

ÉTUDE CRITIQUE / REVIEW ESSAY

Knowledge and State Formation: Recent Scholarship by Edward Higgs

HIGGS, Edward — *The Information State in England: The Central Collection of Information on Citizens since 1500*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. xii, 284.

HIGGS, Edward — *Life, Death and Statistics: Civil Registration, Censuses and the Work of the General Register Office, 1836–1952. A Local Population Studies Supplement*. Hatfield, UK: Local Population Studies, 2004. Pp. xiii, 258.

WHILE THESE two important contributions to the history of knowledge production, statistics, and state formation share the same publication date, *Life, Death and Statistics* was composed before *The Information State*, which reproduces several lengthy passages from it. Nonetheless, each book stands alone in terms of subject matter, focus, and argument. Higgs's ambition in *The Information State* is to provide a broad overview of the role of information "gathering" or "collecting" in the process of English state formation, on the scale of Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer's *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*.¹ *The Information State* begins with a selective critical account of some sociological analyses of the relations between knowledge production and state formation. Higgs claims that these have located the emergence of state information production primarily in the post-Enlightenment period as a consequence of capitalist industrialization and the decline of community-based forms of regulation. He also suggests that the dominant accounts present state information production as driven by interests in social control and surveillance on the part of elites or social classes in command of the state. For the most part, the refutation of these analyses is the scaffolding on which Higgs's historical account is erected.

¹ Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1988).

Beginning with the Domesday survey, Higgs argues that central information gathering has been an ongoing preoccupation of the central state since early modern times. Central authorities in the sixteenth century drew upon a network of relatively autonomous local authority relations and local agents to execute policies from poor relief to taxation. Information in the form of such written records as the parish register or poll tax books was used by powerful local authorities, and such community regulation was characterized by relations of dominance and subordination. In turn, local authorities could invoke central state power at times when it suited their interests.

Higgs carries us from Domesday to the 1830s in about 30 pages, and he is clearly most comfortable in the period after 1830. He argues that, while the dramatic growth in statistical knowledge production and output of the Victorian state was an important stage in state formation, accounts of the growth of a heavily centralized administrative apparatus capable of and engaged in exercising close surveillance of the population are overdrawn. Higgs portrays the Victorian state as classically “liberal”, in the sense of attempting to govern by empowering local authorities and by encouraging individual autonomy while specifying standards of performance and provision. The growth in its capacity for information production in this period is treated as driven primarily by the creation and extension of civil rights, especially property rights, and by the use of publicity to identify social “evils” and to promote the legitimacy of the state.

While there were increasing tendencies towards political centralization in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods as central government increased its direction of local authorities, and while the state faced increased pressures to deal with Fenian terror and with an apparent decline in the fitness of the population for military service, Higgs locates the modern “information state” especially in the period after 1914. The main forces propelling its development were the extension of welfare state entitlements, the mobilization of resources and population demanded by war, and the adoption of new information technology, especially in the form of punch card tabulation. The first two of these forces created systematic pressures on government agencies to be able reliably to identify, characterize, and locate citizens, while also broadening the spheres in which citizens could make demands on government. New technology made it possible to do both sorts of things more quickly, effectively, and extensively. Such new state projects shifted local powers towards central authorities. Government agencies became much more actively involved in conducting surveys into a wide array of social questions and conditions.

Higgs’s final substantive chapter deals with the contemporary period, detailing the dramatic expansion of the capacity to generate information produced by computerization, attempts to combat crime and terrorism, and other forms of administrative extension. The possibilities and dangers of data linking are examined, and Higgs briefly considers matters of freedom of information and data protection.

Life, Death and Statistics focuses much more narrowly on the origins, activities, and fate of one key agency of information production, the General Register Office. This is a thorough, if conventional, administrative history, in which the impressive scope of Higgs's mastery of the secondary literature evident in *The Information State* is augmented by an equal mastery of the archival record. In a reprise of an argument made in the journal literature, Higgs begins by effectively discounting the dominant interpretations of the origins of the English 1836 *Registration Act*, which have seen the act as a way of addressing the exclusion of Nonconformists from independent access to legitimate marriage and to birth and death registration. Higgs shows that the act was instead a result of concerns with the traceability of titles to property. In contrast to accounts that consider William Farr and his statistical work as the most significant elements in the General Register Office, Higgs shows that most of the office's work by far was concerned with questions of property. He also rehabilitates the reputations of the first two Registrars-General, often presented primarily as stooges in Farr's way (*mea culpa*).

A second main argument in the book concerns the reinvigoration of the GRO in the early twentieth century, after a considerable period of lassitude. Higgs's interlocutor here is Simon Szreter, who claimed that the intensifying conflicts between eugenicists and environmentalists over the condition of the English population led to the GRO's devising of the classification of socio-economic groupings and to an intense interest in investigating class-related population events, including the introduction of a question of marital fertility into the 1911 census. Higgs uses his impressive command of the archival record and secondary literature to argue that the matter is more complex than a debate around eugenics. Concerns about population quality were intensified by the condition of potential conscripts for the Boer War and World War I, while there was also a growing movement for child welfare. The birth rate had fallen, but the infant mortality rate had not kept pace, and conditions in England seemed to be lagging behind those in its European rivals. A broad concern with "national efficiency" stimulated interest in population issues, but Higgs suggests that not until the late 1930s did conceptions of social class membership replace population density or locality as an organizing framework for analysis. Among other matters, Higgs examines the impact of the feminization of work, welfare state policy, and new information technologies on the GRO's activities, while also presenting an account of the Office's eventual absorption by the Ministry of Health, at which point it ceased to be an agency able to set parts of its own research agenda.

