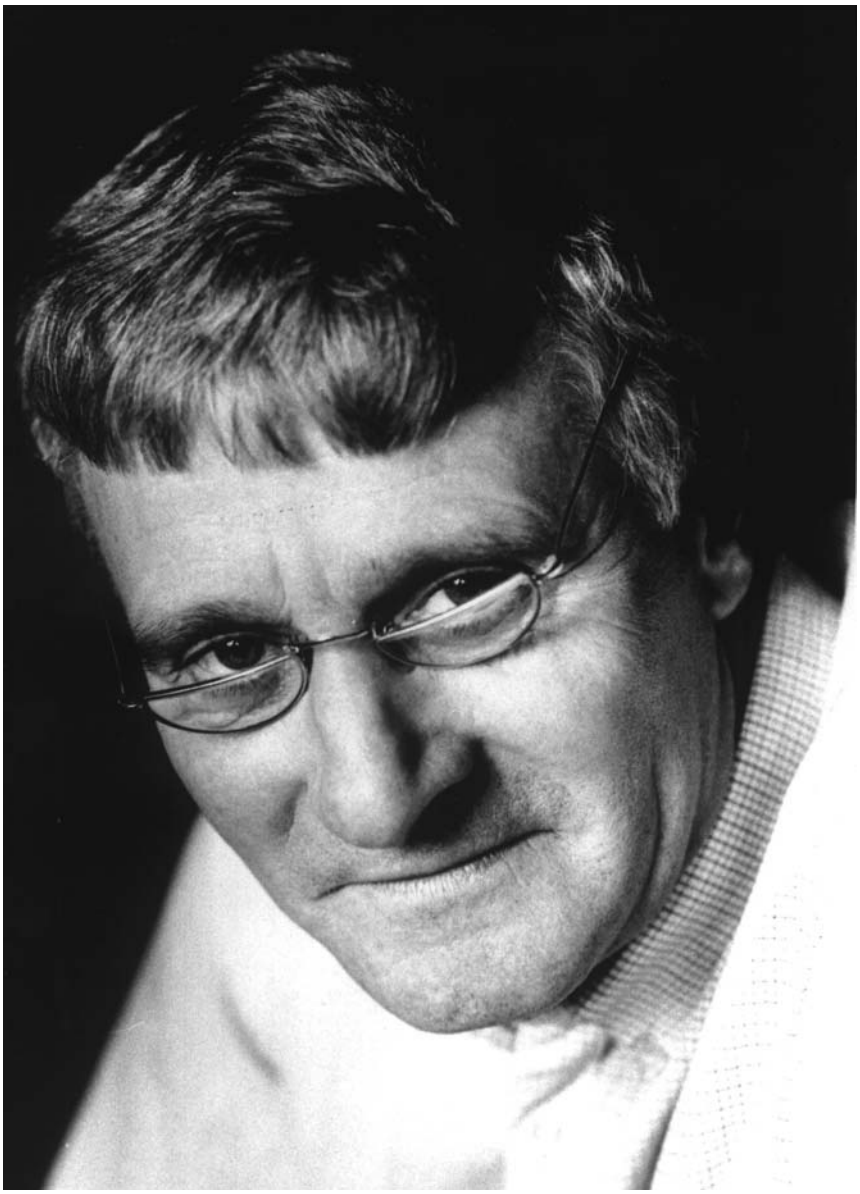

VINCENT WRIGHT

Vincent Wright
1937–1999

> I am happy to live with my intellectual schizophrenia—to preach the need for comparative method, to practice timid comparison, to close my door on occasion in Nuffield and write history, and to profit from the networks of colleagues and friends created and consolidated by both politics and history.[1]

HERE WAS VINCENT WRIGHT almost perfectly summed up by himself: cheerful over and above everything (we all remember his laughter, his infectious sense of humour, and his indomitable optimism); acutely self-aware, and sober in his assessment of the intellectual demons which assailed him; modest, and without a trace of pompousness; gregariously sociable, and enjoying life to the full, while at the same time making the most of the opportunities which it afforded him. There was also a whiff of the religious—hence the reference to preaching. He had stopped believing a long time ago, and described himself as rabidly anticlerical; but he also readily confessed that his moral and philosophical outlook was forever steeped in a Catholic culture.

