it Bohemia, rather than the Czech Republic (which has only existed since 1993), for similar reasons to Milan Kundera: poetic accuracy. Strictly speaking, Bohemia (in Czech, *Čechy*) forms the western half of the Czech Republic, whose eastern half is Moravia (*Morava*). Bohemia and Moravia were the heartland of the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia, though as I show below its territorial extent was at times much greater than this.

<sup>15</sup> Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber*, London: Routledge, 1990. I have since published a trilogy of books on Czech history, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (1998); *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (2013); and *Postcards from Absurdistan: Prague at the End of History* (2022, all Princeton: Princeton University Press), as well as a popular history and travel guide, *Prague: Crossroads of Europe*, London: Reaktion Books, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967, p. 8. I have written on the "peculiarities of the English" in relation to the rise of capitalism in "A Notable Administration: English State Formation and the Rise of Capitalism," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 97, No. 5, 1992, pp. 1382-1415.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Great Arch*, Ch. 1.

<sup>18</sup> See *The Coasts of Bohemia*, pp. 35-42 for fuller discussion.

<sup>19</sup> I take the table from <http://www.libri.cz/databaze/dejiny/panovnici.html> (accessed April 15, 2012).

and occasional kings<sup>20</sup> in unbroken if sometimes murderous succession for over four hundred years from the later ninth century. “Good King Wenceslas” of the English Christmas carol, who was subsequently beatified and became the Czech patron Saint Václav, was Duke of Bohemia from 921 until he was assassinated while at mass by his brother Boleslav in 935; it was Václav who built the first church of Saint Vitus in Prague Castle on the site of the cathedral that still dominates the city’s skyline. The male Přemyslid line finally died out with Václav III in 1306. Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II granted royal title to Přemysl Otakar I in 1198 and made the succession hereditary in the Golden Bull of Sicily of 1212, from which point the kings of Bohemia were numbered among the seven electors of the Empire. But thereafter, in contrast to post-Conquest England, the table seemingly gets *more* disorderly rather than less. Vladislav II (1471-1516) is the second Vladislav II; the first governed as duke from 1140 and as king from 1158-72. There is an Albrecht II (1437-9) and a Maximilián II (1564-1576) but no Albrecht I or Maximilián I. Karel (Charles) IV, who reigned from 1346-78, was the first Bohemian monarch of that name. There was no Karel V. Karel VI ruled from 1711-1740. The last Karel to occupy the Bohemian throne was Karel I, who reigned from 1916 to 1918, at which point Austria-Hungary disintegrated into several independent successor states and the Kingdom of Bohemia, which by then was little more than a legal fiction, gave way to the Czechoslovak Republic.

The initial impact the Bohemian table of kings had on me was comparable to that expressed by Michel Foucault at the beginning of *The Order of Things* in response to a passage in Borges, ostensibly taken from "a Chinese encyclopedia." The encyclopedia classifies animals into “(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” Foucault’s laughter, he tells us, “shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are

---

<sup>20</sup> Dukes Vratislav II (1061-92) and Vladislav II (1140-72) were granted lifetime, non-hereditary royal title by emperors Henry IV (in 1085) and Frederick Barbarossa (in 1158) respectively.



accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things.”<sup>21</sup> What provoked *my* laughter (a very English, public school laughter, it must be said), shattering the surfaces and planes of *my* Anglophone order of things, was the palpable illogicality of the Bohemian royal enumeration. It was like nothing I knew—and *therefore*, as John Ruskin might have concluded, it could not be for real.

I soon discovered that from the perspective of Bohemia’s history the table made perfectly good sense—if that is quite the right word. The monarchs owe their surreal numbering to their places in *other* successions, with which the Bohemian crown was at one time or another linked by the body of the king. It is as if James I, who had ruled Scotland as James VI since 1567 when he was crowned King of England in 1603, brought his Scottish number along with his royal person to Westminster. The Bohemian kings Karel IV and Karel VI are numbered thus because they were the fourth and sixth Holy Roman Emperors to bear that name. In the case of Karel I, the explanation is more convoluted but no less comprehensible. Except for the brief interlude of the “Winter King” Frederick of Bavaria (1619-20), whose tenure in Prague Castle during the Rising of the Bohemian Estates is remembered in some, though not all, Bohemian tables of succession,<sup>22</sup> from 1526-1918 the Bohemian crown was held by the Austrian Habsburgs, a succession that was legally formalized as hereditary under Ferdinand II in 1627. It was only in 1804, however, that the Habsburg dominions were formally constituted as the Austrian (from 1867 Austro-Hungarian) Empire, and this Karel—who as it turned out would be the last reigning Habsburg—was the first of his name to carry the title Emperor of Austria.