Higgs writes lucidly and well, and it is agreeable to read two books concerned systematically to argue and not simply to narrate, even if many of Higgs's opponents, in *The Information State* especially, are nameless, now lacking in credibility or enfeebled by age. I did not enjoy the somewhat relentlessly positive view of liberal government as producing information to empower, service, and protect its citizens, but others may see this emphasis as

a useful corrective to views that cast state institutions only in terms of domination. In the preface to *The Information State*, Higgs remarks, “A work flawed by its ambitions but which stimulates discussion can be more productive than a limited study that leads nowhere” (p. viii). This book especially raises important questions and stimulates discussion,² and these attributes overcome its flaws, although I do not see them as flaws of ambition. Most striking to my mind is Higgs’s neglect of any systematic consideration of his two main categories: “information” and “state”. He does grapple briefly with “state”, arguing against a view of its history as one of expansion from a central point, suggesting that it be seen as a network of power relations rather than as a “thing”, and describing it as a broad constellation of changing groups. He mentions in passing that one might see the organs of local government as by-products of practices of governance and suggests, again in passing, that welfare legislation constructs a public sphere. But he does not present an explicit analysis of the mutual constitution of centre and locality, and he invokes such big conceptual entities as the “Liberal State”, the “British State”, the “Welfare State”, and of course the “Information State” without considering their analytic stature or purchase. These exist alongside such entities as “central state”, “local state”, and central and local government. As well, there are issues of periodization that are not addressed. The extent to which one can actually use the term “state” to refer both to the relatively loose, decentralized, personalized relations of fealty of the early modern period and to bureaucratized, impersonal, contemporary sovereign authorities seems highly debatable. Clarification of the key concept “state” seems more especially called for, given such very different recent readings of state knowledge-power relations as James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* or Mark Neocleous’s *Administering Civil Society*.³

“Information” is indeed something that is gathered or collected in Higgs’s account, as his title suggests. He does announce his adoption of a “constructivist” account of the representations generated by government agencies, but this account does not seem to shape the analysis. Information seems to exist before efforts are made to collect it, and Higgs shows no patience for the arguments of post-representational work in the history of statistics or of science. Such work proposes that enquiries constitute as they capture objects of knowledge.

To my reading, one of the things Higgs has not taken from Corrigan and Sayer, or from Foucault for that matter, is a conception of practices of subjec-

2 See the report of a colloquium on the book held in October 2004 at the University of Essex, in which Victor Gattrell and Steve Hindle offer a number of criticisms (most of which I will not repeat here) and to which Higgs responds: *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 18, nos. 1–2 (2005), pp. 125–143.

3 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Mark Neocleous, *Administering Civil Society: Towards a Theory of State Power* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

tification. He does not attend to Corrigan and Sayer's analysis of "in/formation", despite his promising reflections on the neglect by sociologists and philosophers of attention to the power of forms and form-filling (pp. 164–165).⁴ Nor does he see that Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is centrally concerned with the construction of social subjects through disciplinary technologies, rather than with a simple notion of control and domination.⁵ Indeed, when confronted with questions of power, Higgs tends to see it as either liberating or controlling, not as constituted in the same processes that constitute its objects. A fundamental Foucauldian insight about the productive qualities of power relations seems to be missing, and perhaps for this reason Higgs attends rather less to issues of classification, categorization, naming, and identifying than one might expect.

I think the absence of an account of subjectification tends to skew the analysis in other ways. For instance, in his discussion of Benthamite liberalism, Higgs attends rightly to projects for making individuals responsible for their own fates, as in Chadwick's preoccupations with insurance. Yet there is little or no mention of the other side of the Benthamite conception, as evident in Chadwick's preoccupations with "preventive police": that is, the desire to structure the physical and social conditions of individual life such that responsibility would be the individual's only possible strategy. Stated differently, the field of "information" was to be organized before it was known. The absence of a conception of knowledge production as "making up people" makes it easier to portray such processes as benign.

Edward Higgs's mastery of the archival record and of a broad sweep of historical literature is impressive. He has produced two important books that deal with matters of knowledge and state formation. Critical engagement with them will be rewarding for social and political historians and sociologists of state formation alike.

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4 In fact, there is a literature that Higgs does not cite here. See Alain Desrosières, "Histoire de formes : statistiques et sciences sociales avant 1940", *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 26 (1985), pp. 277–310; Laurent Thévenot, "Rules and Implements: Investment in Forms", *Social Science Information*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1984), pp. 1–45. See also Bruce Curtis, "Social Investment in Medical Forms: The 1866 Cholera Scare and Beyond", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2000), pp. 347–379.

5 Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).