

Paperwork and Political Thought: Notes Toward a Future History

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To the seminar: thanks very much for reading this paper! It is an early stab at thinking through some methodological questions around the history of political thought and the recent florescence of “paperwork studies.” I’ve been mulling these questions over for a while and begun to address in some recent work, & what follows combines some published and unpublished material. I am very interested to hear your feedback, either during the seminar or via email. Since this is work in progress and includes some fairly tentative thoughts, I would appreciate it if you did not circulate the paper beyond the seminar. Thanks again! – Asheesh

I

What did political thinkers have to say about the media forms through which they conveyed their ideas? This is a difficult question to answer. Historians of political thought have not conventionally engaged it, and historians of media have generally not written about propositional reflection on media objects. Such lacunas point to a deeper gap between two approaches to the history of texts that have often seemed to operate in parallel despite their seemingly similar concern with how media means. Some years ago, leading practitioners of two influential approaches to studying the history of texts—the “history of the book” and “intellectual” history—commented upon this divide. Robert Darnton contended that while seemingly “made for each other,” book history and intellectual history had proceeded along parallel paths over the late twentieth century, with the latter focused on the analysis of discourse, while historians of the book concerned themselves with the diffusion of texts.¹ Quentin Skinner responded to Darnton by elaborating on these “contrasts.” He characterized the history of the book as “a specialized form of inquiry into the

¹ Robert Darnton, “Discourse and Diffusion,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 1.1 (2005), 21.

production, diffusion and enjoyment of printed and scribally published material,” while describing intellectual historians as primarily concerned with the meanings that actors in the past have ascribed to concepts as they expressed them in language. Intellectual historians, Skinner suggested, had paid relatively little attention to the social histories of how texts were produced and received, including questions of their physical attributes.²

In practice, distinctions between the “history of the book” and “intellectual” history as methodological practices are probably artificial: as Jacob Soll has noted, self-styled practitioners of both diffusionist and discursive approaches to textual meaning have consistently borrowed from the others’ methods and techniques.³ To these observations, one might add that these respective approaches share another characteristic: whatever their differences, neither book historians nor intellectual historians have generally analyzed the ways in which textual artifacts like the “book” and the elements that compose them—“paper,” “letters,” even “type” and “font” – have themselves been thought of conceptually by past actors.

Until recently, that is. The origins of this turn to writing histories of ideas of media can be traced at least in part to a development within the diffusionist approach to textual meaning: what the *New York Times* in 2004 identified as “an emerging body of work that might be called ‘paperwork studies,’” whose practitioners take “a fresh look at office memos, government documents and corporate records, not just for what they say but also for how they circulate and the sometimes unpredictable things they do.”⁴ Historians of paperwork are preoccupied with understanding how documents travel through contexts, and the meanings that people make out of them in the process.

² Quentin Skinner, “On Intellectual History and the History of Books,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1.1 (2005), 29.

³ Jacob Soll, “Intellectual History and the History of the Book,” in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, eds., *A Companion to Intellectual History* (Malden, MA, 2016), 72–82.

⁴ Jennifer Schuessler, “The Paper Trail through History,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2012, C1.

They want to assess documents in the same way scholars have interrogated printing, books, and reading: in order to account for the impact of media on politics, economics, and society.⁵ Writing for popular audiences, historians have used paper as a means of framing discussions of the present “information age” within broader chronologies and deeper contexts.⁶ Addressing scholarly readers, they have sought to trace paperwork’s production, circulation, reception, and storage in order to illuminate the relationship between cultural attitudes and social practices within a particular political or administrative context—for example, between record keeping and policy making in early modern Europe, citizenship and identity papers in modern states, and the control of archives and justice in post-dictatorship societies.⁷

But some questions still remain: was paper just something people did things on – writing, note-taking, drawing, for example – and did things with – such as folding, archiving, destroying? Or was paper also something that people thought *about*? Is paperwork indeed that which “frustrates the intellect,” the thing that “confounded” “modern political thought,” which failed to theorize it as part

⁵ Cf. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, vols. 1, 2 (Cambridge, 1979); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1996), Part III: “Do Books Cause Revolutions?”; Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, NC, 1991), chap. 4; and Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, 1998).

⁶ For histories of texts and textual practices geared toward trade audiences see, for example, Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York, 1996); Keith Houston, *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks* (New York, 2013); Edward Wilson-Lee, *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books: Young Columbus and the Quest for a Universal Library* (London, 2018); and Leah Price, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Books: The History and Future of Reading* (New York, 2019). For examples of similarly marketed histories of paper see Nicholas A. Basbanes, *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History* (New York, 2013); Alexander Monroe, *The Paper Trail: An Unexpected History of a Revolutionary Invention* (London, 2015); Lothar Müller, *White Magic: The Age of Paper* (London, 2015); and Mark Kurlansky, *Paper: Paging through History* (New York, 2016).