The fact that many Bohemian monarchs took their numbering from elsewhere was not always an indication, as we might mistakenly infer, that the Bohemian kingdom was an appendage of some foreign polity—even if it would later be taken as a sign of such in nineteenth-century nationalist and twentieth-century communist historiography. Karel IV, to take the most luminous example, was a scion of the House of Luxemburg; his father John of Luxemburg (or Jan Luxemburský, as he is known to Czechs) obtained the

---

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage, 1994, p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> Elected king by the Bohemian Estates in 1618, in defiance of the by then customary Habsburg succession. Defeated at the Battle of the White Mountain on 8 November 1620.

Bohemian throne through a combination of political intrigue and a show of force in 1310, ending the conflict between the rival claimants Henry of Carinthia (1306 and 1307-10) and Rudolf of Habsburg (1306-7) that followed the extinction of the male Přemyslid line. John was an absentee monarch who died fighting the English at the Battle of Crécy. Though Karel was brought up at the French court, he returned to the Czech Lands at the age of seventeen as Margrave of Moravia, succeeded to the crown on John's death in 1346, and became the first Bohemian king to be elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1355. He made Prague his imperial capital. His mother Eliška was a Přemyslid princess, and he spoke fluent Czech (along with French, German, Italian, and Latin). Hailed at his funeral as the "Father of the Homeland" (*Otec vlasti*), Karel gave the city the magnificent bridge that today bears his name, Saint Vitus's Cathedral, the Emmaus Abbey, and some of the most spacious boulevards and squares in Europe. He also founded in "our metropolitan and most charming city of Prague"<sup>23</sup> the oldest university in Central Europe in 1348.

The Bohemian Diet chose the Polish Jagiellonian kings Vladislav II (1471-1516) and Ludvík (or Louis, 1516-26) when it could not agree on a domestic successor to the "Hussite King" Jiří z Poděbrad (1458-71)—the last Czech to sit on the Bohemian throne—but this by no means signified incorporation of the Czech Lands into the Polish kingdom. During the Jagiellon tenure the Czech nobility effectively ran Bohemia. After 1526, when the Diet handed the crown to the Habsburgs, and more particularly after the defeat of the Rising of the Bohemian Estates at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, a more plausible case *might* be made for the Czech Lands becoming an Austrian colony—the "three hundred years we suffered" of nineteenth-century Czech nationalist mythology. Yet even this is a huge oversimplification, for reasons I have no space to go into here. Ferdinand II brought his rebellious kingdom to heel with exemplary executions and public whippings, wholesale confiscations of land, constitutional innovations, and much burning of heretical books. During the next century Maria Theresa and Joseph II added insult to injury with their attempts to "Germanize" the machinery of state, albeit in the interests of welding the ramshackle Habsburg domains into an efficient modern polity rather than in pursuit of any ethno-cultural imperialism. Suffice it to say, nonetheless,

---

<sup>23</sup> "Listina Karlova," 7 April 1348, in František Kop, *Založení University Karlovy v Praze*, Prague: Atlas, 1945, pp. 12-15.

that Kinskýs and Kolowrats were a good deal more prominent in Viennese society and Habsburg governance than Singhs and Mukherjees ever were in London. When Czechoslovakia became independent in 1918 one of the memorials removed from Prague squares was to Marshal Václav Radecký, the Czech hero of the Austrian victories in Italy in 1848-9. The statue had stood in the Lesser Town Square for sixty years, but Radecký retrospectively found himself on the wrong side of the new national history. His monument now rests in the lapidarium of the National Museum, a salutary reminder of the mutability of historical memories and the fragility of the bonds between present and past.