Born in 1937, in Whitehaven, in the then county of Cumberland, Vincent Wright's interest in the European Continent stemmed in part from his miner father Walter Wright's strong support for the Popular Front in France and of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. He also inherited from his father a favourable view of the 1945 Labour Government and a prejudice against the Tories. It was his mother, Mary Wright, who imparted a fervent Catholicism that was initially nurtured by

[1] 'The path to hesitant comparison', p. 176, in H. Daalder (ed.), *Comparative European Politics. The Story of a Profession* (1997).

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a Catholic primary school. He did not have a high opinion of the traditional Whitehaven Grammar School, which he considered was too devoted to preparing its pupils for examination success by instruction rather than education. He thought that Clemenceau's comment on the *Polytechniciens*—'they know everything there is to know—but nothing more'—fitted his own school experience all too well. He refused to join the Whitehaven Old Grammarians and had no regrets when the school was transformed into a comprehensive school.

Before going to the LSE to study Government for the B.Sc. (Econ.), he did his National Service in the Royal Navy, spending most of his time on the aircraft carrier HMS *Bulwark*. As well as affording him plenty of spare time to read the many history books in the ship's library, his experience in the navy taught him how important institutions are in attracting loyalty, as well as the vulnerability of authority, lessons that were to stand him in good stead in his subsequent research and publications. At the LSE his natural inclination to scepticism was reinforced by the dominant influence in the Government Department of Michael Oakeshott. He acquired a good grounding in history there but no inculcation of the capacity to undertake comparative studies, which was to come later.

His doctoral research for the LSE started at the Paris *Institut d'Etudes Politiques*, where he came under the influence of René Rémond, whose approach to politics had a predominantly historical bent. He was persuaded to abandon his initial inclination to work on the history of ideas in favour of a detailed study of the electoral history and geography of Basses-Pyrénées. He spent two blissful years in the local archives in Pau, in the process acquiring a profound and enduring love of provincial France, as well as the ability to overcome the intimidating obstacles placed in the way of the seeker after knowledge by French officialdom. From that initiation, he acquired an incomparable grasp of the interaction between central and local politics and administration, as well as the complex relations between state prefects and local notables that was to permeate so much of his subsequent work.

Throughout his career Wright was pulled in conflicting directions by the contrasting concerns and methodological demands of history and politics. Politics was about generalisation, comparison, and theoretical parsimony, while historical enquiry was the domain of particularism, scepticism, and complexity. And yet he found fruitful ways of building bridges between the two spheres—notably by inviting each discipline to draw sustenance from the strengths of the other, and by fiercely resisting attempts to confine each of these academic endeavours within artificially

closed boundaries. He was one of the least sectarian and most open-minded scholars one could ever hope to meet—immensely knowledgeable but insatiably curious; supremely gifted and at the same time immensely generous; very English but also a genuine cosmopolitan. All forms of parochialism were anathema to him, and he was, in this sense, a real *intellectuel républicain*.

These qualities very much shaped the way in which his historical work unfolded. After completing his doctorate on the politics of the Basses-Pyrénées in the nineteenth century, Wright began his academic career first at the University of Newcastle and then at the London School of Economics as an historian of French public administration. His two key works, *Le Conseil d'Etat sous le Second Empire* (1972) and *Les Préfets du Second Empire* (1973, with Bernard le Clère) established his reputation as one of the leading figures in the field. After moving to Oxford to an Official Fellowship at Nuffield College in 1977, Wright increasingly devoted himself to comparative politics. But he nonetheless continued to carry out and publish research on various aspects of French political and administrative history throughout the 1980s and 1990s. He made time for this research—most notably on the Freemasonry and on the prefects of the 1870–1 republican Government of National Defence—through his extraordinary capacity for work, and his tireless ability to sift through large quantities of archival sources. Even the briefest of visits to Paris would rarely be allowed to pass by without spending a few hours at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Archives Nationales, or the military archives at Vincennes; and his ability to charm (or if necessary bully) his way past suspicious and wary departmental archivists was remarkable.

