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The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government

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"Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies?" – Augustine, *City of God*, IV.4.

With this new book Thomas N. Bisson is nothing if not ambitious. By his own account it is in part an answer to a point made over ten years ago by the late Timothy Reuter in a *Past and Present* debate on the so-called feudal revolution.(1) There, Reuter asked for a better chronology and geography of exploitative lordship and violence and Bisson's reply constitutes nothing less than a new grand narrative of power in Western Europe in the Central Middle Ages: in Bisson's words, 'how and why the experience of power became that of government in medieval Europe' (p. 17). The other historical giant conjured by the book's very title is, of course, Charles Homer Haskins, who, with his *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, established the 12th century in the minds of anglophone scholars as a time of institutional and intellectual progression. Bisson's book self-consciously takes part in the same 'traditional institutional history', one of whose strengths was a familiarity with the 'generality' of medieval records rather than the narrower focus of 'new' historians of society and culture. Bisson's criticism of latter-day scholars as not being interested in power is somewhat unfair: whether it is the study of women or heretical peasants, an interest in power and its experience lies at the heart of modern approaches. But Bisson is right to say that this interest has not yet been systematically applied to the subject of traditional history: the dominance of aristocratic men over other men of whatever class.

A key argument of the book and where Bisson parts most radically with his institutional historian forebears is that 12th-century sources tell us very little about government or institutions. Instead, they reflect 'not so

much what power looked like as what it felt like' (pp. viii-ix; also p. 12). A little ironically, perhaps, Bisson has picked up the theme of newer historiographical trends in concentrating on experience and 'methods devised to bring past societies to life' (p. viii) not by applying new methodologies but by reapplying old ones. Bisson has little love for theoretical approaches drawn from sociology (Foucault, for example, is mentioned only to be dismissed) and although he describes his method as 'thick description' (p. 20), he makes no mention of Clifford Geertz and does not undertake anything much like the cultural exegesis that Geertz pioneered. Instead, Bisson's 'thick empiricism', so to speak, constitutes quite simply the gathering of as much comparable evidence from as many different places as possible; accordingly, the book encompasses to varying degrees England, Capetian France, Northern Spain, the Empire, Flanders and the Papacy. His understanding of the 'experience of power', meanwhile, is not some Geertzian search for meaning through semiotics, but instead the pre-linguistic feeling of violence in all its immediacy, like being burnt out of house and home by Norman invaders or having your lord's bailiff stuff shit into your mouth for trying to flee the estate. The book thus serves, in part, as a vivid and salutary rebuke to the sometimes rather bloodless structuralist and post-structuralist historiography of recent times.

In his introductory first chapter, Bisson in effect defines 'power' as the exercise of violence, whether en masse in battle or war (Hastings, Investiture Contest, Crusade) or against individuals (William Rufus, Charles the Good). More generally, it was the power to punish and coerce. The specific version of power in which he is interested is 'lordship', which translates as the affective, arbitrary and unaccountable power of a patrimonial aristocracy. Relying very approximately on the Weberian distinction between patrimonial and bureaucratic domination, Bisson opposes this to 'public order', which was a royal prerogative gradually usurped by lesser lords. It is in the second, relatively short, chapter on ´The Age of Lordship (875–1150)' that Bisson sketches these outlines. For anyone interested in the debate over the so-called 'feudal revolution', Bisson offers a familiar picture. The old Carolingian order was a public and regalian one – a single order, beholden to an overall set of standards and characterised by office-holding. The lordship that replaced it was private, multiple and subject to no norms but the lord's whim. It was based on patrimonies, fiefs and castles that had quickly multiplied and were therefore much more omnipresent than before. According to Bisson, the multiplication of lordships led to an observable increase in complaints about so-called 'bad customs' and these complaints demonstrate that oppressive structures of domination were not just rearranged but that there was also a qualitative shift in the experience of power, one whose historical significance Bisson places on a par with 18th- and 19th-century industrialism (p. 48). Most of this evidence comes from ecclesiastical sources, whether saints' Lives, charters or letters, and it is not always clear what role ecclesiastical lordship plays in Bisson's picture. He seems to think it was lighter on its subjects than the lordship of princes, castellans and knights was on theirs, allegedly because abbots and bishops were unable to maintain the aristocratic sociability which undergirded the intensity of bad lordship (pp. 76, 82–3).