The deeper point of the contrast I am trying to draw here is this. That happy English coincidence of the body of the king and the body politic, within whose representational space, Philip Corrigan and I argued in *The Great Arch*, a series of other *identities* gradually come to be knit—sewing a land, a people, and the institutions of governance into a singular, organically evolving nation/state—is wholly absent from the Bohemian table of succession. There are no great arches to be seen here linking the dead, the living, and the yet to be born, unless they be occasional glimpses of those of *other* states in whose destinies the Czechs have from time to time found themselves caught up. What Bohemia's disorderly royal genealogy instead suggests is that, as Friedrich Engels indelicately put it when the Czechs failed to measure up to the progressive expectations of the materialist conception of history in 1849, we are dealing with “a historically absolutely non-existent ‘nation’” who “have never had a history of their own.”<sup>24</sup>

### 3

There is a grain of truth in Engels's calumny, though I would suggest that it says more about what we have come to understand by a history<sup>25</sup> than it does about the Czechs. *The Great Arch* made much of the millennial continuities in England's parish, county, and state boundaries—though it underplayed the fluidity of England's borders with the rest of

---

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Engels, "Democratic Pan-Slavism," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, New York: International Publishers, 1977, pp. 362-78.

<sup>25</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

the British Isles, a lacuna which I would now see as symptomatic of a wider flaw in the book, to which I shall return. In the Czech lands—*české země*, a loaded descriptor, like all others in this neck of the woods, since *český* can mean either Bohemian (the territory) or Czech (the ethnicity)—the parish boundaries are equally ancient, as are those of the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia. But the frontiers of the wider polities of which they have formed a part have changed with bewildering regularity over the centuries.

Přemysl Otakar II (1253-78) extended his domains south through Austria, Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola to the shores of the Adriatic, giving substance to Shakespeare's conceit in *The Winter's Tale* that landlocked Bohemia possessed a coast. Though these southern acquisitions proved to be short-lived, under the Luxemburg kings the “lands of the Bohemian crown” (as distinct from other dynastic lands to which monarchs may have personally held title) grew to include Brandenburg (from 1373 to 1415), Lusatia (to 1635), and Silesia (to 1742), which are now parts of Germany and Poland, in addition to the Czech heartlands of Bohemia and Moravia (roughly the territory of the present-day Czech Republic). After 1620 the Kingdom of Bohemia survived as a nominally sovereign Habsburg dominion—which during the later eighteenth century became the focus of a proud “Land Patriotism” that founded, among other institutions, the Royal Society of Bohemia and the National Museum—even as most things Czech retreated from the sphere of state. The Czech language dwindled to a mostly peasant and working-class vernacular, though it was probably never as close to extinction as Czech nationalists later claimed. The last Habsburg Emperor who bothered to come to Prague for his coronation was Ferdinand the Benign (Ferdinand Dobrotivý), as the Czechs call him, in 1836. He was crowned Ferdinand V, the title he already held as King of Hungary, but many Bohemian tables style him Ferdinand I, his number as Emperor of Austria—confusingly, because an earlier Habsburg ruled Bohemia as Ferdinand I from 1526-1564. As fate would have it, Ferdinand V/I would end his days in 1875 in Prague Castle, where he was exiled after being forced to abdicate in favor of his nephew Franz-Josef in 1848.

In 1918 the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary expired on the battlefields of World War I and Czechoslovakia was born. The first Czechoslovak Republic may have represented itself as the reincarnation of the medieval Bohemian state, but it was formed out of the merger of Bohemia and Moravia with two regions that had *never* belonged to

the historic Bohemian kingdom, Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, which is today part of Ukraine. The state borders have altered four times since, in 1938 (when around one third of Czechoslovakia's territory was ceded to Germany and Hungary at the Munich Agreement), in 1939 (when Slovakia seceded and Bohemia and Moravia were occupied and became a German Protectorate), in 1945 (when the country was liberated and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia was annexed by the Soviet Union), and at the end of 1992 (when Czechoslovakia split into Czech and Slovak Republics). Bohemia's location at the center of the continent has brought with it cultural involvements in clashing worlds. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Czech lands were in the vanguard of European Protestantism—Jan Hus, whose burning by the Council of Konstanz in 1415 sparked the Hussite Wars, comes between John Wyclif and Martin Luther in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*—but after 1620 they became a bastion of the Counter-Reformation. The architectural glories that draw tourists to Prague are largely the legacy of the Catholic Baroque. Between the First and Second World Wars Czechoslovakia was the most easterly liberal democracy in Europe, a self-consciously modern state looking west toward London, Paris, and (at least among its artistic avant-gardes) New York. From 1948 to 1989, however, it mutated into a distant outlier of the Soviet bloc, recycling nineteenth-century pan-Slav mantras in the service of the peace-loving socialist camp.

