

**Patrick Carroll.**

**Science, Culture, and Modern State Formation.**

University of California Press, 2006, 290 pp.

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This is an exceptional work of historical sociology — interesting and informative from beginning to end. Professor Carroll examines how in Ireland the modern state was materially engineered by science and government. He traces the beginnings of this transformation to scientific thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in particular, to Robert Boyle’s engine science and William Petty’s “experimental politics”, both conceived as instruments for managing and improving the land and the people. The conquest of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he argues, provided Anglo-Irish social engineers with a *tabula rasa* of land and people that they could map, measure, scope, and manipulate for experimental purposes and for the betterment of the Irish. The long-term result was the rise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of an information-gathering state, which sought to police natural and political bodies and improve the land and the people through public works and public education. Professor Carroll laments the lack of sufficient attention to culture in the historical literature on the making of the modern state and especially the failure to give enough attention to the role of science. He argues that the co-construction of science and government explains the peculiar form of the modern state. “The culture of the new science”, he writes, “moved from a local form of collective action to an institutionalized culture that caused the emergence of a state form that was without precedence in history” (13). We can recognize this causal relationship best by closely studying the material culture created by the “state-science plexus”, as he calls it.

The book is well written. It is stimulating and theoretically well informed. Professor Carroll helps to fill a double-neglect: the neglect of Ireland by those who study the rise of the modern state and the neglect of state building — at least before the late nineteenth century — by those who study Ireland. He adds to the literature on state formation and the growth of unobtrusive state control over populations. He makes effective use of a great number of printed primary sources. He is very good on the discourses, practices, and manipulations of material culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, effectively challenging the notion that the Enlightenment has been corrupted by instrumental reason. As he says, “it was there all along”.

Like other good books, it is not without its weaknesses. There is a lot of gratuitous jargon. Conceptualization is too important to be cluttered with unnecessary terms like “bio-population”, “nosopolitics”, “biopolis”, and the latest buzz word “triangulation”. He is repetitious. He frequently draws conclusions that are unwarranted by his evidence or relies on evidence that could support alternative arguments as much as his own, for example when he points to censuses or public education in the nineteenth century as proof of his thesis. He fails to demonstrate in a convincing manner the causal connection between the scientific thinking of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the effects he claims this science had on state action in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And he does not adequately help the reader to understand how Ireland was similar to or different from other countries. The idea that Ireland gave science engineers a *tabula rasa* on which to work is an over-simplification; in some ways this is true, but he is ignoring how difficult state agents found Ireland to govern and how partial was their control over it until at least the middle of the nineteenth century.

Most serious of all is the insufficient attention he pays to other forces and processes that have gone into the making of the modern state, such as the growth in population and population density, the rise of capitalism, globalization/imperialism, competition among states, increasing concentrations of power, greater monopolization of force by the state, and the increase in social control by the state, only the last mentioned of which is treated in this book, and even it only partially. Although there is the odd word here and there which indicates that Professor Carroll realizes that his story of state formation is not the whole story, these slight references are far outnumbered by statements implying that his story is the preeminent one. The critical independent causal factor for him is entirely cultural, that is, the discourse and cultural practices of science-engineers and those whom they have influenced. These men are the architects of the modern state. They are responsible for its “uniqueness”. We are now governed by a state largely of their creation. I am exaggerating his argument a little, but not much.

To get away from this cultural determinism we need to know why state agents picked up the ideas of these science engineers. What other forces and processes were operating that made these ideas useful? How did culture interact with these other forces and processes? And what were the dirty politics of his so-called “biopolis”? It is not a weakness of Professor Carroll’s book that he does not focus on these other forces or processes, but it is a weakness that he hardly mentions them and the important role that they played in the rise of the modern state and indeed in how culture shaped it.

Nevertheless, if Professor Carroll is guilty of neglect, many other scholars have been guilty of neglecting what he examines in this book. So it would do them well to read it. I am certainly glad that I was asked to read it. The book has given me much to think about. Although he gets carried away by his enthusiasm for his subject, that is perhaps for the best. Enthusiasm of this kind is healthy for any discipline.

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