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Great Arches Viewed from the Coasts of Bohemia: Reflections Inspired by Tables of Kings[1]

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"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[2]

Abstract: Considering the differences between the superficial orderliness of the English/British table of royal succession and the apparent anarchy of its Bohemian counterpart, this essay questions aspects of the analysis of English state formation offered in Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer's 1985 study *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*. Rather than providing a contrast to England's institutional political continuities over centuries, Bohemia's manifestly fractured history furnishes a vantage point from which the ideological character of such claimed historical continuities becomes clear. E. P. Thompson's image of a "great arch" of state formation attributes far too much shape, solidity, and coherence to a process that was always, whether in England or Bohemia, a matter of flux and fluidity – a landscape in constant erosion, upon which coherence is only ever imposed in momentary retrospect.

Keywords: Bohemia, state formation, England, Britain, history, narratives, nationalism

ALL AGES SINGING TOGETHER

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, my co-author of *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*,[3] once called "the making of the boy."[4] Educated in the dying days of the British Empire at an English public school – which is to say, an exclusive and expensive private school – I, once upon a time, used to be able to recite the succession of English monarchs with scarcely a stumble. King's School, Rochester, where I imbibed the royal roll-call along with declensions of Latin verbs and my multiplication 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."[5] Henry's nationalization of the Church and dissolution of the monasteries, as we argued by following G. R. Elton in *The Great Arch*, was a crucial moment in the making of England as a sovereign nation state in the modern sense of the word. "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 imperial Crown of the same, unto whom a body politic [...] be bounden and owe next to God a natural and humble obedience."[6]

The school itself claims its origin not in Elton's Tudor revolution in government, however, 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, "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, in 1841;[7] the promulgation of an Instrument of Governance for the school at the Court of Windsor in 1877; and its election to the Headmaster's Conference, representing "the leading independent schools in the United Kingdom, and, indeed, the world"[8] in 1909. The latter claim cannot help but bring to mind 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."[9] Like beauty, origins are in the eye of the beholder.

The school's 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 as a choral scholar from 1959–1968. Nowadays Masters no longer cane small boys' backsides. Indeed, the school now admits girls – many of them foreign. Proud of its high A-level achievement rate for a "broad-ability school," today's 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," while the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst was a more popular destination for King's graduates than Oxford and Cambridge. A good deal about King's nevertheless remains 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 morning assemblies and 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 as *the same place*.

To return to the dignified parts of the Constitution, of which the monarch was ever the capstone, one can mention 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, and 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. 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 the names of 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, Canute, and Edward the Confessor from this period. 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. Progressive order came to the sceptered isle, it would appear, only with the Norman Yoke.[10] 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 all sovereigns have their appointed numbers, which are 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, for instance, of Matilda, who was proclaimed reigning queen for a few months in 1141 before Stephen recaptured the throne, and Lady Jane Grey, who was queen for nine days before she was beheaded in 1553. There was also the rather larger matter, of which Christopher Hill and other Marxist historians who influenced *The Great Arch* made possibly too much, of the "interregnum" years of 1649–1660, when England was a Commonwealth under the authority first of Parliament, then of a Rump, and then of the 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, 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 wonderfully misnamed Glorious Revolution of 1688, Parliament kicked out James II, invited in the Dutch William (of Orange, a town and onetime principality in Provence), and eventually settled the royal succession (in 1701) on the descendants of Sophia of Hanover, saddling Eng-

land 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 "royal family" of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (the house of Prince Consort Albert; "Queen Victoria herself remained a member of the House of Hanover," emphasizes the royal website)[11] morphed into the 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 the 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,"[12] it is this image that haunts *The Great Arch*. And not only *The Great Arch*. Corrigan and I 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."[13] 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 a conviction of English exceptionalism. "The 475th anniversary of the re-founding of King's by Henry VIII," relates a recent item on my old school's 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."[14]

A HISTORICALLY NON-EXISTENT NATION

Like England, Bohemia is an old European polity. I first began to research the history of Bohemia[15] 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.[16] Possible comparisons of Bohemia with Marx's "classic ground"[17] of capitalism looked intriguing. Also like England, Bohemia was "a remarkably centralized country" (the description is Marc Bloch's)[18] at an early date: its first recorded sovereigns claimed jurisdiction over all within their realm, including (until 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 was in existence by the time of the fifteenth-century Hussite Wars.[19] But there – on the face of it – any similarities with Shakespeare's "sceptered isle" end.