Bohemia's population has been no more stable either in its ethnic or national composition or—perhaps more significantly—in what was thought to constitute ethnic or national identities in the first place.<sup>26</sup> Ethnic Czechs formed a bare majority (51 percent) of the citizens of interwar Czechoslovakia, in which German-speakers, who had been an integral presence in the Czech Lands since the Přemyslid era and formed around one third of Bohemia's inhabitants before World War II, outnumbered Slovaks. Three million "Germans" were expelled from the country in 1945-6 in what was euphemistically known as the transfer (*odsun*) but was in fact one of the largest acts of ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe. A hundred years earlier, Praguers had been at a loss when asked their nationality by census takers, since language then divided classes more than it united nations. Conversely, Slovaks were incorporated into the Czechoslovak state in

---

<sup>26</sup> See Derek Sayer, "The Language of Nationality and the Nationality of Language: Prague, 1780-1920," *Past and Present*, No. 153, 1998, pp. 164-210.

1918 on the basis of ethno-linguistic consanguinity with the Czechs, notwithstanding their palpable lack of any shared history. Jan Hus was not a Slovak martyr or the Battle of the White Mountain a Slovak tragedy; Slovakia had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary since invading Magyars destroyed the first western Slav state, Great Moravia, in or around 906. Asked by Czech census takers at the end of 1919 whether they were Slovak or Hungarian, in village after village Slovak-speaking peasants responded: "It's all the same to me. If the bread is buttered on the Hungarian side, I am Magyar, if it is buttered on the Czech side, I am Slovak."<sup>27</sup> The context for this anecdote, which is related by Ferdinand Peroutka in his *Budování státu* (The Building of a State), was the collection of data to inform provision of schools in Eastern Slovakia. It is a sharp reminder that the presence of state agents and agencies in a territory does not always ensure affective—or effective—identification of states and their subjects.

What are we to make of Bohemia's Jews, whose presence is first mentioned in tenth-century written sources, and who for centuries formed one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe? Close to half the German-speaking population of Prague in the 1900 census was Jewish (as identified by religion), but the Austro-Hungarian censuses did not recognize Jews as a distinct ethnic (or in the parlance of the day, national) group. The first Czechoslovak census of 1921 did, but barely a fifth of Prague's inhabitants declaring their religion as Judaism self-identified as Jewish by nationality; a quarter declared their nationality as "German" and more than half as "Czechoslovak." There is a buried history here,<sup>28</sup> which is far from evident in the numbers alone; this was a period of intensifying conflict between Bohemia's Czech and German-speaking communities and there were strong pressures on Jews to identify with one or the other. The sharp decline in the percentage of Prague Jews who declared their "language of everyday intercourse" to be German between the imperial censuses of 1890 (74 percent) and 1900 (45 percent) owes less to demographic changes than political persuasion—these were years of rampant Czech nationalism and anti-German boycotts and riots in which synagogues were trashed as well as German shops and the editorial offices of the *Prager Tagblatt*. Understandably perhaps, many Jews had been strong supporters of the multinational

---

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Ferdinand Peroutka, *Budování státu*, Vol. 1, Prague: Lidové noviny, 1991, p. 135.

<sup>28</sup> See Sayer, "Language of Nationality," for elaboration.

Habsburg Monarchy, but that option disappeared in 1918. Eventually the Nazis murdered four-fifths of Bohemia's Jews and most of the survivors soon emigrated, rendering such questions of identity academic. It was only *after* (not to say thanks to) the Holocaust and the *odsun* that Czechoslovakia corresponded to the fictional image in which it had been constructed, becoming "a national state of Czechs and Slovaks."

