STATE AND SOCIETY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

I. Introduction: purpose of lecture
   A. First, to look at the nature and the growth of the modern state in the 18th century (looking to the further development of the nation-state in the nineteenth)
      1. This is pretty much the "old history"
      2. The state has been, until recently and with exception of a few queens, run by males—and in Europe, of course, by white males
      3. Yet, the profound importance of the modern state for all people can scarcely be denied, both in terms of how Europe came to world supremacy -- and to nearly destroying itself in the 20th century
   B. Second purpose: to examine the relationships of state, society, economy, and the "balance of power" between states
   C. Third purpose: to forward some fundamental remarks about what motivated the great powers of the 18th century
   D. Finally, to suggest how national character developed in part under the influence of the state

II. The modern state, a definition
   A. It is not easy to define "state" and the related concept of "sovereignty"
   B. We are accustomed to them but they are in fact exceedingly abstract and difficult concepts in their many ramifications
   C. There are a number of varieties in the modern period
      1. The absolutist state (for example, of Louis XIV) is only one variety
         a) In it, a single monarch makes claim to absolute state power or sovereignty
      2. There are many other varieties: oligarchy, liberal democracy, communistic democracy, etc.
      3. In each of them different parts of the population make a claim to sovereignty
D. But in all of them the state lays claim to be the ultimate sovereign on all questions
   1. The modern state recognizes, in fact if not always in word, no higher sovereign or authority
   2. The state is itself the source of authority, a law unto itself
   3. Cardinal Richelieu: "God absolves actions by the state which, if privately committed, would be a crime"

E. This claim is supported by the state’s related claim to a monopoly on legitimate violence and repression
   1. In other words, to control the army, the police force, courts of law, etc.
   2. More to the point: The state takes life, takes property, determines the freedoms it allows its citizens
   3. Of course there have been efforts to control and delineate how and under what circumstances the state may do such things
      a) But in truth the rulers of most states, when under duress, have not paid much attention to such limits -- especially when the issue is self-protection, or the survival of the state
      b) It was not only Nixon, for example, who "broke the law" in the name of state security but also FDR and Abraham Lincoln -- and innumerable European statesmen of the right and the left throughout history
         (1) "war criminals" or "terrorists" for some are "national heroes" for others
4. To repeat, there are many complexities to this whole issue that cannot be presented here
   a) The main point is the extent to which the modern state has assumed "god-like" quality, above private morality
   b) It is a quality recognized by most theorists of the state, whether contemporary or far in the past

III. The basis, or rationale, for the state’s claims

A. On what basis could the state make such sweeping claims?

B. A key theoretical expression of it came with work of Thomas Hobbes
   1. In his influential 17th century work, *The Leviathan*, he wrote that the state is properly given a "monopoly of violence" by the people to end the social strife that characterized the "state of nature," where there was "a war of all against all"

C. He made, in other words, a practical or utilitarian justification for the absolute sovereignty of the state
   1. This justification was quite different from divine claims (i.e., that God gave the ruler of the state his absolute powers)

D. Some theorists, after Hobbes denied the right of individual rulers to absolute sovereignty, yet they did not really deny the state its "god-like" powers
   1. They recognized that the state can and must do things that are not allowed to individual citizens or subjects
   2. Heads of state can, for example, order that someone be killed
      a) This would be "criminal" in an ordinary citizen, yet is somehow different with the head of state
         (1) Kennedy approved measures to have Castro killed (but is not consider a felon, someone who attempted murder, in the way a private citizen would)
IV. The growth of the modern state since the 17th century

A. Throughout the modern period the state has tended to increase its power over its subjects

B. The reasons for this (or the "dynamic" of growing state power):
   1. States compete with one another for control over material goods
   2. If a state fails to increase its power effectively, it stands to be taken over by surrounding states
   3. It is then in perennial competition with other states

C. Thus: the state is an organization of raw power—one that ever seeks to increase its power and overall control

D. The factors limiting state power
   1. The basic wealth of the territory it encompasses
      a) France has enormous natural wealth, diversity of climate—"a garden"
      b) Spain is mountainous, arid, lacking in fertile soil
      c) Prussia is even less naturally endowed -- sandy, barren soil covers much of it
   2. The organization of resources
      a) An efficient organization can make up for poverty in natural resources
      b) Prussia, for example, organized with great efficiency and "rationality"
      c) Poland, on the other hand, was poorly organized, and it suffered from an inefficient organization of its state
      d) Its relatively rich land did not compensate adequately for that inefficiency—and Poland eventually paid dearly for it
   3. A third factor, interesting and complex: the balance of power
      a) This was a way of regulating the competition between states, or controlling their appetites
      b) Thus, even if a state was naturally wealthy and efficient, it could not take on all of the other states alone
      c) It required allies, and those allies did not want any state to become too strong
d) They would, similarly, want to share in any gains made in war