Bohemia's table of royal succession is a very different kettle of fish to its English counterpart.[20] An indigenous Czech dynasty, the Přemyslids, ruled as dukes (*knížata*) and occasional kings in unbroken if sometimes murderous succession from the later ninth century. The male line finally died out with Václav III in 1306. The Holy Roman Emperor granted a hereditary royal title to Přemysl Otakar I in 1198, from which point the kings of Bohemia were counted among the seven electors of the Empire. But thereafter, in contrast to post-Conquest England, the table seemingly gets *more* disorderly rather than less. This period's Vladislav II (1471–1516) is the second Vladislav II; the first governed as duke from 1140–1172 and as king from 1158. There is also an Albrecht II (1437–1439) and a Maxmilián II (1564–1576), but no Albrecht I or Maximilián I. Karel (Charles) IV, who ruled from 1346–1378, was the first Bohemian monarch of that name. Then there was no Karel V, but Karel VI ruled from 1711–1740. The last Karel to occupy the Bohemian throne was Karel I, who ruled from 1916 to 1918, at which point Austria-Hungary collapsed and the (by then legal fiction of the) Kingdom of Bohemia gave way to the (first) Czechoslovak Republic.

The initial impact that encountering 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 that was ostensibly taken from "a Chinese encyclopedia." The encyclopedia classifies animals into the following categories: "(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 accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things."[21] What provoked *my* laughter (a very English public school laughter, it must be said), shattering the surfaces and planes of *my* 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 inferred, 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 in which the Bohemian crown was at one time or another imbricated. 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 so numbered because they were the fourth and sixth Holy Roman Emperors to bear that name. In the case of Karel I (and last) the explanation is more convoluted but no less comprehensible. From 1526 (with the brief contested interlude of the "Winter King" Frederick of Bavaria, in 1619–1620, who figures in some, though not all, Bohemian tables of succession) the Bohemian crown was held by the Austrian Habsburgs, a succession[22] that was legally formalized as hereditary under Ferdinand II in 1627. It was only in 1804, however, that the Habsburg dominions were themselves formally constituted as the Austrian (and, from 1867, Austro-Hungarian) Empire, and this particular 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 both nineteenth-century nationalist and twentieth-century communist historiography. Karel IV (1346–1378), to take the most luminous example, was a scion of the House of Luxemburg; his father John of Luxemburg (or Jan Lucemburský, as he is known to Czechs) obtained the Bohemian throne through political intrigue and a show of force in 1310, ending the conflict between rival claimants that followed the extinction of the Přemyslid line upon the death of Václav III. Jan 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 and later became the first Bohemian king to be elected Holy Roman Emperor. 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). Remembered as the "Father of the Homeland" (*Otec vlasti*), Karel gave the city the magnificent bridge that today bears his name, Saint Vitus's Cathedral, 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"[23] the oldest university in Central Europe (1348).

The Bohemian Diet chose the Jagellon kings Vladislav II (1471–1516) and Ludvík (1516–1526) when it could not agree on a domestic successor to the "Hussite King" Jiří z Poděbrad (1458–1471) – the last Czech to sit on the Bohemian throne – but this also by no means signified an incorporation of the Czech Lands into the Polish kingdom. During the Jagellons' tenure the Czech nobility effectively ran Bohemia. A more plausible case *might* be made for the Czech Lands becoming an Austrian colony after 1526, when the Diet handed the crown to the Habsburgs, and more particularly after the defeat of the Rising of the Czech Estates at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 – the "three hundred years we suffered" of Bohemia's nineteenth-

century nationalist mythology. Yet even this is a huge oversimplification, for reasons I have no space to go into here. Certainly Ferdinand II brought the rebellious kingdom to heel with exemplary executions, 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 polity rather than in pursuit of any ethno-cultural imperialism. Suffice it to say, nonetheless, that Kinský's 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 that had to be removed from Prague squares was the one to Marshal Václav Radecký, the Czech hero of the Austrian victories in Italy in 1848–1849. The statue had stood in Malostranské náměstí 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 in Prague, 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 their 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."[24]