Bisson's history (and geography) of lordship begins in earnest in the third chapter, 'Lord Rulership (1050–1150): The Experience of Power', the beginning of two pairs of chapters which constitute the meat of the book, the first pair covering roughly 1050–1150 and the second 1150–1220. In the first pair of chapters, Bisson ranges geographically widely to compare how the history of lordship differed between regions while the underlying problems and themes remained the same. This is one of the great services of this book: Bisson manages to write a history of lordship that both treats Europe as a single culture facing similar problems but also to take full account of regional variation. The third chapter, for example, looks at the key issue of private, affective as opposed to public, official power in different contexts. The attempts of later 11th- and early 12th-century Popes to reform the Church highlight for Bisson a confusion between official and affective power. The principalities of Northern Spain and the Pyrenees, where royal and comital order crumbled in the face of the castellans, contrast with the alpine imperial provinces of Bavaria and Lombardy, where even in the absence of the Emperor public order was maintained as an ideal. The Angevin counts put up a façade of public authority, but castellans, advocates and provosts continued to exercise arbitrary violence. Their Flemish counterparts, in contrast, maintained real authority by co-opting the newly flourishing 'customs' into their own courts. The examples of Capetian France and Norman England, lastly, provide a foretaste of the other major argument of the book by looking at how the new lordship took the place of any notion of royal government. Early Capetian rule was reactive, not active, and the kings issued

privileges, not legislation. England superficially seems to have been the most governed, but its public order was pervaded by lordship.

The fourth chapter, ‘Crises of Power (1060–1150)’, looks at how the tensions described in the previous chapter played out in various polities where lord-princes came to realise they depended on the goodwill of their followers: how, so to speak, the structural tensions created by the new lordship manifested themselves on a political level. Bisson discusses a range of ‘critical moments of accommodation between regimes of public order and dynastic lordship’ (p. 196). He first returns to the Gregorian Reform as an exemplar of his topic, but this time extends the discussion into the Investiture Contest to discuss how the crisis put paid to ideas of theocratic power, while the reformers’ campaigns for restitution ironically allowed clerical lordship to take even firmer root. The Saxon Revolt is the inevitable candidate for the crisis between private lordship and royal power in the Empire, although the choice jars somewhat with the earlier imperial examples of Bavaria and Lombardy; consistency would have made the argument stronger. Bisson struggles here, as indeed contemporaries did, with the paradox of a king imposing rule through the same sort of castle-building lesser lords engaged in. If he fails to resolve this ‘bitter contradiction’ (p. 221), it is probably because it was irresolvable. But the Saxon Revolt does demonstrate, as Bisson forcefully argues, that the ‘newly garrisoned castles, whatever their declared purpose, were generators of violence, and *could not* be otherwise’ (p. 217, emphasis in original).

The Investiture Contest and the Saxon Revolt are ‘usual suspects’ when it comes to demonstrating crises in royal power and the same can be said of Louis VI’s campaigns against the castellans of the Ile-de-France, the Anarchy of Stephen’s reign in England and, at the comital level, the murder of Charles the Good of Flanders. To say that these examples, all drawn on by Bisson, are familiar is the opposite of a criticism – in fact, it is one of the greatest merits of Bisson’s work that it takes familiar stories and places them in a wider narrative. That said, it is in the inclusion of Northern Spain, notably Bisson’s own area of interest Catalonia, that the argument really becomes strong. Spain is far too often omitted from surveys of Western European medieval history, but including it allows for much more variation in the subjects studied and allows well-known developments to be seen in a fresh light and thus as much less inevitable than they would otherwise appear. As well as striking a balance between regional diversity and pan-European themes, Bisson can therefore use the Spanish perspective to show how familiar stories interacted with contingency to develop in surprising and thus unfamiliar ways.

The final pair of chapters, ‘Resolution: Intrusions of Government (1150–1215)’ and ‘Celebration and Persuasion (1160–1225)’ respectively, have a somewhat different focus. From the start of the book Bisson is reluctant to talk about ‘government’, believing (rightly) that it is an anachronistic concept for the period. In opposition to the older generation of historians, above all Haskins, Bisson does not see the lords of the 12th century worrying overmuch about creating institutions and administrations for the better government of their realms and principalities. But he does perceive the slightest, not always successful, shift in this direction towards the end of the century. In the book’s fifth chapter, ‘Resolution’, Bisson identifies a new accountability in lordship that is most readily perceptible in a change in texts of land accounting. The polyptychs of Carolingian times constituted a prescriptive type of accounting which listed what estates were supposed to produce, but provided no way of holding estate managers accountable for actual production and were too inflexible to account for change over time. By the third quarter of the 12th century, documents begin to survive which show a different type of accountancy, a probative one where the agents of the lord had to demonstrate what they were receiving from each estate. Bisson is not blind to the limits of the new documentation (it was not being used to work out how better to exploit material resources, only to hold provosts and the like accountable for realising the prescribed values of the estates), but takes it nonetheless to indicate a new attitude towards accountability that sat in tension with the old lordly reliance on fidelity.(2) He works through this idea again on a number of case studies. On the example of England, for example, Bisson shows how the previously affective lord-kingship of the Anglo-Norman kings was less available to the Plantagenets as the spread of ‘procedural expertise’ meant that the kings had to ‘respond as of custom, no longer simply as of grace’ (p. 385). In France, too, Philip Augustus’s lordship is described as ‘habitually managerial, not exploitative’ (p. 413). Two cases studies act as controls against the progressivist fallacy,