A century or so previously those identities themselves were anything but clear. Even when Bohemia's upper classes thought of themselves as Czech, they spoke German. The journalist and "martyr" of the 1848 revolution Karel Havlíček Borovský and the composer Bedřich Smetana, author of the "national opera" *The Bartered Bride* (1866), struggled to master their "native tongue," while the founders of the patriotic gymnastic Sokol movement, Miroslav Tyrš (*né* Friedrich Emanuel Tirsch) and Jindřich (*né* Heinrich) Fügner, could at best manage "kitchen Czech."<sup>29</sup> The Czech "national revival" that colonized Bohemian society after 1860, refashioning linguistic and other markers of class distinction into badges of national identity, remained the province of a handful of intellectuals before 1848: a contemporary joke had it that if a certain ceiling in Prague collapsed, so would all hope of a national renaissance. Similarly, while in retrospect it is tempting to see the Slovak secession in 1939 and the eventual collapse of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1992 as evidence of the "artificiality" of the Czechoslovak union forged in 1918, things were not always so clear-cut. L'udovít Štúr only began to formalize a separate Slovak written language in the 1840s; an enterprise in which he was bitterly opposed by his Slovak compatriot Jan Kollár, author of the celebrated epic *The Daughter of Sláva* (which is written in literary Czech). Karel Havlíček Borovský was anything but a pan-Slav romantic—a visit to Russia "extinguished in me the last spark of pan-Slav love ... I returned to Prague a *Czech*, a mere inflexible Czech,"<sup>30</sup> he wrote in 1846—but he insisted that all those he called "Czechoslavs" (*Českoslované*), a category that has vanished from the language today, "are Czechs, Czechs in the Kingdom [Bohemia], Czechs in Moravia, Czechs in Slovakia. Don't the inhabitants of Provence, the Vendée, and Burgundy want to be called French, and don't the Saxons and the Prussians call

---

<sup>29</sup> Zora Dvořáková, *Miroslav Tyrš, prohry a vítězství*, Prague: Olympia, 1989, p. 29; Renata Tyršová, *Miroslav Tyrš, jeho osobnost a dílo*, Prague: Český čtenář, 1932-4, pp. 34-5.

<sup>30</sup> Karel Havlíček Borovský, "Slovan a Čech," in Jan Novotný (ed.), *Obrození národa: svědectví a dokumenty*, Prague: Melantrich, 1979, p. 333.

themselves Germans?"<sup>31</sup> Norman Davies (whose *Vanished Kingdoms* is a wonderful reminder of the ephemerality of all states great and small) might have a thing or two to say about Burgundians and Frenchmen but let that pass.<sup>32</sup>

It will by now be apparent, I hope, why for a long time, writing *The Coasts of Bohemia*, I kept asking myself: *of what, exactly, was I trying to write a history?* A country? A people? A nation? A state? A culture? All that was solid repeatedly melted into air. Where in the English case E. P. Thompson's metaphor of a great arch had connoted shape, solidity, and endurance, my image of coasts was intended to suggest flux and fragility: a landscape in constant erosion. Bohemia's history, I argued, "was *always* a 'postmodern' polyphony, in which the fragile stabilities of location and identity rested on the uncertain vicissitudes of power."<sup>33</sup> It was not just the body of the king and the body politic that were frequently out of alignment. The *identities* that historians (and others) implicitly take for granted in order to chart change through time were conspicuous by their absence. Bohemia is a part of the world where borders and populations have been in perpetual motion, and such sociological indicators of cultural identity as religion, and even language, turn out to be endlessly slippery. They are neither constant through time nor a reliable basis upon which to differentiate Czechs from their neighbors. Hereabouts a *smažený vepřový řízek* is a *Wienerschitzel* is a *cotoletta alla Milanese*. It is impossible, over any extended period, to identify a consistent *subject* for a historical narrative without having recourse to an ethnic essentialization that will not withstand empirical scrutiny. Still less is it possible to fix upon a subject that coincides with the territorial boundaries of a national state. In this respect, Bohemia's surreal table of succession is an accurate reflection of the multiply fractured history it purports to summate.

Thus far, then, I go along with Engels. The Czechs do not have a history in the way that the English (or the French, or the Americans) like to imagine that they do. Far from neatly overlapping—or at least progressively converging—to ground a coherent and bounded narrative that sinews past and present, in Bohemia's case land, nation, and state

---

<sup>31</sup> Borovský, "Slovan a Čech," p. 342.

<sup>32</sup> Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-forgotten Europe*, London: Penguin, 2012. "Burgundy"—as Davies beautifully shows—was a moveable feast. At the height of its power, its center was in the Low Countries.