A CERTAIN CEILING IN PRAGUE

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[25] than it does about the Czechs. *The Great Arch* made much of the millennial continuities in parish, county, and state boundaries within England – though it underplayed the fluidity of England's borders with the rest of the British Isles, a lacuna which I would now see as symptomatic of the book's wider flaws, to which I shall return. In the Czech Lands – *české země*, a loaded descriptor, like all others in this neck of the woods, since the adjective *český* can mean either Bohemian (the territory) or Czech (the ethnicity) –

the parish boundaries are equally ancient, but the frontiers of the wider polities of which the Czech Lands have formed a part have changed with bewildering regularity over the centuries. To be clear, the term "Czech Lands" here refers to Bohemia and Moravia – roughly the territory of the present-day Czech Republic – which formed the core of the medieval kingdom of Bohemia. But the lands of the Bohemian crown (or its twentieth-century Czechoslovak successor state) by no means always coincided with the historic *české země*. Equally to the point, the Czech Lands were never inhabited by Czechs alone.

Přemysl Otakar II (1253–1278) extended the crown domains south through Austria, Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola to the shores of the Adriatic, giving credence to Shakespeare s conceit in *The Winter's Tale* that landlocked Bohemia possessed a coast. Though these acquisitions proved short-lived, under the Luxemburgs the Bohemian kingdom took in Brandenburg (which it retained from 1373 to 1415), Lusatia (until 1635), and Silesia (until 1742), which are now parts of Germany and Poland, as well as the Czech-speaking heartlands of Bohemia and Moravia. After 1620 the Kingdom of Bohemia survived as a nominally sovereign Habsburg dominion – and became the focus of a distinctive 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 the state. The Czech language dwindled to a mostly peasant and working-class vernacular, though it was probably never as close to extinction as 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 monarch 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 Czechoslovak First 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 the faraway 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 under the Munich Agreement), 1939 (when Slovakia seceded, and Bohemia and Moravia were occupied as a German Protectorate), 1945 (when the country was liberated and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia annexed by the Soviet Union), and 1992 (when Czechoslovakia split into the Czech and Slovak Republics).

These repeatedly shifting boundaries have in turn brought cultural entanglements in frequently 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 and internationalist 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-Slavist mantras in the service of the peace-loving socialist camp.

Czechs formed a bare majority (51%) of the inhabitants of interwar Czechoslovakia, in which German-speakers, who had been an integral presence in the Czech lands since the early Middle Ages and formed around one third of Bohemia's inhabitants before World War II, outnumbered Slovaks. Three million such "Germans" were expelled from the country in 1945–1946 in what was euphemistically known as the *odsun* or transfer, but was, in fact, one of the largest acts of ethnic cleansing in a century full of them. But as significant as these changes in the ethnic or "national" composition is the lability of what was thought to constitute ethnic or national identity in the first place.[26] A century earlier, Praguers had been at a loss when asked their nationality by census-takers, since language then divided classes rather than nations. Conversely, Slovaks were incorporated into the Czechoslovak state in 1918 on the basis of their ethno-linguistic consanguinity with the Czechs, notwithstanding the palpable lack of any shared history between the two groups. Jan Hus was not a Slovak martyr, and neither was 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."[27] The context for this anecdote, which is related by Ferdinand Peroutka in his *Budovaní státu* (The Building of a State), was the collection of data to inform the provision of schools in Eastern Slovakia. It is a sharp reminder that the mere presence of state agents and agencies in a territory does not always ensure an affective – or effective – iIdentification of states and their subjects.

What are we to make of Bohemia's Jews, whose presence is first mentioned in tenth-century sources, and who formed one of the largest Jewish communities in the western half of 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 "Jewish" as an ethnicity (or in the parlance of the day, a nationality). 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,[28] 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%) and 1900 (45%) owes less to demographic changes than to political persuasion – these were years of rampant Czech nationalism and anti-German boycotts and riots. Eventually, of course, the Nazis murdered some 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 state of Czechs and Slovaks." But 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, the author of the "national opera" *The Bartered Bride*, 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."[29] The Czech "national revival" that colonized Bohemian society after 1860, refashioning classes into ethnicities, remained the province of a handful of priests and 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 Czecho-Slovak union forged in 1918, things were by no means 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, the author of the celebrated epic *The Daughter of Sláva* (which is written in literary Czech). Karel Havlíček Borovský was anything but a pan-Slavist 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,"[30] he wrote in 1846 – but he insisted that all those he called "Czechoslavs" (*českoslované*), a category that has vanished from the contemporary Czech language, "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 themselves Germans?"[31] 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.[32]