4. Thus, in the 18th century there was a reticence to see any overwhelming victory
   a) rather, a there was taste for territorial acquisitions only in moderation—which all watched with anxiously—ever intent on maintaining a balance of power

V. The special role of England in the European balance of power

A. Its geographic position gave it the opportunity to intervene on one side and then on another, always striving to preserve a balance of forces

B. It quite consciously saw this as its historic role

C. It was a role that was to England’s self-interest, since any single, unopposed super-state dominating the continent might have the power to cross the channel

VI. The workings of the balance of power: specific examples

A. France was in principle an absolute monarchy

B. In truth, that did not mean that the king effectively exercised absolute sovereignty, absolute state power

1. In practice, especially after the death of Louis XIV, his power was limited by a number of "intermediary bodies" ("between" him and the people)

2. One of the better known examples of such bodies were the parlements, roughly comparable to our higher courts of law
   a) They claimed that they had the right and responsibility to register any royal edict before it actually became law
   b) Moreover, they claimed the right to remonstrate against any edicts that they felt violated the fundamental laws of France
   c) And, of course, it was the courts that determined what those fundamental laws were

3. In the course of the 18th century these parlements saw themselves as defenders the interests of "conservative" or noble causes
a) The most obvious examples: opposition to efforts of the king to tax the nobility, to impinge on its "privilege" not to be taxed

b) Power over taxation was a central issue: Without it, without being able to collect money effectively, a state's organization of power is much diminished

4. And France's state in the 18th century did weaken

   (1) not, interestingly, because of decreasing national wealth

   (2) Rather, because the state proved unable to tap that wealth, to collect from its citizens the resources necessary to operate a state effectively

   (3) However, France was so wealthy in natural resources that this flaw was not immediately disastrous

5. Moreover, for some Frenchmen the limitations on the power of the state through intermediary bodies like the parlements were a very fine thing

a) Such bodies preserved "liberties" and "privileges" (two closely related concepts) against royal despotism

6. Indeed, praise for such intermediary bodies was one of the things for which the philosophe, Montesquieu, was best known

a) His famous and influential work: *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) developed this point

b) Montesquieu compared French institutions with those of oriental despotism

c) In the Orient there was only the exercise of raw power

d) There was a lack of privileged groups, corporations, and other intermediary bodies that limited the raw exercise of power and preserved liberty

7. But there was a problem, or contradiction, in Montesquieu's ideals:

a) The "liberties" he so much praised worked against the power of the state to protect itself from foreign threats

b) This was, indeed, the issue with Poland—its privileged classes had *too many* "liberties" and the
state was defeated and partitioned in the late 18th century

C. Russia was, in fact, a kind of "oriental despotism," completely different from France in the 18th century

1. By the 18th century Russia was a considerably more backward area, in a social and economic sense, than most of western and central Europe
2. The country had little urban development
3. Foreign observers were struck with how Russia's subjects were "slaves" to the tsar
   a) The tsar had developed an undisputed authority that had few parallels in the West
   b) The tsars were not even restrained by a belief in the virtues of custom or of ancient privilege
   c) Repeatedly Russia's tsars "revolutionized" the country from above, tore up the existing institutions
   d) Peter the Great tortured and murdered his nobility with his own hands
   e) Lawlessness, violence, brutality, and a taste for obscene tortures were a common aspect of Russia life through the 17th and 18th centuries
4. The fundamental reasons for these patterns of autocracy:
   a) In part they reflected Russia's vulnerability to its more advanced neighbors, its constant and quite justified fear of invasion
   b) Because of its economic backwardness, Russia could not afford to have the "luxuries" of privileged orders, of "liberties"
   c) To some degree, then, Russian autocracy can be seen as a kind of frantic, paranoiac effort to compensate for its economic backwardness

D. Prussia

1. Prussia stood, in a sense, between Russia and France
2. Prussia's monarchs engaged in no obscene or bloody tortures (although they did threaten to do so)
   a) But either the threat or the act would have been nearly unthinkable in highly "civilized" France
3. On the other hand, Prussian monarchs freely arrested those nobles in the royal service who dared to question a royal command
   a) Such a noble, no matter what his previous rank, would quickly find himself locked in Spandau, condemned to menial labor

4. The Prussian monarchs of the 17th and 18th centuries stood out in one particular way
   a) They created an extremely efficient state mechanism, manned by honest, hard-working officials
   b) And in so doing they were able to make the Prussian state far more powerful than its size and natural wealth would otherwise have permitted
   c) Indeed, that size grows rather dramatically throughout the 18th and 19th centuries—central facts of European power politics, of ominous importance for the 20th century

VII. The uses and functions of state power

A. The way that the power of a state in relation to others was gauged and concretely tested was through warfare, and its auxiliary, diplomacy