<sup>33</sup> *Coasts of Bohemia*, p. 17.



frequently head off in different directions to combine and recombine ever anew. This is rough terrain for those who like their histories to make *sense*, or (as Marx and Engels did) to have *direction* and *meaning*. But I would draw a different conclusion from this perplexity than Engels did. It is *our* expectations of what constitutes a history, I believe, that are awry. Part of the reason for this may be that even as we attempt to unmask it, we continue to be mesmerized by the hypnotic (not to say Hegelian) image of *the State* as the end of history, the form of forms in which the real and the rational come together. Many, including Philip Corrigan and I in *The Great Arch*, have drawn attention to the magical, fetishistic qualities of that totem of totems.<sup>34</sup> Parallels with religion are germane—so long as we remember Émile Durkheim's insight that the sacred inspires reverence as well as awe, and love as well as terror. We are too easily lost without our great arches, vaulting the ages, humbling and inspiring us with their majesty. They put us in our place—which can, of course, be an immensely comforting place to be. Just as, a long time ago and far, far away, the Norman arches of Rochester Cathedral nave marched a thousand years back into time out of mind, leaving a little boy mesmerized by their fearful symmetry.

#### 4

At this point, let me return to that English royal genealogy—the one I learned as a schoolboy at King's, whose order occupied my subconscious (in the way that an army does a territory) and made its Bohemian counterpart seem insane. Concealed beneath the smooth cadences of the table's surface, in fact, is a lot that inhabitants of Bohemia might find familiar. Many kings of England were not English kings. From Canute (of Denmark, Sweden, and part of Norway) and William I (of Normandy), through James I (and VI of Scotland) and William III (Prince of Orange, Stadtholder of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, and Overijssel in the Dutch Republic), to the first two Georges (of Hanover), they could have taken their numbers, as Bohemia's kings did, from their place

---

<sup>34</sup> Notably Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, London: Routledge, 1997.

within the dynastic orders of other realms they simultaneously ruled—and with which, in many cases, they were more likely to personally identify. Even when the kings were not themselves foreign, their overseas territories were frequently extensive. Throughout the Middle Ages English kings exercised lordship over substantial parts of France and for a long time spoke French themselves—Angevin (the royal house of Henry II, Richard I, and John) means "from Anjou." The French connection only ended with the fall of Calais in 1558.

The reach of the English crown thereafter extended ever outward through Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, gradually making Shakespeare's conjuncture of the scepter with the isle more of a reality (even if, on closer inspection, the Celtic fringes were never fully legally or culturally incorporated into an English hegemony). Eventually the royal writ ran through large parts of North and Central America, Africa, Asia, and Australasia, until by the turn of the twentieth century the British Empire embraced a quarter of the land surface of the globe. English kings and queens graduated to being Emperors and Empresses of India. The ghostly traces of empire linger, bringing with them some quintessentially Bohemian absurdities: the present Queen of Canada is styled Elizabeth II, for example, even though there was no Canada to reign over when Elizabeth I sat on the English throne. These are the kind of loose ends from which the painstakingly woven tapestry of state can begin to be unraveled. At *no* point in this millennium-long history did the crown's dominion coincide with the bounds of that imagined national space of *the state*, the uneasy hybrid of England/Britain/United Kingdom, the notional body politic of which the body of the monarch became the symbolic capstone. This disjunction would be still more evident if we were to take into account the myriad unofficial forms in which English power reached into the three corners of the world,<sup>35</sup> from Francis Drake's state-sponsored piracy in the Spanish Main, to the private armies of the East India Company that ruled large parts of what are today India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar from the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to the Indian "Mutiny" in 1858, to James Brooke's unlikely tenure from 1841-68 as the Rajah of Sarawak.

---

<sup>35</sup> "Come the three corners of the world in arms,  
And we shall shock them. Naught shall make us rue,  
If England to itself do rest but true."  
William Shakespeare, *King John*, Act V, Scene 7.