however: Catalonia, where the new accountability appeared briefly but failed to take root, and the Papacy, whose unique ability to formulate policy in any sense that approximates modern politics shows up even the most 'objective' (p. 406) kingships of the day as a long way away from what we might understand as government.

The sixth and final chapter, 'Celebration and Persuasion', picks up and develops a theme introduced in the previous chapter: that lords began to take account (at least in theory) of wider interests than just their own selfish whims. Bisson begins discussing various 'Cultures of Power'. Here the violent songs of the troubadours appear as desperate glorifications of a dying mode of lordship, while both a newly literate courtly discourse and academic moralising struggle with the 'dichotomy between exploitative power and official service' (p. 443). The key change is seen not in such hand-wringing, however, but in the development of a culture of expertise. This is most clear in the issue of law, where at the beginning of the 12th century someone who appealed to Roman law might find their claim nullified by an opponent who could simply appeal to the parallel norm of custom, 'pitting law against law'. With legal expertise came the opportunity 'for adjusting customary rules and procedures by reference to equity and (Roman) reason' (p. 460) and creating what Hannah Vollrath has elsewhere called a 'hierarchy of rights' (3), where one norm could be argued to be superior to another. But there also arose expertise in procedure – not just knowing, but knowing *how*. These technicians, whether accountants of the English exchequer or Roman lawyers, worked according to procedures that existed outside of themselves and therefore towards a 'social interest' (p. 468) greater than mere lordly whim.

Bisson argues that this constitutes the beginnings of a politicisation of power. According to his informal Weberian scheme, older lordship was 'social-relational', 'sociologically personal, affective, and unpolitical' and 'passively affective'. Techniques of rule were 'devices for ensuring and imposing the lord's will' by creating 'affective solidarities' whose discussions were comparatively 'ceremonious and deferential'. In contrast, by the end of the 12th century we see the institutionalisation of accountability and office as well as a discourse focussed on issues and the discussion of 'interests as distinct from rights' (p. 494). The development is to be seen, according to Bisson, in the crisis around Count-King Alfonso I of Barcelona-Aragon's peace initiatives in the 1070s and 1080s and that of John of England and the Magna Carta. The Catalonian peace differed from earlier versions by seeking to impose it on Catalonia as a whole, without regard to aristocratic rights, but in doing so politicised it and made it negotiable. Something similar happened with Magna Carta, where John's failure of affective lordship forced the barons to impose something resembling administrative power. Neither the irony that the barons only ever wanted affective lordship (just better affective lordship) nor the fact that the consultative provisions of the charter were quickly dropped negates the fact that the crisis consisted of a politicised debate about the general interest of the realm. As Bisson goes on to describe, there are other indications of 'the state of the realm' becoming an 'arguable cause' (p. 539) at this time, whether in Alfonso IX of León's statutes of 1188 or Philip Augustus's 1220 refusal to revoke a statute without consulting his barons in a parliament. In the assemblies of this period, argues Bisson, we begin to see something new: issues (notably monetary issues) depicted as the collective responsibility of the assembled participants, rather than merely the interest of the lord, and accepted by all as such.

This is a book which scholars of central medieval power and society will have to ponder for a long time to come. Its sheer breadth, its ambition and the lightness with which it wears its scholarship all demand attention. Whether it persuades may depend on two areas Bisson might have written more about: the nature of the source base and the definition of lordship. Granted Bisson's point that newer research trends cannot boast the breadth of their predecessors, one reason for this is a much more acute awareness of how context-bound some of the evidence is. The recent flight into cultural history stems in part from this newly sharp appreciation for just how wide the gap between rhetoric and reality can yawn. A case in point is the growth in accusations of bad customs in the 11th century. Bisson interprets these as reflecting the activities of newly aggressive secular patrimonies. He may well be right. But the accusations come overwhelmingly from ecclesiastical sources and might instead reflect changes in Church attitudes towards its lay allies and enemies. If the complaints reflect new standards being applied to old traditions, perhaps by a newly assertive