B. In the 18th century both diplomacy and war attained a kind of classical finesse and formality (or "rationality")
   1. This was in conformity with the general "spirit of the age," with its rationality and formality
   2. The job of the ambassador was central
   3. He was a kind of "resident spy," recognized as such, and tolerated because each country had one and recognized the benefits of having them
      a) He was controlled by a tremendous number of formalities and rituals
      b) The ambassador would thus attempt to determine the weaknesses of his host country and report back home about them
      c) This task was particularly important if the country was a likely enemy
      d) And in fact in the course of the eighteenth century nearly every European country became involved in a war against a shifting array of other countries
C. War: the ultimate test

1. This test had to be resorted to regularly

2. However, 18th-century warfare had a peculiarly limited and "rational" aspect to it

3. It was quite distinct from the wars of the 17th century (wars of religious passions, and great destructiveness)

4. Or, those of the 20th century (national and ideological passions)

5. 18th century wars had limited goals and used limited means
   a) Most of the population of the various countries was not much involved, normal life was not much disrupted
   b) Wars were fought by professional soldiers
   c) There was little, in other words, like later notions of the "nation in arms," or "totalitarian warfare"

6. The campaigns of Frederick the Great of Prussia
   a) His two most famous wars (of Austrian Succession and Seven Years War) illustrate many of the above generalizations
   b) Frederick and Napoleon are often compared as great military leaders, yet the differences between them were very great and very revealing
   c) Frederick worked with an army that was strictly professional, and he made every effort to preserve it
   d) Napoleon massed gigantic forces of unprofessional soldiers, citizens in arms—intoxicated with revolutionary ideals
   e) The battles were great slaughters, overwhelming victories

7. Frederick adhered to 18th c. strategy:
   a) He sent out small detachments of observers
   b) He engaged in minor clashes over supply routes, magazines, or fortified positions
   c) He always remained close to base camp, relying heavily on supplies of the magazine
   d) He was hesitant to engage in large, decisive battles
   e) Discipline, prudence, and patience were essential
8. Thus Frederick relied on the sum total of a series of partial blows to bring the enemy to the negotiating table
   a) There, "reasonable" agreements could be reached
   b) He and others would have a force to fight another day

9. Again, there was a sharp contrast with Napoleon: forced marches, gobbling up almost inexhaustible supply of non-professional troops, lording it over those he totally defeated

VIII. The philosophes and state power

A. Frederick's successful organization of state power caused him to be greatly admired by many of his contemporaries, especially the philosophes
   1. Voltaire even went to live with him for a while

B. Yet, the philosophes were at the same time repelled by the price Frederick paid
   1. He made Prussia into a kind of military barracks
   2. He directed the energies of Prussia's upper classes entirely to the service of the state and to warfare
   3. Thus, they admired the efficiency of the machine but also were repelled by its despotism, the lack of freedom of its subjects
   4. Indeed, many of them were turning with growing interest to another model: England

C. England's greatest attraction for them was its liberty, the freedom of its citizens to say what they wanted—something that few on the Continent could do, including the French

D. English prestige also grew because of its military victories in the 18th century—largely at the expense of the French
   1. However, one very important fact mostly eluded the understanding of the philosophes who came so to admire England
      a) The country enjoyed what might be termed "natural advantages" that Continental countries did not
      b) That is, as an island England had quite clear natural frontiers—frontiers, moreover, that were relatively invulnerable to invasion
      c) Central irony here: The philosophes began to call for reforms of a sort that would follow the English model
d) Yet that model, because of England's natural advantages, was not really relevant to Continental powers, which lacked such clear natural frontiers.

2. Nevertheless, "English" political ideas become more and more favored among critics on the Continent.
   a) Such was the case especially after 1748 (the same year as the appearance of *The Spirit of the Laws*).

3. And of course Montesquieu is one of those who quite explicitly admired English institutions.
   a) again, without really understanding how they worked or appreciating how irrelevant they were for the Continent.

IX. **Concluding remarks**

A. The balance of power was not only a way of controlling war and destruction.

B. It also assured a constant, competitive interaction between European powers.

C. And this was finally a kind of creative influence.

1. Changes in one country inevitably spread to another.
   a) Indeed, these changes had to spread to the others if they were to survive for very long.
   b) This competitive interaction helped to instill a dynamism in the European scene, and even in the European psyche.

2. Some have even seen it as at least part of the explanation of how Europe continued such a long period of creativity, until it came to dominate the world.

3. There is little question, at any rate, that this constant shifting and combining of great powers is a central aspect of the European scene.
   a) It is one that helps to explain not only the general European psyche but the more specific traits of countries like Russian, Germany, France, and England.
   b) And this dynamic and productive (as well as destructive) interplay between states will be a central theme of these lectures.