⁷ Cf. Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 63–86; Randolph Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information, and Political Record-Keeping, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2019); Craig Robertson, *The Passport in America: The History of a Document* (New York, 2010); and Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham, NC, 2014).

of political *praxis* even as it attended to the *content* of the ideas inscribed through it?⁸ Or have historians of political thought simply failed to notice political thinking about paperwork?⁹

In what follows, I suggest that the latter is probably the more plausible explanation: political thinkers thought about paperwork as an integral facet of political practice and theory, but historians have yet to examine how, and the categories thorough which we organize the historiography of political thought (republicanism, liberalism, absolutism, etc.) seem to be inadequate to capture this aspect of political thinking. I advance this thesis by highlighting thinking about paperwork in the writings of two pillars of the ‘western’ political tradition: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Like so many other thinkers now considered part of the early modern political thought canon, Hobbes and Locke spent much of their careers extensively involved in bureaucratic activity, through which they gained intimate, direct experience with the administrative machinery of early modern statecraft and the regimes of documentation that animated them. They also thought extensively about the relationship between documentation and statecraft – and they did so in contrasting ways. Far from being confounded by its encounter with paperwork, political thought has extensively sought to account for it – and this accounting remains a largely unexplored avenue down which historians of political thought may wish to venture.

⁸ Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 10.

⁹ There might be a different way of interrogating this question by expanding the conventional definition of ‘early modern political thought’ to include figures such as Jean Mabillon, Sir Robert Cotton, Sir Thomas Wilson, and William Cecil, First Baron Burghley, all of whom wrote explicitly on the meaning of documents in administration: see, on these points, Paul E. J. Hammer, *The Polarization of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge, UK, 1999); Randolph C. Head, “Documents, Archives, and Proof around 1700,” *Historical Journal*, 56 (2013), 909-930; Noah Millstone, “Seeing Like a Statesman in Early Stuart England,” *Past & Present*, 223 (2014), 77-127; Nicholas Popper, “An Information State for Early Modern England,” *Journal of Modern History*, 90 (2018), 503-535; and Head, *Making Archives*.

II

Bureaucratic employment was probably closer to the norm rather than the exception for early modern Europe's canonical political thinkers. For example, Niccolò Machiavelli spent over a decade as a high ranking official in the Florentine chancery in the early 1500s; in England, Sir Thomas More served in a number of administrative positions under Henry VIII from the late 1510s before the king executed him in 1535; and roughly a century later in the 1600s, Francis Bacon was a government clerk, Attorney General, Privy Councilor, and Lord Chancellor. Fast forward about a hundred and fifty years, and one finds that bureaucratic employment was common among 'Enlightenment' philosophers: Adam Ferguson was secretary to the British government's Carlisle Commission embassy during the American Revolution; David Hume was secretary to Britain's ambassador to France from 1763 to 1766 and then an undersecretary of state between 1767 and 1769; Adam Smith spent over a decade as a Scottish customs commissioner from 1778 to 1790; even a relatively 'minor' member of the Edinburgh coterie such John Bruce served as Historiographer to the English East India Company and Keeper of State Papers in England from the 1780s through the 1810s; and Edmund Burke (whether or not one classifies him as part of the 'Enlightenment' and in addition to his Parliamentary service) was the London agent for New York's colonial legislature during the 1770s.¹⁰ All of these employments gave these figures intimate and direct experience of early modern bureaucratic systems – their structural dimensions, of course, but also the arguably most tedious, mundane, and endemic aspect of administrative life: paperwork.

¹⁰ On Machiavelli, see Robert Black, "Machiavelli in the chancery," in Jeremy M. Najemy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge, UK, 2010), 31-47; J. A. Guy, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven, 1980). On Bacon, see Julian Martin, *Francis Bacon, The State, and The Reform of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK, 2007). On the Edinburgh coterie, there seems to be less, but see Gary M. Anderson, William F. Shughart, II and Robert D. Tollinson, "Adam Smith in the Customhouse," *Journal of Political Economy*, 93 (1985), 740-749; Spartaco Pupo (ed.), *David Hume, A Petty Statesman: Writings on War and International Affairs* (Milan, 2019); as well as my own "Mobilizing the 'State Papers' of Empire: John Bruce and the Bureaucratic Archives of Britain," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 22 (2018), 392-410. On Burke, see Richard Bourke *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2010), chap. 6