Wright was proud of his archival Stakhanovism. Many a friend, colleague, or student will no doubt remember arriving at a French public archive shortly after opening hours to find him already seated at his desk, with an expression of mock disapproval on his face and a dramatically over-elaborate glance at his watch.

Wright's synthesis between politics and history found its substantive expression in his constant preoccupation with political and administrative power in modern France—where it was exercised, through which institutions, and by which individuals and groups; in his later years he became especially concerned in the fate of these institutions and elites in the critical circumstances of war. In the final months of his life he worked with Karma Nabulsi on two articles exploring the tensions and rivalries among different branches of the French state during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1. Throughout his life Wright remained a self-defined

Jacobin; he defended the principle of the general interest, was instinctively suspicious of 'groups' (whether functionally or territorially based), and believed in the fundamental importance of state institutions in upholding legal, administrative, territorial, and cultural unity.[2] This cultural Jacobinism, which he upheld in vigorous discussions with all his colleagues in France and in the Anglo-American world, largely defined the focus of Wright's historical research.[3]

France's administration remained close to Wright's heart throughout his career. His early major works focused on two *Grands Corps*, the Prefectorate and the Conseil d'Etat (with whose members he retained very close personal ties). He frequently attended meetings and conferences at both institutions. At the same time his substantive interests were much broader. Among his distinctive historical contributions were studies on the abortive Ecole Nationale d'Administration of the Second Republic;[4] the prefects of police of the Second Empire;[5] Gambetta's *cabinet* at Tours during the Franco-Prussian war;[6] the role of secretaries-general and directors of central administrations;[7] and the bureaux of the Ministry of War.[8] Both the central and local branches of the Ministries of the Interior, Justice, Finance, Public Instruction, and War also featured prominently in his writings, partly in their own right, and partly because he did not believe that the history of individual administrations could be written in isolation.

In substantive terms, the themes which dominated Wright's approach to administrative history were 'fragmentation' and 'institutional constraint'. The nineteenth-century French state, according to him, was conceptually based on a Jacobin–Napoleonic blueprint which was 'statist, powerful, centralized, hierarchically-structured, ubiquitous, uniform,

[2] For a flavour of Wright's sense of Jacobinism, see his article 'Question du'un Jacobin anglais aux régionalistes français', *Pouvoirs*, 19 (1981), pp. 119–30.

[3] The theme of Wright's Jacobinism will be explored in a forthcoming collection of historical tributes to his work, to be published by Oxford University Press: *The Jacobin Legacy in Modern France* (edited by Sudhir Hazareesingh).

[4] 'L'Ecole Nationale d'Administration de 1848–1849: un échec révélateur', *Revue Historique*, CCLV/1 (1976).

[5] 'Les préfets de police 1851–1880: problèmes et personnalités', in *Les préfets en France 1800–1940* (Geneva, 1978).

[6] 'L'administration du Ministère de l'Intérieur en temps de crise: le cabinet de Gambetta à Tours en 1870', *Administration*, LII (Autumn 1976).

[7] 'Les secrétaries généraux et les directeurs des administrations centrales: pouvoirs et pouvoir', in *Les directeurs de Ministère en France* (Geneva, 1976).