It will by now be apparent, I hope, why for a long time, when writing the book that eventually became *The Coasts of Bohemia*, my difficulty was the following: *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."[33] The identities that historians (and others) unthinkingly take for granted in order to chart change through time – the selfsame identities whose centuries-long forging was so pivotal to the narrative offered in *The Great Arch* – were conspicuous by their absence in this case. Bohemia is a part of the world where borders and populations have been in perpetual motion, and such standard sociological indicators of cultural identity as religion, or even language, turn out to be endlessly slippery. They are neither stable across 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 of time, to identify any consistent *subject* for any historical narrative without having recourse to an ethnic essentialization that will not withstand historical scrutiny. Still less is it possible to fix upon a subject that coincides with the territorial boundaries of a national state. Benedict Anderson's imagination of community and Eric Hobsbawm's invention of tradition are never-ending labors of Sisyphus in these parts, vainly attempting to mend a fabric of identity that is repeatedly being torn asunder.[34] In this respect, Bohemia's surreal table of succession is an accurate reflection of the 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 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 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. We continue to be mesmerized by the hypnotic *image* of the state – an "ideological artifact attributing unity, structure and independence to the disunited, structureless and de-

pendent workings of the practice of government," as Philip Abrams characterized it[35] – even as we attempt to unmask it. Many, including Philip Corrigan and I in *The Great Arch*, have drawn attention to the magical, fetishistic qualities of this totem of totems.[36] Parallels with religion are germane here – 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.

BREAKING THE SPELL

Let me return, at this point, to that English royal genealogy – the one I learned as a schoolboy at King's, whose order occupied my subconscious 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 a 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 places within the dynastic orders of other territories that they simultaneously ruled – and with which, in many cases, they were more likely to identify. Even when the kings were not themselves of foreign origin, the monarch's 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 – for example, Angevin (the name of the royal house of Henry II, Richard I, and John) means "from Anjou." And though it might pain Brexiteers to hear it, 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 monarchs 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 kinds of loose ends from which the painstakingly woven tapestry of the state can begin to be unraveled. At *no* point in this millennium-long history, in fact, did the crown's dominion coincide with the bounds of that imagined national space of the state, the slippery and sometimes uneasy hybrid of England/Great Britain/United Kingdom, 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 other forms in which English power reached to the four corners of the world, from Francis Drake's state-sponsored buccaneering in the Spanish Main to the private armies of the East India Company to James Brooke's unlikely tenure as Rajah of Sarawak.

We did not wholly ignore this extramural dimension of English state formation in *The Great Arch*. Yet looking back, our treatment seems to have been strangely perfunctory. Rhetorical gestures to "the blood, much of it foreign," mixed with the cement concealed the fact that we said virtually nothing of substance, beyond the occasional passing mention of "learning from abroad," to acknowledge the part that entanglements beyond England's imagined boundaries have *always* played in the making of the English culture, society, and state from the architecture of London's grand Victorian railway stations to the rituals of the morning cup of tea. Contrary to Andrea Leadsom, it was the world that gave England its language, starting with the post-Conquest confluence of the (already Nordic-infused) Anglo-Saxon and Norman French languages and progressing through the infinite varieties of new vocabulary imported from Renaissance Europe or plundered from the colonies. Our mistake was to assume that despite this history we *could* deal with "state formation in England" alone, but "[n]ot [in] Britain, Great Britain, the British Isles, or the United Kingdom; [and] not [in] Wales, Scotland, Ireland, India, North and Central America, Australasia, [and] Africa," without compromising the analysis.[37] These entanglements unsettle any confidence we might place in the location, let alone the stability, of the national boundaries, which have often been contested and always been permeable, and erode 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 – justly asked, "who only England know?" He went on to complain about "[t]he poor little street-bred people that vapour and fume and brag [...] lifting their heads in stillness to yelp at the English Flag!"[38] "The English Flag" perhaps deserves re-reading in the wake of the recent Brexit referendum.