The same can be said of the stars of early modern English political thought: Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704). Like their contemporaries, both Hobbes and Locke had intimate experience with early modern bureaucracies, and particularly their Atlantic imperial appendages. In the 1620s, Hobbes was invested in the corporate imperial projects of the Crown-chartered Virginia Company (and attended many meetings of its governing council) and Somers Island Company.¹¹ Locke's imbrication in administration was even more extensive. He served as secretary to the proprietors of the colony of Carolina between 1669 and 1673; as secretary and treasurer of the Council on Trade and Plantations, the Privy Council committee that advised the Crown on imperial and commercial administration from 1673 to 1674; and as secretary to the committee's successor, the Board of Trade from 1696 to 1700.¹²

Within these early modern bureaucratic bodies, the work of administration was intimately and inseparably connected with the production, circulation, and archivization of written documentation. The Reformation-era English state saw the development of theories of politics that linked concepts of state sovereignty and political wisdom with the production and control of information inscribed on paper. In medieval England, ecclesiastical institutions performed many of the most document-intensive functions of administration, such as collecting taxes and notarizing births. Hence, much written information circulated outside the compass of secular power and was housed in churches, monasteries, and other religious sites. Aspects of these standard administrative practices of bureaucratic delegation to corporate bodies and other private interests—including the

¹¹ On Hobbes' entanglements with imperial corporations, see Noel Malcolm, "Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company," *Historical Journal*, 24 (1981), 297-321; and Srinivas Aravamudan, "Hobbes and America," in Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (eds.), *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory* (Oxford, 2009), 37-70.

¹² On Locke and the Board of Trade, see Peter Laslett, "John Locke, the Great Recoinage, and the Origins of the Board of Trade: 1695-1698," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 14 (1957), 370-402; Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London, 1957), chapter 25; and I. K. Steele, *Politics of Colonial Policy: The Board of Trade in Colonial Administration, 1696-1720* (Oxford, 1968), 22-25.

power to control information— remained central to the workings of the English state for centuries to come.¹³ But in 1536, two years after forming the Church of England, King Henry VIII extended his “Tudor revolution in government” into the sphere of political knowledge when he sent crown officials to seize the administrative records that had accumulated in the hands of the medieval church. As Henry reallocated authority over fiscal matters from sacred institutions to newly established secular offices, such as the Court of the Augmentations of the Revenues of the King’s Crown, written knowledge of the economic health of the realm flowed into the hands of the monarchy. Henry’s successors, Elizabeth I and James I, formalized this information infrastructure with the chartering of new institutions, such as the State Paper Office in 1578, through which the crown aimed to assert control over official records.¹⁴

Aspiring to control the flow of written information within administrative bureaucracy, the crown and its councillors aimed to instantiate not only an effective system of revenue collection but also an ideology of governance and a corresponding set of administrative methods. During the

¹³ For the importance of private interests in the execution of bureaucratic functions throughout the early modern period in Britain and its empire, see Lillian M. Penson, *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies: A Study in Colonial Administration, Mainly in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1924); Michael G. Kammen, *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968); Christopher Clay, *Public Finance and Private Wealth: The Career of Sir Stephen Fox, 1627–1716* (Oxford, 1978); Alison Gilbert Olson, *Making the Empire Work: London and American Interest Groups, 1690–1790* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Mark Goldie, “The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England,” in *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850*, ed. Tim Harris (Basingstoke, U.K., 2001), 153–94; Aaron Graham, *Corruption, Party, and Government in Britain, 1702–1713* (Oxford, 2015), chap. 2; Jack P. Greene, “Britain’s Overseas Empire before 1780: Overwhelmingly Successful and Bureaucratically Challenged,” in *Empires and Bureaucracy in World History: From Late Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Crooks and Timothy H. Parsons (Cambridge, 2016), 318–43, esp. 328–29.

¹⁴ The broader context of the English Crown’s projects of administrative reform in the 1530s is discussed in G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1953); Christopher Coleman and David Starkey, eds., *Revolution Reassessed: Revisions in the History of Tudor Government and Administration* (Oxford, 1986). For the origins of government by records in Europe, see Arndt Brendecke, “Arca, archivillo, archivo: The Keeping, Use and Status of Historical Documents about the Spanish Conquista,” *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (September 2010): 267–83, esp. 268; M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*, 3d ed. (Malden, Mass., 2013); Randolph C. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information, and Political Record-Keeping, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2019). For the shift from a medieval to early modern information order in sixteenth-century England, see Nicholas Popper, “From Abbey to Archive: Managing Texts and Records in Early Modern England,” *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (September 2010): 249–66; Vanessa Harding, “Monastic Records and the Dissolution: A Tudor Revolution in the Archives?,” *European History Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (July 2016): 480–97; Angela Andreani, *The Elizabethan Secretariat and the Signet Office: The Production of State Papers, 1590–1596* (New York, 2017).