[8] 'Les bureaux du ministère de la Guerre', *Revue Historique des Armées*, III (1993).

depoliticized, instrumental, expert and tightly controlled'.[9] However, despite the general adherence of most nineteenth-century French regimes to its broad outlines, this Jacobin model never matched what he was fond of calling the 'untidy reality'. France was in this sense a perfect object of study for his quest to overcome the dualism between the historian's desire to particularise and the political scientist's search for parsimonious explanatory models. Wright saw that in France, statism was repeatedly challenged and subverted from within as the various administrations' functional powers seeped away; centralisation was often mythical; hierarchies crumbled in the face of bureaucratic rivalries; the rhetoric of omnipresence masked insufficiencies in staffing at the local levels; 'depoliticized' agents of the state often assumed blatantly political functions; and 'expertise' was sometimes a cover for incompetence, or worse still an excuse for partiality and partisanship. The narrative of the nineteenth-century French state was thus neither epic nor linear; its development was marked rather by discontinuities and constraints. This, for example, is how Wright typically ended his contribution on the prefects of police under the Second Empire: 'ici comme ailleurs dans le domaine de l'administration, les généralisations sont dangereuses et les hypothèses normalement trompeuses'.[10]

Bureaucratic power was also frittered away as a result of vertical conflicts and functional inconsistencies within the same institution. Second Empire prefects were asked by their political masters to maintain a strictly depoliticised local order, but also to intervene in all elections to secure the victory of 'official' candidates—thus making themselves the principal agents of politicisation. But the real difficulty was that the French state lacked a fundamental sense of unity, and its different bodies tended to see themselves as rivals (and indeed adversaries) rather than partners. Often the product of conflicting and long-standing institutional 'myths', such rivalries sometimes had a sound basis in reality. The Ecole Nationale d'Administration of 1848 succumbed to a large part because of the undisguised hostility of the University and the traditional administrative elites.[11] Under the Second Empire, the Conseil d'Etat's role as the final court of appeal against administrative dysfunctions could often lead

[9] Vincent Wright, 'The administrative machine: old problems and new dilemmas', in Peter Hall, Jack Hayward, and Howard Machin (eds.), *Developments in French Politics* (1990), p. 116.
[10] Vincent Wright, 'Les préfets de police pendant le Second Empire: personnalités et problèmes', in Jacques Aubert *et al.*, *L'Etat et sa police en France (1789–1914)* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), p. 102.
[11] Vincent Wright, 'L'Ecole Nationale d'Administration de 1848–49: un échec révélateur, *Revue Historique*, CCLV/1 (1976).

to the quashing of prefectoral decisions and even the annulment of municipal elections—rulings which exasperated and frequently infuriated the Ministry of the Interior.[12] In times of crisis, when resources were scarce and pressures on the administration intensified, these centrifugal tendencies were exacerbated even further. During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1, there were systematic clashes between military authorities and their civilian counterparts (prefects and municipal agents). Under the Vichy regime, the prefects saw their authority undermined by the growing reluctance of most parallel local state agencies to co-operate with them.[13]

Through Wright's portrayal of the French administration, we see that paradoxically (a word he loved using) the state was not as powerful as its critics believed, or even as its Jacobin apologists hoped; its political masters were generally able to maintain overall control over the institution. However this instrumental control (and the fragmentation which accompanied it) had its limits. 'Heroic' attempts to transform state institutions often ended in failure or at the very least in diluted outcomes; and state elites showed considerable capacities of adaptability, flexibility, and even opportunism. There were thus strong elements of institutional continuity—especially at the 'cultural' level—alongside the rifts and schisms which marked the development of the French state. Finally Wright did little to conceal his general sympathy, respect, and even admiration for the state elites he evoked. He often stated that the overall quality of the French administration was much higher in the nineteenth century than that of the British bureaucracy. He recognised that the French state often enacted condemnable policies, and Wright never wavered in his censoriousness when it came to denouncing administrative evil as a general concept—whether the arbitrary brutality of the *Commissions Mixtes* of 1852, the infamous *loi de sureté générale* of 1858, the 'bigotry, narrow mindedness and intolerance'[14] of the early Third Republic, or the deportations organised by Vichy agents. But there was for him always a silver lining—repressive French regimes contained 'liberal' institutions; repressive intentions (and actions) were counteracted by political considerations, social imperatives, and conjunctural factors; local despots such as the Bonapartist prefect Janvier de la Motte were involved in quaint sexual rituals;[15] and if all

