

*Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, by Joanna Innes (Oxford: OUP, 2009; pp.xviii + 364. £55).

In this gadfly world where academic fashion occasionally seems as frivolous and changing as its high-street counterpart, the ability to maintain a coherent perspective over three decades, to build from year to year and article to article, an ever deeper and more coherent view of a past and a place, is a remarkable achievement. *Inferior Politics* brings within the compass of a single book seven major essays produced over 26 years charting the history of eighteenth-century British social policy and state formation, and in the process achieves just this coherence.

Any historian of eighteenth-century Britain, of its governance and social system, will be familiar with many of the essays in this volume. Even some of those published here for the first time have had an extensive pre-existence in the form of fading typescripts passed among an ever-expanding network of scholars; the originals, dog-eared and endlessly photocopied, forming a prized possession for a particular generation of historians, never to be loaned or lost. But in the process of bringing these articles together, *Inferior Politics* also articulates the clear relationship between pieces which up till now most of us have read as free standing interventions in an ongoing debate, and more clearly than ever before, restate the vision of the workings of the eighteenth-century British state that informs Joanna Innes's broad scholarly project.

The book is divided into three parts. The first deals with the bones and sinews of local and central government. Under the title of 'Structures', the role of Parliament in the evolution of social policy broadly defined, the development of the domestic state as a financial system, and the significance of local innovation in the creation of new legislation, are each explored in turn. In effect, this section dissects the body politic; anatomizing the relationship between the local community, the county, and the central state. In the process Joanna Innes argues for the significance of Parliament as the healthy and beating heart of a system able to tolerate regional diversity, local innovation, and an increasingly sophisticated system of central administration. And as the heart of a system able to innovate, and to respond effectively to the challenge of rapid social, economic and political change both at home and abroad.

The volume's second part, 'Empirical Enquiry', interrogates the mind and eye of this political beast. It explores the evolution of 'political arithmetic' and the sources of knowledge that informed political change. Comprising a single 70 page essay, this section is the most all-inclusive and ambitious in the book. It surveys the whole field of empirical social enquiry from the great figures of the late seventeenth century, such as Sir William Petty and Gregory King, to their late eighteenth-century successors, encompassing material relating to population, tax and revenue, agriculture, poverty, crime, industry and parliamentary representation. In the process Innes relates a seldom told story of mid-eighteenth-century enquiry, and the gradual evolution of social statistics into a new form of analysis – a form that unlike its seventeenth-century progenitor took for granted the need to measure change over time. What emerges is a series of enquiries that are more extensive and effective than has hitherto been recognised; and a picture of eighteenth-century governance that is better informed than has generally been allowed. In Innes's assessment, and for all the patronising condescension heaped on eighteenth-century governance by two centuries of scholarship, the system essentially worked.

Part three is composed of a series of micro-historical case studies focussed on late eighteenth-century London. These include an analysis of the revived reformation of manners movement, a now classic piece on the organisation of King's Bench debtors' prison, and a chapter on the altogether unsavoury character of the 'reforming' constable, William Payne of Bell Yard. Together they form a highly localised counterpoint to part one, in which Parliament took the lead, and describe the local and quasi-state appendages at the very extreme of Innes's body politic.

Together with the introduction, these essays describe a system that existed happily half way between a modern state, with all its implications of bureaucratic and ideological coherence, on the one hand, and the early modern variety, made up of communities, custom and local institutions, on the other. Historiographically, the volume effectively knits together John Brewer's account of the rise of the 'fiscal-military state', mirroring its profound appreciation of the power of system (and money), with John Beattie's equally influential explorations of local and localised, legal and administrative competence. A sparkling thread or two of Jürgen Habermas's authentic public sphere can also be discerned woven among these more robust materials. By bringing these perspectives together into a single narrative, *Inferior Politics* provides a stentorian riposte to an older historiography that tended to depict eighteenth-century governance as a variety of stage drunk, prat-fall comedy, characterised by lurching stumbles, precarious preservations, and an ever thirsty corruption. More *sotto voce*, these essays also address and refute many of the assumptions that underpin the more politicised versions of eighteenth-century history that emerged from the 1970s and 1980s. Innes's depiction of the state as encompassing local initiative, as eagerly listening to voices from below, as competently reacting to social change and dealing with crises, effectively undercuts both Jonathan Clark's confessional model of the state as social hierarchy writ small; and Edward Thompson's depiction of the same state as class oppression writ large.

Overall, this volume forms a lucid statement of the core assumptions that inform much of the best historical work of the current generation of senior scholars; and Innes is at justified pains to position her views as being 'broadly shared' (p.7) among historians of the period. Like the eighteenth-century state it describes, *Inferior Politics* tends to avoid areas of disagreement and conflict – both among modern historians and the more raucous denizens of eighteenth-century Britain – always seeking a middle ground of consensus and informed compromise. The result is an important book that helps to articulate a coherent view of the period. And if this reader occasionally wished to find a sharper edge, a harder point, upon which to bruise and scrape, perhaps impale, their own version of the body politic, this is no doubt the product of an unreasoning and romantic attachment to a time when ideology, politics and partisanship - and fashion - had a more prominent place in the profession.

Tim Hitchcock

Professor of Eighteenth-Century History

University of Hertfordshire