sixteenth century, English officials increasingly understood politics as a system of knowable rules and patterns. They believed that wisdom about how to govern could be generated by collecting information about how people behaved in the present and comparing it with evidence of how they had behaved in the past. Information about present-day human behavior could be generated by sending trusted servants to travel, spy, and observe both human and natural phenomena; record their findings in writing; and report them to the crown's advisers. Authoritative information about past human behavior could be found in the written records generated by earlier governments over the ages. By correlating this incoming information with the archival documentation under their control, royal administrators believed they could produce reliable guidance on ruling in present time. And if they controlled the circulation of these records, administrators could ensure that they retained a monopoly over this essential component of power. Administrators would be able to cite, replicate, and circulate these records in forms such as manuscript tracts, memoranda, and letters as evidence to support the adoption of specific policies. Such activities involved the construal of records as providing confirmation of the feasibility of existing ambitions as well as the reading of documents for information that could spur the development of new policies. Officials vied to accumulate copies of records in their own private collections and then deploy them against their political opponents. They viewed the possession and control of documents as constitutive of the expertise that allowed them to make definitive claims about contentious policy matters.¹⁵

¹⁵ On the English context, see W. H. Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism and Politics: Two Traditions of English Political Thought, 1500–1700* (London, 1964), chap. 9; Noah Millstone, “Seeing Like a Statesman in Early Stuart England,” *Past and Present*, no. 223 (May 2014): 77–127; Popper, “An Information State for Elizabethan England.” For comparable developments in early modern continental Europe, see Jacob Soll, “Introduction: The Uses of Historical Evidence in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 2 (April 2003): 149–57; Randolph Head, “Knowing Like a State: The Transformation of Political Knowledge in Swiss Archives, 1450–1770,” *Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 4 (December 2003): 745–82; Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi, eds., *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Randolph C. Head, “Documents, Archives, and Proof around 1700,” *Historical Journal* 56, no. 4 (December 2013): 909–30. Pan- and extra-European accounts include Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters, and Alexandra Walsham, eds., *The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 2016); Maria Pia Donato, “Introduction: Archives, Record Keeping and Imperial Governance, 1500–1800,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 22, no. 5 (October 2018): 311–26; Donato and Anne Saada, eds., *Pratiques d’archives à l’époque moderne: Europe, mondes coloniaux* (Paris, 2019). On administrators’ creation of personal archives out of state papers and the role of antiquarian scholarship in

The materialized practices of early modern statecraft ramified into early modern political thought. Three decades after his involvement in corporate imperial bureaucracy, Thomas Hobbes presented a theory of sovereignty in what is now one of the most celebrated and studied texts in the history of political thought: *Leviathan* (1651). *Leviathan* is conventionally read and taught as an argument for how political order might be produced through both the establishment of a social contract between rulers and ruled, and through an epistemology in which language is construed as a system of clearly and unambiguously defined words that directly correspond to the things they describe. Much less noticed is how Hobbes' sought to (as he memorably wrote in the dedicatory epistle) "advance the Civil Power" not only via a well-glossed theory of contractarianism, but also through an almost totally overlooked theory of administrative writing. The frontispiece that graced the first edition of the text (1651), jointly produced by Hobbes and the engraver Abraham Bosse, famously captures the political theory in visual. In the center of the image is the figure of the Sovereign, whose body is literally and figuratively made out of the consent of a multitude of individual bodies to his rule. This polity, a unity made out of a multiplicity bound together, is peaceful, coherent, and ordered, capturing Hobbes' secular vision of politics which paralleled (and sought to replace) the link between body and spiritual order drawn by Paul in the Book of Corinthians, which describes those who ate the bread and drank the wine during the ceremony of the Eucharist as "members in particular" of the "body of Christ." This theological account of the body of believers harmoniously unified together with the body of Jesus Christ was linked to the

early modern European statecraft, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (1957; repr., Cambridge, 1987); Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), esp. chap. 3; Kevin Sharpe, "Re-writing Sir Robert Cotton: Politics and History in Early Stuart England" (1997), in *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics* (Cambridge, 2000), 294–341, esp. 314–15; Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2009); Alan Stewart, "Familiar Letters and State Papers: The Afterlives of Early Modern Correspondence," in *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain*, ed. James Daybell and Andrew Gordon (Philadelphia, 2016), 237–52.

