

I. The Medieval Constitution

- A. The king and council model developed in the last two lectures provided the basic template of governance for much of Europe from the fourteenth century through the eighteenth centuries.
- i. In several cases, that "template" continues to the present day, as in England, Sweden, and Denmark.
 - ii. For the most of this time, the King (or Queen) was the dominant figure in policy formation during this time.
 - a. Parliaments (or Estates General) were not "self calling" during this period of time, and met only when the King wanted their opinion on some matter, and were dismissed when the king decided that he had heard enough.
 - b. Since the royal demand for new advice was rare in stable times, parliaments met only every year or two, and often for a period of just a few weeks.
 - c. The exception to this rule occurred during times of war, at which point Parliament's permission for new taxes was necessary.
 - d. Parliaments were also used as a pressure valve, insofar as ordinary people could petition the parliament, and the parliament could in turn petition the king to address problems of regional or local concern.
 - e. However, by in large, most important decisions were made within the executive branch of government and by local governors (noblemen) who were delegated authority to decide many judicial matters within their domains (titled property).
- B. Beyond this core political arrangements, stood the laws of property and inheritance, which played a substantial role in economic and political life.
- i. Land was by far the most valuable economic asset of the time, and land for the most part was passed down among families connected by marriage.
 - ii. Insofar as kingdoms, principalities, and baronies were treated as property, political power also tended to be inherited in large measure.
 - a. Insofar as unskilled labor was not so valuable, and opportunities for skilled labor were relatively few, and often controlled by guilds, inheritance also played an important role in the one's station in life.
 - b. Kings and kingdoms, princes and principalities, barons and baronies, were determined in normal times by heredity--assigned to particular families and passed on through inheritance and marriage, as were many of the titles and properties within their territories.
 - iii. Together the political and civil law characterized a stable political and economic system.
- iv. It was so stable that even major disruptions such as the English civil war (1640-1660) could not replace the template.
 - After Cromwell's death, the Charles II was invited to reassume the English throne and the medieval constitution was reinstated.
 - Indeed, it could be said the "revolutionary system" adopted by Cromwell was "just" another instance of the king and council, with Cromwell the king and new parliament the council.
 - v. This is not to say that no governments existed within Europe that used other systems of governance.
 - a. For example, cities often had their own oligarchic or representative structures of governance.
 - b. In many cases, "free cities" purchased a degree of freedom from national or regional authorities.
 - c. However, even the "free cities" were rarely sovereign, and their "privileges" could often be revoked by the local nobility, albeit at an economic cost.
 - ("Freedom" would only be "bought," if the local king or baron kept his side of the bargain. And free cities were often one of the main engines of economic growth in their nations/baronies.)
 - vi. Indeed, the paucity of the governmental designs in Europe, is reflected in the analyses of enlightenment scholars (1600-1700)
 - In general, they analyzed far fewer governmental forms than did the Greeks scholars, in part because so few forms of government existed within Europe.
 - Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant, for example, did not fully analyze representative or parliament dominated systems--whether to praise or dismiss--in large part because they had never seen one operate.
 - Indeed, Rousseau who imagines the possibility of a grand democratic constitutional convention, appeals to ancient Greece and Rome practices, somewhat desperately, in an attempt to argue that such grand assemblies were really possible.

"The people in assembly, I shall be told, is a mere chimera. It is so today, but two thousand years ago it was not so." (the *Social Contract*, 1762, Ch. 12)
 - Apart from the Dutch republic, and perhaps the Swiss confederation, the king and council template was essentially universal.
 - vii. This is not to say that "unusual times" never occurred.
 - During the English Civil War, a (rump) parliament elected on the basis of very narrow suffrage was in control of governance for ten years or so;
 - During the middle of the eighteenth century, the Swedish parliament became dominant during the Swedish "Age of Liberty";

- There were also a few cases in which kings disbanded or ceased calling parliaments, as in France and Denmark, and to some extent in England during the two decades on either side of its civil war in the mid-17th century.
- Although only Denmark completely disbanded its parliament. The Estates General and Parliament continued to exist during the "absolutist" periods in France and England.

viii. It is to say that such unusual times were infrequent.

- That is to say, both true absolutism and strong parliaments were unusual events.
- Although the balance of power between kings and their parliaments varied a bit, the norm remained a dominant king and a relatively weak parliament for seven hundred years.
- Indeed kings that had inherited multiple territories often had several parliaments to negotiate with.