[12] *Préfets du Second Empire*, pp. 128–30.
[13] Sonia Mazey and Vincent Wright, 'Les Préfets', in Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (eds.), *Vichy et les Français* (Paris, Fayard, 1992).
[14] Vincent Wright, 'The coup d'état of December 1851: repression and the limits to repression', in Roger Price (ed.), *Revolution and Reaction: 1848 and the Second French Republic* (1975), p. 328.
[15] *Préfets du Second Empire*, p. 260.

else failed he would point out that repressive institutions contained sensitive souls—like the Bonapartist prefect of police Boitelle, a 'discreet and tolerant' man who tried to forget his dastardly deeds by painting his own water colours and smoking exquisite cigars.[16]

Wright's French historical writings also consistently dwelled on the local sphere—a world which he discovered with his doctoral research on the Basses-Pyrénées in the early 1960s, and which instilled in him a love of provincial France which remained with him throughout his life.[17] All the visitors to his country house in the Lot will remember the hospitality which he and his partner Basil Smith lavished upon his guests, and his indomitable attachment to the Quercy *terroir* (and particularly its wonderful culinary delights). Wright's French provincial world was deeply and indeed almost inescapably politicised, but often in ways which did not immediately meet the eye. And for him the real craft of the historian lay in unearthing conflicts which lurked below the tranquil surface of provincial life: family feuds which were in fact expressions of long-standing ideological differences; conflicts about burial rights which were in reality battles between secular and religious systems of values; and administrative measures—such as the closure of an inn—which were underhand attempts to clamp down on a republican *aubergiste*.

But politics in this localised sense was not just a story of a Jacobin state imposing its will on hapless communities: the moral of the tale was indeed often the reverse. Focusing on the local arena was for Wright an important means of bringing out the limits of state power. The pages of the *Préfets du Second Empire* provide countless examples of how the idiosyncracies of a particular locality could fatally undermine the authority of a prefect vested with the most awesome formal powers. 'Thicker' subcultural variables could prove equally frustrating for the potentates of the state: a Bonapartist prefect could do little in a territory dominated by the republican party, and even the most anti-clerical republican prefect had to tread warily if he happened to find himself *en terre Catholique*. Power thins out in space: Wright found that this physical law also applied just as clearly to the political realm.

Wright's emphasis on the sub-national level was also driven by the belief that France's 'collective' experience of politics could not be deduced merely by examining what was occurring at its Parisian epicentre.

[16] *L'Etat et sa police* (op. cit.), p. 92.
[17] The Basses-Pyrénées from 1848 to 1870, a study in departmental politics. (unpublished Ph.D., University of London, 1965).

Although culturally a Jacobin, Wright rejected the Jacobin view of nineteenth-century French history, which depicted the construction of a modern nation-state in terms of the imposition of 'central' social and political values on a passive and backward 'periphery'. For Wright such accounts represented a huge oversimplification (as well as an unacceptable reliance on teleology). The republicans won because their local organisations—especially at municipal level—had already begun to establish the political and ideological basis for republican hegemony in the cities and many of the provincial towns of France during the 1860s. Looking at politics 'from the bottom up' was not a self-indulgent exercise in political archaeology, but an indispensable instrument for making sense of the complex interactions between the national and local spheres.[18]