Aristotelian concept of politics by medieval political theorists.¹⁶ Hobbes extended the homology to the early modern state, which for him contained the individual bodies of its subjects who sublimated their individuals wills to the skeletal unity of shared laws, customs, and norms of the Sovereign body.¹⁷

But there is another way to interpret *Leviathan's* famous frontispiece: as a visualization of Hobbes' theory of the ideal *internal* division of the Sovereign body into what he called its "parts Organicall." In *Leviathan*, Hobbes named these "parts Organicall" of the Sovereign "Publique Ministers," whom he defined as those "employed" "to represent" "the Person" of the "Soveraign, (whether a Monarch, or an Assembly)" "in the Administration of the Publique businesse." These "Publique Ministers," Hobbes wrote, "resembleth the nerves, and tendons that move the severall limbs of a body naturall." Like the nerves and tendons of a natural body, the "Publique Ministers" parceled the responsibilities for administering the different parts of the artificial, sovereign body among themselves, each an internal organ responsible for executing a particular task necessary to keep the sovereign body alive. The healthy body of state described in *Leviathan* was not only one in which individuals coalesced and consented to the ruler to trade a state of nature in which life was "nasty, brutish, and short" for a governed existence: for Hobbes, the functioning corpus of state was

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 12. On medieval corporeal theory, see J. P. Canning, "Law, sovereignty, and corporation theory, 1300-1500," in J. H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1988), 454-476; and for the links between ancient, medieval, and early modern corporeal theory, see Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 18-21.

¹⁷ Quentin Skinner has observed that "Hobbes was the first major philosopher to organise a theory of government around the person of the state": see Skinner, "Hobbes and the Purely Artificial Person of the State," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 7 (1999), 2. On Hobbes' use of images, see Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (1938; Chicago, 2008); Noel Malcolm, "The Titlepage of *Leviathan*, Seen in a Curious Perspective," *The Seventeenth Century*, 13 (1998), 124-155; Horst Bredekamp, "Thomas Hobbes' Visual Strategies," in Patricia Springborg (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes* (Cambridge, 2007), 29-60; Magnus Kristiansson and Johan Tralau, "Hobbes' hidden monster: A new interpretation of the frontispiece of *Leviathan*," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 13 (2014), 299-320; Susanna Berger, *The Art of Philosophy: Visual Thinking in Europe from the Late Renaissance to the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J., 2017), chapter 5; and Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge, 2018), chapter 10.

also one in which the parts of the body's nervous system, the "Publique Ministers," worked harmoniously to constitute this order.¹⁸

According to Hobbes, sovereigns animated the commonwealth by making their reason visible to their subjects. This process, Hobbes explained, required that 'public ministers' regulate the dissemination of sovereign reason within the body politic through specific communicative techniques. As he stressed in *Leviathan*, "the will of another, cannot be understood, but by his own word." During "antient time, before letters were in common use," this will as word – what Hobbes called "Lawes" – took the form of speech, being "put into verse" such that "the rude people" could take "pleasure in singing, or reciting them" and thereby "more easily reteine them in memory." But in the world of civil government, the sovereign made its will visible not through speech, but instead by making a "written, and published" "Declaration of the Law," complete with "manifest signs that it proceedeth" from its decree. Through this process of communication, Hobbes wrote, "the Sovereign" established that it was the "Author" of the law. According to Hobbes, seeing like an early modern statesman meant knowing and controlling this visible manifestation of sovereign reason—what he called "the knowledge of the publique Registers." When law was written in these "publique Registers, and thus "Verified" as "the Testimony and Record" of the sovereign, the reason of state became evident to the reading eye. Civil government rendered its reason clear by writing: as Hobbes emphasized, "the Sovereign is the sole Legislator," and "all Lawes, written and unwritten, have their Authority and force, from" his "Will." Collected together, Hobbes wrote, this body of written laws made up "the Statutes, and Constitutions of the Sovereign" visible.¹⁹ In this

¹⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm, ii (Oxford, 2012), 376, 378 (part II, chapter XXIII, "Of the Publique Ministers of Sovereign Power"). I follow Malcolm in rendering Hobbes' writing according to his original spelling.

¹⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ii, 416, 420, 424, 426, 438 (part II, chapter XXVI, "Of Civill Lawes"). On Hobbes and the publicity of sovereign reason, see Millstone, "Seeing Like a Statesman," 93-94. On Hobbes and writing, see Tracy B. Strong, "How to Write Scripture: Words, Authority, and Politics in Thomas Hobbes," *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993), esp. 157-159.

early modern English narrative of civil government, paperwork was the means through which the state moved, the substance that, like blood, kept its organs propelling.²⁰