The England-focused perspective of *The Great Arch* had the consequence of relegating those who contributed, albeit differently, to whatever being English (or British) meant to the role of mere victims of imperial expansion at any given point in time. More importantly, in the context of the present discussion, it was also pro-

foundly wrong to misunderstand England's *own* making. The image of a little England where everything began and everything ended, like those arches marching down Rochester Cathedral nave, continued to haunt what was, at the end of the day, a very grand narrative. Far too often the space within which our analysis moved continued to be the representational space of *the English state itself* – an absent center that we ourselves had defined as a collective *mis*representation, a spectacular façade of unity and coherence that concealed the frequent absence of either. Even as we sought to deconstruct it, the image of the great arch continued to provide the very coordinates within which we thought.

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. I see no reason to abandon the conception of state formation as cultural revolution that Philip Corrigan and I developed in *The Great Arch*. *The Coasts of Bohemia* could not have been written without that book's recognition of "the meaning of state activities, forms, routines and rituals [...] for the constitution and regulation of social identities, ultimately of our subjectivities."[39] But looking back from those Bohemian coasts, I would now be much less reverential than I was in 1985 toward the much-vaunted ancient continuities of institutional form – the county boundaries, circuits of assize, JPs, the parliament, the Privy Council, and the rest, not to mention the table of royal succession – that gave our book its title. England's history has been no less rich in unpredictable convolutions than Bohemia's own. 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 visions of grandeur out of megaphones and mirrors, 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, *everything* was contingent and could have turned out differently. 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 as such 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 narratives of state, which are as much exercises in forgetting as repositories of memory. It is these that fabricate the great arches, the deep structures, and 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 emphatically *not* the same institution as that in which I learned my royal roll-call 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 Justus (maybe) attached to his monastery

when he founded it in 604. As for states, they are perhaps always best viewed from off-center, outside the discursive – not to say affective – fields they construct and police. Only then will they cease to take us in.

ENDNOTES

[1] This essay has had a long gestation. It began life as a presentation for an invited panel on "The State" at the American Anthropology Association annual meetings in Chicago in November 2003. I revised it in April 2012 for a lecture at Peking University, Beijing, and then reworked it when David Nugent kindly invited me to contribute a theoretical piece for a book he was editing on Andean state formation. It soon became apparent to both of us that an essay dealing largely with Bohemia didn't belong in such a collection. Rather than abandon the Czech content, I withdrew it, pending an opportunity to publish it in some other context. The catastrophe of the Brexit vote led me to ponder once again the peculiarities of the English – or rather, the widespread English conviction of English exceptionalism – and so I revised and updated the essay again for the present publication.

[2] 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*, 06/07/2016. Available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/andrea-leadsom-brexit-speech-conservative-leadership-election-next-tory-leader-a7124641.html – Accessed 30/08/2016.

[3] Philip R.D. Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1985), *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*.

[4] Philip R.D. Corrigan (1991), "The Making of the Boy: Meditations on What Grammar School Did with, to, and for My Body," in Henry A. Giroux (ed.) *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. I address the same themes in Derek Sayer (2004), *Going Down for Air: A Memoir in Search of a Subject*.

[5] All quotations and other information on King's School, Rochester, are taken from the school's website at http://www.kings-rochester.co.uk (last accessed 29/08/2016). Its senior school fees are currently £18,210 p.a. (for day pupils, boarders' fees are higher).

[6] Quoted in Corrigan and Sayer (1985), *The Great Arch*, p. 43. See also G. R. Elton (1953), *The Tudor Revolution in Government*.

[7] Whiston's conflict with the Dean and Chapter of Rochester Cathedral formed the basis for Anthony Trollope's novel *The Warden*.

[8] The Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference website, available at http://www.hmc.org.uk/ – Accessed 15/03/2012.

[9] Plaque at site, personal observation.

[10] Christopher Hill (1958), "The Norman Yoke," in his *Puritanism and Revolution*.

[11] Information taken from the following website: http://bmsf.org.uk/the-house-of-windsor-1917/.

[12] Corrigan and Sayer (1985), *The Great Arch*, p. 17.