The study of elites constituted the third, more sociological, aspect of Wright's study of power, alongside and in conjunction with its territorial and institutional aspects. As an historian he showed relatively little interest in the peasantry—a lack of concern which perhaps stemmed from his early immersion in the Basses-Pyrénées, where he found villagers to be relatively 'indifferent' to politics.[19] What fascinated him as a political sociologist was the dialectic between the rulers and the ruled—how each group influenced the other and learned to live with each other. But although he was concerned mostly with elites, he was not exclusively attached to the strong and powerful. He wrote sensitively about the humble victims (mostly from the republican rank-and-file) of the 1851 coup d'état—about the cruelty and suffering endured by those who resisted, the callous lack of social solidarity at local level, the devastatingly brutal impact on their families, and the irreversibly broken lives.[20]

One of Wright's major contributions as an administrative historian was his sociological treatment of bureaucratic elites, which was anchored in a deep-seated belief that the functional powers of the French state (and the limitations upon these powers) could not be explained by formalistic and juridical principles alone. Political and administrative power also stemmed from existing social hierarchies. As his analysis of both the Prefectorate and the Conseil d'Etat showed, a significant proportion of

[18] This theme is developed in Sudhir Hazareesingh and Vincent Wright, 'Le Second Empire: enjeu politique de la commune et la commune comme enjeu politique', in F. Monnier and J-P. Machelon (eds.), *Histoire des communes de France* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2001).

[19] Vincent Wright, 'Députés et conseillers-généraux des Basses-Pyrénées de 1848 à 1870', *Bulletin de la Société des Sciences Lettres et Arts de Pau*, 5 (1970), p. 155.

[20] Guy Thuillier and Vincent Wright, 'Les dossiers des pensionnés du 2 Décembre 1851', *Le Mouvement Social*, 94 (Jan.–March 1976).

recruits from both corps under the Second Empire came from the aristocracy and the *haute bourgeoisie*; conversely only a very small section of the administrative elite came from humble backgrounds. The first general conclusion was thus that there was little evidence of mobility; there were indeed natural sociological limits to the application of the Bonapartist myth of the French state. In Wright's terse formula: 'la conception de l'administration française comme une "carrière ouverte à tous les talents" restait un idéal prêché par beaucoup, chéri par certains, mais mis en pratique seulement par un très petit nombre'.[21] Another important factor limiting the broadening of the social base of the administration was the economic cost of certain offices. For all the *préfets de première classe*, for example, the possession of large personal fortunes was not only desirable but necessary, because of the exorbitant costs of holding office.[22] Closure of another kind was achieved through the maintenance of family networks within and across the higher institutions of the French state. In the Conseil d'Etat there were veritable dynasties, and members of the Council enjoyed close links with families in the Army, the diplomatic corps, the magistracy, and the prefectoral corps.[23] Family networks typically 'reached out into all branches of public life',[24] and thus created an invisible but highly effective method of ensuring continuity of access to high offices for the well-heeled.

Wright's French state was thus *corporatiste* in some senses of the term: institutions possessed distinct and non-overlapping identities, which they fought to maintain (generally successfully); social elites enjoyed privileged access, and in the cases of some families the higher civil service was regarded as a *chasse gardée*. But there were significant factors which also cut across these corporatisms—most notably the purges, which allowed regimes with distinct social bases (such as the republicans in the 1870s and 1880s) to distribute the spoils of office to their clientèle.[25] Wright also found little evidence in the early days of the Third Republic to support the proposition that the French state was covertly penetrated by minority groups and secret corporations. There was thus no 'république protestante'

[21] Howard Machin and Vincent Wright, 'Les élèves de l'E.N.A. de 1848–1849', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, XXXVI (1989), p. 637.
[22] 'Les préfets Emile Ollivier', *Revue Historique*, CCCCLXXXVI (July–Sept. 1968), p. 124.
[23] *Conseil d'Etat*, p. 61.
[24] 'The reorganization of the Conseil d'État', *International Review of Social History*, XIV (1969), p. 188.
[25] 'Les épurations administratives de 1848 à 1885', in Paul Gerbod *et al.* (eds.), *Les épurations administratives XIXe et XXe siècles* (Geneva: Droz, 1977).