III

Hobbes' account of the relationship between paper and political bodies did not go unchallenged in seventeenth century England. In *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), James Harrington imagined the existence of a state administered by the *prytans*, a council "to whom it was lawful for any man to offer any thing in order to the fabric of the commonwealth." At meetings of the *prytans*, Harrington wrote, "all parties . . . were invited to dispute their own interests, or propose whatever they thought fit in order to the future government." The *prytans* "had the right of moderators, and were to report from time to time such propositions or occurrences as they thought fit to the council of legislators." The council of legislators "took such results or orders" out of each part of the commonwealth – the people, the senate, and the magistracy – and had "the clerk or secretary" "put [them] from time to time" "into writing." Harrington emphasized that the clerk's inscription of the results of each part of the commonwealth was *not* law, but instead "propositions." These results, he wrote, "remained no more in the conclusion" but rather became visible to the council which could "view and examine them with a diligent eye" such "that it might be clearly discovered whether" any of the orders could "come to interfere or jostle one the other." Harrington posited administrative writing as a facilitative technology, the transcribed suggestions of the different parties of the commonwealth rather than the proclamation of law. Indeed, for Harrington, the

²⁰ The overlap between the language of anatomy and paper within early modern political thinking has been noted elsewhere, principally in connection to the language of currency: see, for example, Christine Desan, "From Blood to Profit: Making Money in the Practice and Imagery of Early America," *Journal of Policy History*, 20 (2008), 26-46; and Katie A. Moore, "The Blood that Nourishes the Body Politic: The Origins of Paper Money in Early America," *Early American Studies*, 17 (2019), 6-12.

“constitution” was not a body that harmoniously bound a multiplicity together through the organic parts of bureaucracy and the circulation of paper, but instead something that stood apart from any “props or scaffolds.” Rather than through writing, Harrington wrote, “fundamental laws,” none more important than the “protection” of property, caused the “motions” of the corpus of the commonwealth.²¹

Many of Harrington’s contemporaries agreed that the body politic existed independent of the support of paperwork. While “the lawyers tell us *the law is written reason*, and that whatever they find in their books is just,” such statements were simply “Westminster Hall prate, hardly worth an answer,” echoed Algernon Sidney in his *Court Maxims*, written between 1664 and 1665.²² Written records were, of course, central to a knowledge of civil history: the English Gentleman of Henry Neville’s *Plato Redivivus* (c. 1681), for example, stated that “where there are not stories, or records, extant,” it was impossible to write a history of government. However, this did not mean that government depended on writing. Rather, Neville wrote, government was “more ancient than history,” and indeed “whatsoever the frame or constitution was first, it was made by the persuasion and mediation of some wise and virtuous person, and consented to by the whole number.” Before

²¹ James Harrington, “The Commonwealth of Oceana,” in Pocock (ed.), *The Commonwealth of Oceana and A System of Politics* (Cambridge, 1992), 70-71, 100. On the complex relationship between Hobbes and Harrington, see Felix Rabb, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation* (London, 1964), chapter 6; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 397-401; James Cotton, “James Harrington and Thomas Hobbes,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42 (1981), 407-421; Jonathan Scott, “The Rapture of Motion: James Harrington’s Republicanism,” in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), 139-163; Arihiro Fukuda, *Sovereignty and the Sword: Harrington, Hobbes, and Mixed Government in the English Civil Wars* (Oxford, 1997); Cook, “Body and Passions,” 25-48; Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge, 2004), 165-173; Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England, 1640-1700* (Cambridge, 2007), 176-185; and Paul A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory Under the English Republic* (Cambridge, 2008), chapter 11.

²² Algernon Sidney, *Court Maxims*, eds. Hans W. Blom, Eco Haitsma Mulier, and Ronald Janse (Cambridge, 1996), 123. On Sidney and republicanism, see Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 418-422; Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623-1677* (Cambridge, 1988); Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677-1683* (Cambridge, 1991); Alan Craig Houston, *Algernon Sidney and the Republican Heritage in England and America* (Princeton, N.J., 1991); and Lee Ward, *The Politics of Liberty in England and Revolutionary America* (Cambridge, 2004), chapter 6.

being written, according to Neville, this frame or constitution was “instituted for the good and preservation of the governed, and not for the exaltation and greatness of the person or persons appointed to govern.” For Neville, “the good government of England” was originally “like the law of nature”: it was scripted not with ink but rather was “only written in the hearts of men,” and *then* “came to be expressed in parchment, and remain a record in writing.” Written records thus “gave us no more, than what was our own before.” There was no need for “any record,” Neville stressed, for something to be “the fundamental law” of government; thus, the lack of written records in ancient times was not a sign of pre-civilized barbarity, but instead showed that “our wise ancestors thought there needed none, but that by the very essence and constitution of the government it is provided for.”²³

John Locke shared this skepticism about the constituting power of “Westminster Hall prate” written down on paper. Locke, of course, was intimately aware of the centrality of written records to the operation of the early modern English state and empire because of his career as an imperial bureaucrat. Locke served as secretary to the proprietors of the colony of Carolina between 1669 and 1673; as secretary and treasurer of the Council on Trade and Plantations, the Privy Council committee that advised the Crown on imperial and commercial administration from 1673 to 1674; and as secretary of the Board of Trade from 1696 to 1700, successor to the Council and for much of the imperial period, the metropolitan point for receipt of written documents from bureaucrats stationed in the Atlantic world colonies.²⁴ In his philosophical output, Locke envisioned a different