[13] E. P. Thompson (1978), "The Peculiarities of the English," in his *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*.

[14] "Happy 475th Anniversary," on the King's School, Rochester website, https://kingsrochester.fluency-cms.co.uk/Happy-475th-Anniversary – Accessed 28/08/2016.

[15] I call it Bohemia, rather than the Czech Republic (which has only existed since 1993), for similar reasons to Milan Kundera: reasons of poetic accuracy. It is an eminently floating signifier, whose movements I tried to track in (1998) *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History*. Geographically speaking, Bohemia (in Czech, *Čechy*) forms the western half of the present-day Czech Republic, whose eastern half is Moravia (*Morava*). As I discuss below, Bohemia and Moravia were the heartland of the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia, though the territorial extent of the latter was at times much greater than this.

[16] Derek Sayer (1990), *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber*. I have since published two books on Czech history: *The Coasts of Bohemia* mentioned above; and (2013) *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History*.

[17] Karl Marx (1967 [1867]), *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, p. 8. I have twice written on the (alleged) "peculiarities of the English" in relation to Marx's theories of the rise of capitalism: Derek Sayer (1992), "A Notable Administration: English State Formation and the Rise of Capitalism," *American Journal of Sociology*, 97(5): 1382–1415; and (in Polish) Derek Sayer (1993), "Ta krolewska wyspa, czyli raz jeszcze o 'osobliwosciach Anglikow'" [This Scepter'd Isle, or Once Again on the "Peculiarities of the English"], in A. Czarnota and A. Zybertowicz (eds.) *Interdyscyplinarne studia nad geneza kapitalismu*, t. 2, Torun: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikolaja Kopernika, pp. 133–156.

[18] See Corrigan and Sayer (1985), *The Great Arch*, Chapter 1.

[19] See Sayer (1998), *The Coasts of Bohemia*, pp. 35–42 for a fuller discussion.

[20] I take the table from http://www.libri.cz/databaze/dejiny/panovnici.html – Accessed 15/04/2012.

[21] Michel Foucault (1994), *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, p. xv.

[22] He was elected king by the Bohemian Estates in 1618, in defiance of the Habsburg succession. He was then defeated by the imperial armies at the Battle of the White Mountain on 8 November 1620.

[23] "Listina Karlova," in František Kop (1945), *Založení University Karlovy v Praze*, pp. 12–15.

[24] See Friedrich Engels (1977 [1849]), "Democratic Pan-Slavism," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works*, Vol. 8, pp. 362–378.

[25] See Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007), *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.

[26] For a fuller discussion see Derek Sayer (1998), "The Language of Nationality and the Nationality of Language: Prague, 1780–1920," *Past and Present*, 153: 164–210.

[27] Quoted in Ferdinand Peroutka (1991), *Budování státu*, Vol. 1, p. 135.

[28] See Sayer (1998), "Language of Nationality," for elaboration.

[29] Zora Dvořáková (1989 [1928]), *Miroslav Tyrš, prohry a vítězství*, p. 29; see also Renata Tyršová (1932–1934), *Miroslav Tyrš, jeho osobnost a dílo*, pp. 34–35 .

[30] Karel Havlíček Borovský (1979 [1846]), "Slovan a Čech," in Jan Novotný (ed.), *Obrození národa: svědectví a dokumenty*, p. 333.

[31] Borovský, "Slovan a Čech," p. 342.

[32] Norman Davies (2012), *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*. My point is that "Burgundy" – as Davies beautifully shows – was a highly moveable feast. At the height of its power, its center was in the Low Countries.

[33] Sayer (1998), *Coasts of Bohemia*, p. 17.

[34] See Benedict Anderson (2016), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence O. Ranger (1992), *The Invention of Tradition*.

[35] Philip Abrams (1988), "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1(1): 15.

[36] Notably Michael Taussig (1997), *The Magic of the State*.

[37] Corrigan and Sayer (1985), *The Great Arch*, p. 11.

[38] Rudyard Kipling (1891), "The English Flag", available at http://www.telelib.com/authors/K/KiplingRudyard/verse/volumeXI/englishflag.html – Accessed 30/08/2016.

[39] Corrigan and Sayer (1985), *The Great Arch*, p. 2.

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