We did not wholly ignore this extramural dimension of English state formation in *The Great Arch*. Yet looking back, our treatment left much to be desired. It is revealing that Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) was not cited in the bibliography to the first edition of the book, though (thanks to Philip) it did make its way into the bibliographic supplement to the 1991 reprint along with a handful of other works in what was then the emergent field of postcolonial studies under the rubric "Old Worlds?" While we acknowledged that "the 'imperial' qualities of English state formation were a fundamental aspect of both its materiality and its imagery,"<sup>36</sup> we did little, beyond the occasional passing mention of "learning from abroad," to attempt to actually *document* the part entanglements beyond England's imagined boundaries have played in the making of English culture, society, and state, from the architecture of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton to the ritual of the morning cup of tea. But when Black Lives Matter demonstrators toppled a statue of the enslaver, philanthropist, deputy director of the Royal Africa Company and Tory Member of Parliament Edward Colston into Bristol Harbour in June 2020, they were graphically confirming that this realm of England has, indeed, always been *an Empire*. Down those country lanes, through those November mists, you catch a distant glimpse of "the British country house, that symbol of refinement, connoisseurship and civility, [which] has long been regarded not only as the jewel in the nation's heritage crown, but as an iconic signifier of national identity."<sup>37</sup> It is an ironic as well as an iconic signifier, since many of the fortunes that funded the refinement, the connoisseurship, and the civility were made on the backs of enslaved Africans. This is not a story that happened beyond a boundary.<sup>38</sup> The violence of empire is woven into Herbert Butterfield's genteel "landscape of English life."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> *The Great Arch*, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds), *Slavery and the British Country House*, Swindon: English Heritage, 2013, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> I am alluding to the great C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Corrigan and Sayer, *The Great Arch*, p. 5. See further Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire*, New York: Knopf, 2022. I later documented one such notorious example of English imperial violence and the response "at home" in "British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre 1919-1920," *Past and Present*, No. 131, 1991, 130-64.

Contrary to Andrea Leadsom, it was the world that gave England its language, starting with the post-Conquest confluence of (already Nordic-infused) Anglo-Saxon and Norman French and progressing through the infinite varieties of vocabulary imported from Renaissance Europe or plundered from the colonies along with their other riches. The British Museum is arguably the world's largest repository of stolen goods, from the so-called Elgin Marbles to the more than a thousand bronzes looted by British troops from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin in what is now southern Nigeria in a punitive expedition in 1897.<sup>40</sup> Our mistake was to assume that notwithstanding so intrinsically global a history, we *could* take as our topic "state formation in England"—"Not Britain, Great Britain, the British Isles, or the United Kingdom; not Wales, Scotland, Ireland, India, North and Central America, Australasia, Africa"—without seriously compromising the analysis.<sup>41</sup> For the various imperial entanglements and associated wars that have been integral to English state formation since its beginnings unsettle any confidence we might place in the stability of the "national" boundaries, which have often been contested and always been permeable; and they equally undermine any belief we might have had in the identity across time of the (alleged) subjects of this (supposed) national community. "What should they know of England," Rudyard Kipling—who was born in Bombay—pointedly asked in 1891, "who only England know?" He went on to complain about "The poor little street-bred people that vapour and fume and brag ... lifting their heads in stillness to yelp at the English Flag!"<sup>42</sup> Their descendants voted for Brexit.

As some critics charged at the time, one consequence of the narrowly England-focused perspective of *The Great Arch* was relegation of those who contributed, albeit differently, to whatever at any given point in time being English (or British) meant to the role of mere victims of imperial expansion. But as much to the point here, it was no less profoundly to misunderstand England's *own* making. As I have remarked elsewhere,

---

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Robertson QC, *Who Owns History? Elgin's Loot and the Case for Returning Plundered Treasure*, London: Biteback Books, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> *The Great Arch*, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The English Flag" (1891), at <http://www.telelib.com/authors/K/KiplingRudyard/verse/volumeXI/englishflag.html> (accessed 30 August 2016).

nary a tealeaf ever grew on the Sussex Downs.<sup>43</sup> Despite our disclaimers, the image of a self-contained little England where everything began and everything ended, enduring as those arches marching down Rochester Cathedral nave, continued to lurk deep within what was, at the end of the day, a very grand narrative—a story, as we summarize it elsewhere, of "designed 'English' expansion, imperialism and reconstitution from the tiny class/gender/racial base in southern/south-eastern England outwards in a series of waves—precisely like the shockwaves from an explosion."<sup>44</sup> Actually, no: there was always a recoil, too, subverting, miscegenating, polluting English purities with foreign dangers. Too often the space in which our analysis moved continued to be the imagined representational space of *the English state itself*—an absent center that we ourselves had followed Philip Abrams in calling out as a collective *misrepresentation*, a spectacular façade of unity and coherence that concealed the frequent absence of either. For me, it took engagement with a different history, and one that (crucially) I had never had any reason to think of as "*my*" history, to break the spell.