²³ Henry Neville, “Plato Redivivus, or A Dialogue Concerning Government (c. 1681),” in Caroline Robbins (ed.), *Two English Republican Tracts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 84-85, 124, 133. On Neville as a “Harringtonian or neo-Harringtonian,” see Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 417-421 (quotation from 418); and Blair Worden, “Republicanism and the Restoration, 1660-1683,” in David Wootton (ed.), *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649-1776* (Stanford, Calif., 1994), 144-152.

²⁴ On Locke and the Board of Trade, see Peter Laslett, “John Locke, the Great Recoinage, and the Origins of the Board of Trade: 1695-1698,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 14 (1957), 370-402; Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London, 1957), chapter 25; and I. K. Steele, *Politics of Colonial Policy: The Board of Trade in Colonial Administration, 1696-1720* (Oxford, 1968), 22-25. On the role of these bodies in circulating and archiving imperial bureaucratic paperwork, see Siddique,

relationship between writing and power. “I endeavour, as much as I can, to deliver my self from those Fallacies, which we are apt to put upon our selves, by taking Words for Things,” Locke wrote in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the first edition of which appeared in 1690. Words could not constitute reality, Locke argued; they could only be used by a speaker to describe it. If a person were to enquire “into the Nature of things” and “be told, that all learned Books consisted of Paper and Letters, and that Letters were things inhering in Paper, and Paper a thing that held forth Letters,” he would “scarce take it for a satisfactory Account” because he would have been given merely “clear *Ideas* of Letters and Paper,” not Letters and Papers themselves: an account of words, meaning things which were “*Sticking on and Under-propping*,” supporting but not constituting. Words were arbitrary “Marks of *Ideas*” which humans erroneously “suppose . . . stand also for the Reality of Things.” In fact, Locke wrote, words “signify nothing immediately, but the *Ideas* in the Mind of the Speaker.” Rendering speech into writing did not clarify meaning, for without “a constant defining the terms, of conveying the sense and intention of the Speaker,” the written word would be no clearer than the spoken, a circumstance attested to by the existence of “Volumes of Interpreters and Commentators on the Old and New Testament” despite the Biblical text being “infallibly true” because it contained the word of God. For Locke, anything “conveyed to us by Books and Languages” was “liable to the common and natural obscurities and difficulties incident to words.”²⁵

For Locke, the inability of writing to fix the meaning of words meant that written records offered only limited insights into history and human nature. “I think nothing more valuable than the

“Governance Through Documents: The Board of Trade, Its Archive, and the Imperial Constitution of the Eighteenth Century British Atlantic World,” *Journal of British Studies*, 59 (2020), 264-290.

²⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 174-175, 404-405, 420, 489-490. Emphasis in the original. On Locke and linguistic instability, see Paul Guyer, “Locke’s philosophy of language,” in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge, 1994), 125-126; and Hannah Dawson, *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2007), 215-216. For the importance of Locke’s account of language to early American political thought, see Jonathan Gienapp, *The Second Creation: Fixing the American Constitution in the Founding Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018), 44-47.

Records of Antiquity: I wish we had more of them, and more uncorrupted,” he wrote in the *Essay*, “but this, Truth it self forces me to say, That no *Probability* can rise higher than its first Original.” Description was merely a probable, not definitive account of phenomena, and the practice of citing “Records of Antiquity” as authorities for constitutional truths was therefore dubious. As time passed between the event and its written description, Locke contended, the authority of the record diminished, for “farther still it is for the Original, the less valid it is, and has always less force in the mouth, or writing of him that last made use of it, than in his from whom he received it.” For Locke, the idea that the received written authority of the past could be a ground for certain knowledge was therefore risible. As he wrote mockingly, “the Tenet has had the attestation of reverend Antiquity, it comes to me with the Pass-port of former Ages, and therefore I am secure in the Reception I give it: Other men have been, and are of the same Opinions, (for that is all is said,) and therefore it is reasonable for me to embrace it.” To Locke, this form of reasoning was as dubious as the invocation of faith as the ground for one’s views: “A Man may more justifiably throw up Cross and Pile for his Opinions, than take them up by such Measures.”²⁶ The secular theology of paper worship was just as questionable an epistemological foundation for government as the Biblical Word.