Church cut loose from royal oversight, then we are seeing changes not in patrimonial but ecclesiastical lordship and the narrative of power changes considerably.(4) Later on in the book, Bisson's argument about the development of probative accountancy depends on the silence of earlier sources. As Bisson concedes (p. 349), the essentially prescriptive nature of estate management did not change over the period, but it is difficult to imagine any prescriptive system working without a checking mechanism. That sources for the latter do not survive from before the 12th century does not mean they never existed. In any case, some discussion of changes in the source base would have been desirable.(5)

Bisson's wonderfully evocative language certainly makes it clear what he means by 'the experience of power', but his avoidance of theoretical issues makes it less clear what he means by lordship. This has the result that distinctions Bisson wants to make, for example across time, are not as strongly underpinned as might be necessary. Was Charlemagne's rule really more administrative than William the Conqueror's or his court less celebratory than that of Count-King Alfonso I? Maybe, but a more detailed consideration of the relevant Weberian concepts and their later theoretical offspring would be needed to make the point. Other distinctions may not be made strongly enough, such as that between lordship among aristocrats and of aristocrats over peasants.(6) Bisson notes the similarities (p. 47), but one way of squaring his emphasis on lords' arbitrary violence with the more consensus-oriented anthropological approach of historians like Stephen White and Gerd Althoff is to note that many of the 'rules of the game' applied only between aristocrats.(7) That does not of course mean that such rules stayed the same (8), but what sometimes gets lost in discussions of medieval aristocratic society is just how, so to speak, *racist* it was: these men (and women) believed that the great majority of their subjects were inferior and legitimately open to abuse simply by virtue of their birth. How lordship was experienced vis-à-vis fellow aristocrats is another question and a more sustained engagement with the various definitions of lordship would have clarified the issues.

These reservations are, however, a measure of how daring a book Bisson has written. Few other books manage to use Europe's regional variation so elegantly to elaborate on coherent pan-European themes whilst avoiding any impression that developments were inevitable. Its contribution to the debate over changes in lordship and government will be massive. It will undoubtedly serve to pull historical interest back to the centre of medieval experience: the exercise of power and its effect on life and limb.

Notes

1. Timothy Reuter, 'Debate: the "feudal revolution"', *Past and Present*, 155 (1997), 187–93.Back to (1)
2. For a rather different, but complementary, view of the development of bookkeeping, see Hagen Keller, 'Vom 'heiligen Buch' zur 'Buchführung': Lebensfunktionen der Schrift im Mittelalter', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 26 (1992), 1–31. Keller is only one German historian whose work provides potentially fruitful points of contact with Bisson's.Back to (2)
3. Hannah Vollrath, 'Konfliktwahrnehmung und Konfliktdarstellung in erzählenden Quellen des 11. Jahrhunderts', in *Die Salier und das Reich*, ed. Stefan Weinfurter,(3 vols., Sigmaringen, 1991), iii, p. 293. Bisson's contrast between debatable 'interests' and arbitrary 'rights' reflects that made by Vollrath between a rationally justifiable 'hierarchisch gegliederten Rechtsordnung' and the feud, where any injury to someone's 'Rechtstand' (i.e. the sum of that person's rights, possessions and honours) demanded immediate reparation through revenge.Back to (3)
4. Bisson's is by no means the only recent overview to neglect the institutional church, as Ian Wood has pointed out in the context of the early Middle Ages: 'Review article: landscapes compared', *Early Medieval Europe*, 15 (2007), 235–7. Indeed, one of the great as-yet unlearnt lessons of Susan Reynolds's *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994) is the importance which ecclesiastical lordship ought to have in any understanding of medieval power relations in general.Back to (4)
5. See already Reuter, 'Debate', 193–4.Back to (5)
6. As Reuter pointed out, beating up your own peasants was very different from beating up neighbouring monks (indeed the difference might require you to beat up *their* peasants in lieu): 'Debate', 181.Back to (6)

7. See, to begin with, these historians' respective volumes of collected studies: Stephen D. White, *Feuding and Peace-Making in Eleventh-Century France* (Aldershot, 2005) and Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997).Back to (7)
8. On this period, see, for example, John Gillingham, '1066 and the introduction of chivalry into England', in *Law and Government in Medieval England and Normandy. Essays in honour of Sir James Holt*, ed. George Garnett and John Hudson (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 31–55 and more generally Gerd Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale. Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 2003).Back to (8)

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