Let me be clear. My subsequent research into Bohemia's history has given me no reason to question either the overall argument on state formation as cultural revolution Philip and I presented in *The Great Arch*, or its applicability to Marx's "classic ground." Can anyone seriously doubt that the English/British state was "a construction, as perspective and personnel, of male, white, Protestant, English propertied classes; a form of their organization and a central form through which they ruled others"<sup>45</sup>—a body politic into which some of the latter (Catholics, non-propertied males, women) were later gradually and conditionally "admitted," while others (for example, the various grades of mostly non-white "British subjects" who today have no "right of abode" in the "United Kingdom") were not?<sup>46</sup> The continuities continue: two-thirds of Boris Johnson's Cabinet

---

<sup>43</sup> *Going Down for Air*, p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, "From 'The Body Politic' to 'The National Interest': English State Formation in Comparative and Historical Perspective (An Argument Concerning 'Politically Organized Subjection')," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 116.

<sup>45</sup> *The Great Arch*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Before 1948 all inhabitants of His or Her Majesty's dominions, i.e., the British Empire, including the United Kingdom, the Dominions of Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand, and South Africa, and the colonies, were all considered "British subjects" and as such could freely enter the U.K. Successive immigration laws since 1961 have created new categories of (mostly non-white) "British overseas citizens"

(including the prime minister himself, who was educated at Eton), were the products of public schools, while 45 percent of ministers went to Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>47</sup> But looking back at E. P. Thompson's great arch from the coasts of Bohemia, I would be much more alert than I was in 1985 to the part the rest of the world played in English state formation, and correspondingly less overawed by the continuities of institutional forms *in* England—the county boundaries, circuits of assize, JPs, Parliament, Privy Council, and the rest, not to mention the table of royal succession—that gave our book rather more than just its title. Certainly, the fact that core institutions of the English state "could plausibly be represented as both ancient in origin and unbroken in their development over the best part of a millennium is hardly incidental to its resilience and power."<sup>48</sup> But I would now lay much more stress on the word *represented*, and the unending work—largely of erasure and denial—that has had to be put in to keep those collective (mis)representations plausible. For at the end of the day there is no great arch of state that spans past and present in which all ages sing together, in England any more than anywhere else. Notwithstanding the orderly progression of its table of kings, England's history has been no less rich in unpredictable convolutions than Bohemia's. The image that comes to my mind today when I think of the panoply of the English state, in all its empty pomp and suffocating circumstance, is less E.P. Thompson's great arch than the Wizard of Oz cowering behind his curtain, conjuring up mirages of grandeur out of megaphones and mirrors, fucking around and hoping he won't be found out.

Intellectuals make their living out of making sense; we would dearly like all that is real to be rational and all that is rational to be real. But in England as in Bohemia, in the end *everything* was contingent and could have turned out differently at any point. Had the Atlantic winds been blowing in a different direction one day in 1588 the lingua franca of the world might now be Spanish. History has neither pattern, nor providence, nor purpose, nor direction, nor point. Coherence, logic, and meaning are only ever retrospectively conferred in historical narratives—pre-eminent among them the narratives of state, which are always exercises in forgetting as much as repositories of memory. It is

---

and "British overseas territories citizens," who remain British subjects but have no right of abode in the U.K.

<sup>47</sup> Amy Walker, "Two-thirds of Boris Johnson's cabinet went to private school," *Guardian*, 25 July 2019.

<sup>48</sup> *The Great Arch*, revised and expanded edition, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 216.

these narratives that fabricate the great arches, the deep structures, the *longues durées*, recycling the past to serve the needs of successive presents—again and again and again. However familiar its rituals and routines might feel, King's School, Rochester is *not* the same institution as that in which I learned my royal rollcall back in the day; and still less is it the school for Twenty Scholars of Grammar Henry VIII established in 1541, or the choir school the saintly Justus supposedly attached to his monastery in 604. As for states, they are perhaps always best viewed from somewhere off-center, outside the discursive—not to say affective—fields whose borders they police. Only then will they cease to take us in. In every sense.