C. However, the stability of this system depended on the stability of Royal interests and the royal purse, as well as the interests represented in parliament and the size of the national tax base.

II. Empire and the Technology of War

A. These interests and constraints began to change slowly in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as several of the larger European nations attempted to assemble worldwide empires.

B. Empires were of interest to Kings and Queens for several reasons:

- i. First, the brought with them the promises or more revenues, from sales of land, monopoly privileges, and tariffs, all customary sources of royal income beyond the control of parliaments.
- ii. Second, there was prestige and honor associated with size.
- iii. Third, there was the opinion among many, particularly mercantilist economists, that larger territories had many trade advantages. And, of course, a richer kingdom also generally meant greater royal revenues.
- iv. Given, these three economic advantages, "grabbing" an empire might also regarded as necessary for self defense. Economic wealth and royal income meant larger and more powerful military machines.
 - It bears noting, that the same economic arguments also made empires of interest to nobles and commoner as well, insofar as the need for taxes might diminish, prosperity might increase, or national security be enhanced.
 - And to the extent that national pride is a good, even the "status" and "honor" of the nation might matter to many within the kingdom in addition to the king.

C. However, insofar as these incentives applied to all nations, and territory that could be brought into an empire is scarce, conflict and escalating competition for "colonial" territories naturally arose.

- i. Partly because of this conflict, the technology of sea combat, in particular, improved rapidly, but so did its expense.
- ii. In most cases, national **budgets** to pay for the fleets and armies necessary for empire, **increased more rapidly** than did the "anticipated" receipts.
 - Relatively few territories had gold for the taking, as in the Spanish conquests in South America.
 - Moreover, colonial matters required new governmental personnel.
 - And, public policy in general became more complex and elaborate, causing bureaucracy to increase.
- iii. New taxes were often necessary, and parliamentary assent was required under the medieval constitution.

D. Consequently, parliaments became somewhat more important in public finance and in public policy matters.

- i. As the need for new taxes increased, parliaments may readily secure modest increases in legislative authority in exchange for tax increases.
 - (Recall the models developed in the previous lectures.)
- ii. As the import of majority support in the parliament increased, the kings were forced to take parliamentary majorities more seriously.
 - (This was true, even if in most cases, the King or Queen could use royal resources to purchase seats for their supporters. Even this requires attention and effort.)
- iii. Although election laws were not changed, elections became relatively more important, and more likely to be contested.

III. The Rise of Commerce

A. Commerce began to increase in the 18th century for a variety of reasons, partly technological, partly political, partly because of population growth, and partly because of Empire.

- i. One of the technologies that made war more costly, better ships, also tended to make shipping relatively cheaper.
 - a. If one could stay clear of pirates and war, more goods could be shipped more quickly with less likelihood of loss.

- b. As the territories in which trade could take place expanded, because of increased speed and successful colonization, **new opportunities for exchange** (three or four corned) arose internationally and domestically.
 - ii. Other new technologies were also introduced, as with new water powered looms which reduced the cost of producing cloth, and improved metallurgy which was important for building both better cannons and many useful commercial devices, such as the early steam engines of Newcomen (1712) and John Watts (1769).
 - As new more capital intensive production methods were adopted (ships, looms, and iron), markets for skilled and unskilled labor increased.
 - New techniques in farming (new crop rotations, better plows, and new tilling methods) were also adopted that increased farm output per unit of land.
 - iii. The power of urban monopolies and guilds declined somewhat during the eighteenth century (Jones), although even toward the end of the eighteenth century, Adam Smith would lament the poor quality of workmanship within the guild dominated cities.
 - iv. Of course, emigration to the colonies tended to drive up wages, even as population grew.
- B. Some of the increase in commerce reflected changes in the medieval law, presumably at the behest of the new commercial interests and by landholders who sought to make better use of the new farming technologies.
- i. For example, the laws protecting guilds and urban monopolies were weakened (Jones).
 - ii. And laws providing for more or less voluntary "rationalization" of land holdings through enclosure movements.
 - iii. And involuntary reforms were allowed insofar as nobles and other major landholders in effect confiscated traditional communal forest and grazing grounds.
- C. The number of persons occupied directly or indirectly with commerce increased, although not greatly so.
- i. Most of the population remained on farms and in small towns in the country side (perhaps 90% of the population).
 - ii. Indeed, in some cases, royal land holdings were being sold off to "freeholders" to finance the expanding royal lifestyles and imperial aspirations, but which also increased the number of "free holder" farmers.
 - iii. **A stage was being set**, but the great transformation would not take off for another half century or so.