in the substantive sense of the term. There were of course protestants who occupied positions of power in the new administrative (and indeed political) order after 1870, but they were internally divided, and whatever little group affinities they possessed were countermanded by political, administrative, and psychological imperatives.[26] Despite the views to the contrary of leading historians of the subject, Wright similarly believed that in broad terms the same phenomenon applied to the French Jews, who could not really be identified as a self-conscious collectivity in the republican bureaucratic elite.[27] He also came to the same 'anti-corporatist' conclusion with regard to Freemasonry, often regarded as the principal occult influence on French republicanism in the 1860s and 1870s. The Government of National Defence of 1870–1 was notoriously viewed as the product of a masonic conspiracy, because several of its leading members (notably Gambetta) were masons, as were many of its appointees to high administrative positions. A closer look, however, suggested that these conjunctions were largely fortuitous, and that there was little personal or ideological solidarity among the fragmented and fissiparous collectivity of Freemasons during these years.[28]

Wright's interpretation of power was strikingly Weberian, in the sense that what emerges from his reading of the French nineteenth century is the extraordinary fluidity of administrative and political rule. Power was not the same as authority, and indeed the formal instruments of governance (institutional rules and principles, laws, coercive instruments) were often not the real sites where power was exercised. Informal networks could be extremely powerful, both at national level (through the penetration of elite administrative institutions) and local level (through the holding of *pouvoir notabilier*).[29] This emphasis on informality also explained Wright's avoidance of the grand theoretical frameworks for explaining power. His reluctance in this respect was a product not only of his inherent scepticism of 'theory' (where the influence of his mentor Oakeshott was very powerful)[30] but also of his consistent commitment to his own brand of methodological individualism. Here again Wright could be seen

[26] Vincent Wright, 'Les protestants dans la haute administration 1870–1885', in *Actes du Colloque Les Protestants dans les débuts de la Troisième République* (Paris, 1979), p. 245.
[27] Vincent Wright, 'La réserve du corps préfectoral', in P. Birnbaum (ed.), *La France de l'Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris, 1993).
[28] Vincent Wright, 'Francs-maçons, Administration et République: les préfets du gouvernement de la Défense Nationale 1870–1871', *Revue Administrative*, CCXXXX–I (Nov.–Dec. 1987 and Jan.–Feb. 1988).
[29] 'Députés et conseillers-généraux des Basses-Pyrénées de 1848 à 1870' (op. cit.), pp. 160–1.
[30] 'The path to hesitant comparison' (op. cit.), pp. 164–5.

as a disciple of Weber; in his social and political explanations he constantly strove to make sense of social and political phenomena in terms of individual actors and their motivations.

Wright's commitment to the complementarity of historical and political enquiry appears forcefully in his scholarly work on the French Freemasonry, which yielded several articles and a posthumously-published book (jointly-authored with Sudhir Hazareesingh), *Francs-Maçons sous le Second Empire*.[31] The French Freemasonry of this period shared many characteristics with Wright's own persona: a fondness for international travel, and for attending conferences; a *penchant* for creating and consolidating networks; a natural tendency towards sociability; a love of *la bonne chère*; and—last but not least—a virulent anticlericalism.

This book also brings together all of Wright's intellectual passions as an historian: the social and political history of provincial France in the nineteenth century; the relationship between the state and local associations; the interface between political and social elites at the local level (and especially the roles played by the ever-present *notables*); and the territorial dissemination of the influence of the republican party. *Francs-Maçons sous le Second Empire* is based on an exhaustive trawl of administrative and Masonic archives in Paris and in the provinces. The interface with Masonic officialdom gave rise to some comical encounters, most notably when Wright succeeded in convincing the archivist of the Grande Loge Nationale in Paris that 'Nuffield' was the name of a British Masonic lodge. The book challenges the principal myths concerning the Masonry—namely that it was merely a united and disinterested philanthropic organisation (the 'internal' myth); that it was a perpetual conspiracy against all forms of established order (the Catholic myth, first propounded by Abbé Barruel in 1797); and finally that the Masonry of the 1860s and 1870s was merely a recruitment centre for the republican party (the republican historiographical myth).