The meaning of political words was equally unstable, Locke argued, as was the conceit of taking the human body as a model for the state. In the *First Treatise of Government* (1689), Locke challenged the homology between paternal and civic power drawn by the writer Robert Filmer in *Patriarcha, Or the Natural Power of Kings* (1680). For Locke, the effort to determine the constitution of the polity based on an account of the physical constitution of the male self was questionable because the workings of the human body were clouded in obscurity. “The Argument” “to prove that Fathers . . . come by an Absolute Power over their Children” “because they give them Life and Being”

²⁶ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 664-665, 718.

could not stand, for “how can he be thought to give Life to another that knows not wherein his own Life consists . . .” Both philosophers and anatomists “confess their Ignorance in the Structure and Use of Many parts of Mans Body, and in that Operation wherein Life consists in the whole . . .” As Locke emphasized, humans did not constitute other humans; rather, only God did so, for it was God who “alone did at first, and continues still to make a living Soul, He alone can breathe in the Breath of Life.” Making a life was therefore not an act of forming the internal organs of another self, but instead the construction of external scaffolding by which parents “Frame and make a living Creature.”²⁷ While parents could shape the visible behavior and outward appearance of their children, only God made the internal parts of the body. In fact, Locke argued, the constitution of the human body pointed to the inherent autonomy of each individual from the other, excluding the possibility of the sort of agglomerated corporeal existence of humans envisioned by Hobbes. As Locke wrote in the *Second Treatise* (1689), “every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*” and “no Body has any Right to but himself.”²⁸ The act of making law did not nullify this autonomy of the individual body, “for no Body has an absolute Arbitrary Power over himself, or over any other . . .”²⁹ Thus, Locke wrote, paperwork was not the animating blood of the constituted body of government but a mere external afterthought, for “government is every where antecedent to Records, and Letters seldome come in amongst a People, till a long continuation of Civil Society has, by other more necessary Arts provided for their Safety, Ease, and Plenty.”³⁰ Rather than “necessary” and constitutive, written records were merely “accidental” to government. Natural law—the law which

²⁷ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1966), 196-197.

²⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 305.

²⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 375.

³⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 352.

truly governed human behavior, according to Locke—preceded writing, for it was “by a Law antecedent and paramount to all positive Laws of men” that society was actually constituted.³¹ Elsewhere, in his unpublished essays, Locke reiterated this point. The law of nature could not be “learned from tradition” because it was “inscribed in [the] heart” and thus known from “sense experience.”³² The most that writing could do for government, Locke argued, was to set down on paper certain already established rules for the preservation of property; but the rules, and the government itself, were neither constituted by nor dependent upon inscription or its medium.

IV

Political thought was not confounded by its encounter with paperwork. But paperwork may indeed be the unconscious of *historians* of political thought, who have as yet not paid much attention to the ways in which the subjects of their interest intertwined thinking about material form with theorization about the nature of rule – perhaps, as the example of Hobbes and Locke suggest, in conflicting, contentious ways. What new possibilities and avenues for historians of political thought might be opened up by thinking about reflection on media forms and the sociality of practice, especially bureaucratic entanglement, together? John Stuart Mill labored as an East India Company administrator; Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, and Otto Kirchheimer all pushed paper at the Office of Strategic Services; Michael Oakeshott was an army officer and intelligence analyst; and Ludwig von Mises’ critique of *Bureaucracy* (1944) was an entirely imminent one, since he wrote it after a stint in the Austrian civil service, to give just a few examples. All of these positions confronted

³¹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 397-398.

³² Locke, *Questions concerning the Law of Nature*, trans. Robert Horwitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 131. For the fate of the ‘body politic’ metaphor in eighteenth-century Anglophone political discourse, see Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago, 2009), 43-85; and Rosenfeld, 21-24.

these foundational figures of modern political thought with mountains of administrative tedium manifested as memos, forms, and accounts.³³ What would it mean for intellectual historians to take their experiences seriously? What avenues remain to be explored, if only we risk venturing down them?

³³ On Mill, see Abram L. Harris, "John Stuart Mill: Servant of the East India Company," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 30 (1964), 185-202; Lynn Zastoupil, "J. S. Mill and India," *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1988), 31-54; and David Williams, "John Stuart Mill and the practice of colonial rule in India," *Journal of International Political Theory*, forthcoming. On Marcuse and company, see Barry M. Katz, "The Criticism of Arms: The Frankfurt School Goes to War," *Journal of Modern History*, 59 (1987), 439-478. On Oakeshott, there seems to be less, but see Jeffrey L. Mayer, "Managers, Machiavelli, and Michael Oakeshott: A Caveat," *Publius*, 6 (1976), 101-105. On von Mises, there seems to be even less. I'm of course here overlooking the most obvious and imminent way in which political thought as an increasingly academized discipline in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries became tied to paper-pushing systems: its institutionalization within the modern research university, the greatest bureaucracy of them all. On the rise of academic bureaucracy, see William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago, 2006).