IV. The Rise of Liberal Ideology

- A. In philosophical and political circles, new radical political views were formed based on ideas of popular sovereignty.
- i. The nature of government, so long in equilibrium, ceases to be taken as given, as an act of divine intention, and became a subject of inquiry.
 - ii. **The new theory argued that government arose as a device for advancing the common interests of a nation's citizenry.**
 - a. For example, Hobbes (1651) argued that people "agree" to transfer powers to a sovereign so that they might escape from war and enjoy the advantages of peace.
 - He argued that sovereignty was absolute once given, but rested in principle on a voluntary social contract of a free and equal people.
 - b. Locke (1689) argued that the same transfer was adopted as a means of securing personal property (in both person and land).
 - His argument also suggested that legitimate sovereign power emerged from a social contract, but unlike Hobbes suggested that there were limits to that delegation of authority. Not every royal policy could plausibly have been agreed to by those signing the original contract.
 - c. These arguments were further developed in the eighteenth century by Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Kant--to name but a few of the next generation of political theorists.
 - The idea sovereignty emerges from "the people" as a method of advancing common interests became widespread among intellectuals and the educated.
 - As did the associated idea, the delegation of sovereignty to government was limited by "the contract," at least in principle.
 - iii. In addition to the *theories* of impressive and original scholars were some *substantial real world* instances of **social compacts** and representative systems of government.
 - For example, republican government was established in the very successful Dutch republic.
 - And, popular government--at least by the standards of that time--were established in the in many of the English colonies.
 - Some nations had managed to depart from the medieval template, without courting disaster, whether divine or political.
- B. Indeed, by century's end, the American revolution had taken place and introduced a "totally" new form of government without a king, in which all the highest offices were based on based on elections with relatively broad suffrage.
- i. The French revolution was not completed,

- ii. but its political ideas remained relatively popular,
 - iii. and the reforms imposed by French armies changed many of the local political equilibria.
 - iv. After a French monarchy was restored, *with a functional parliament*, and the Dutch republic transformed into a kingdom, the medieval template was restored
 - The ideas of the French and American revolutions, however, were not forgotten.
 - Although ideas are not enough to complete a revolution, they may still affect the development of governments by changing beliefs about the "proper" method and domain of governance.
- C. At century's end a new vision of economic life also emerged with the publication of Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" in 1776.
- i. Among other points argued, he insisted that a nation's wealth consisted of the capacity for making goods and services rather than its stockpiles of gold.
 - a. That is to say, in its human resources, its holdings of productive equipment and land, and its ability to produce desired goods and services from those holdings.
 - b. In effect, Smith proposed a "popular sovereignty" vision of wealth, as people rather than piles of gold in the royal treasury.
 - ii. He also argued that the system, although driven by self interest, in the end promoted the welfare of all involved without significant design on the part of a sovereign--as if "by and invisible hand."
 - iii. Although, governments could provide useful public services, such as roads and canals, national defense, and law--wealth was not produced by the strategies of sovereigns but by independent decisions that lead men and women to promote the interests of the commonwealth by promoting their own interests.
 - iv. Commerce was not an inferior occupation, but by promoting specialization and expanding exchange was the engine of wealth production from which ultimately comes a nation's power.
- D. Together social contract theory and the wealth of nations, greatly diminished the office of the sovereign, by grounding both politics and economics in the decisions of ordinary people.

V. By Century's End the Stage is Set

- A. To say that a stage was set, or sparks were lit, is not to say that a new act or fire is inevitable.

- i. Commerce could have stalled, the ideas of intellectuals and radical reformers might have lost to other more traditional ideas.
 - ii. Governments might have remained king dominated--had colonization proved to be as profitable as expected and war less costly.
 - iii. Napoleon might have established a dictatorship on the continent.
- B. By century's end, or perhaps a bit beyond (Vienna), the stage had been set for a great transformation, although it had scarcely begun.