The archival evidence reveals a far more complex picture. The provincial Masonry was unevenly represented across France, and the Lodges themselves took on a variety of forms in different localities—here purely philanthropic and apolitical, there proto-republican, but elsewhere strongly penetrated by liberal or Bonapartist *notables*. The Masonry was also deeply divided, and the provincial brothers often fought bitter battles

[31] Sudhir Hazareesingh and Vincent Wright, *Francs-Maçons sous le Second Empire: les loges provinciales du Grand-Orient à la veille de la Troisième République* (Collection Carnot) (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001).

with each other over personal, social, ideological, and religious issues. In overall terms *Francs-Maçons sous le Second Empire* underscores the sheer plasticity of the nineteenth-century French masonry—a useful quality which enabled the institution to survive through a period of great political and ideological turmoil in French national politics.

Both implicitly and explicitly, the book makes a powerful statement of the complementarity of historical and political-science research. The Freemasonry of the Second Empire and early Third Republic offers a privileged object of study for some of the core questions which Wright believed should interest political scientists: how institutions shape behaviour and mediate conflict, and how they may retain loyalty under conditions of stress. *Francs-Maçons sous le Second Empire* also returns repeatedly to one of Wright's favourite themes both as an administrative historian and political scientist: the limits of positivism. The formal rules governing membership of the Masonry were extremely rigid and centralised during this period, and the Parisian authorities of the Grand Orient de France made repeated attempts to bring their provincial brethren under hierarchical control. But the rules they codified often had limited application in the different corners of the French *hexagone*. Indeed the 'operational code' of the Masonry was an entirely unreliable guide to the manner in which power was really exercised within the institution. This again brings out the importance of the Weberian conclusions about power, namely that its formal and juridical character is often its least significant dimension, and that its reality often lies in its less tangible aspects. In the Masonry as elsewhere, the formal instruments of governance were often not the real means through which political and intellectual power was exercised. Informal networks—such as those based on family traditions, cultural affinities, or social authority—could be extremely powerful, bypassing and overriding the powers of established cadres.

Francs-Maçons sous le Second Empire ultimately provides an ideal testing ground for the limits of theoretical models in explaining social and political realities—another favourite theme in Wright's scholarly work both in history and in political science. The French Freemasonry during this period offers little comfort to the advocates of rational choice explanations of individual and collective strategies. Rather than an all-knowing rational maximising self-interest, the archival evidence finds masonic behaviour to be grounded in a complex admixture of reason, interest, emotion, tribalism, and affective memories. Wright's legendary scepticism about macro-theoretical explanations (and rational choice models in particular), which permeated his work in political science, was

thus reinforced by the conclusions he reached in his historical explorations across nineteenth-century France.

Bertrand Russell described the happy man as he who is neither pitted against himself nor divided against the world. Such was Vincent Wright: although he was pulled in different directions he was always able to channel these intellectual conflicts and tensions into creatively successful outcomes. He thus left us with a vivid, humane, and highly individual account of nineteenth-century France. His knowledge of the French terrain was extraordinary, and it was a delight to accompany him on a trip to any part of the country, whether rural or urban. He was always eager to make new discoveries, to track down local monuments and archives, and get to the heart of whatever issues were confronting a locality. Like all good historians he genuinely empathised with the objects of his research; indeed he sometimes said that if he could have had a different life he would have loved to have been a (republican) Prefect. But with Wright one often felt that there was something more—that he could reach into their souls, and bring out into the open the wonderful complexities (and sometimes absurdities) of their existence.

One of the most attractive features of his personality was his free spirit, and his absolute refusal to be bound by social, institutional, or academic convention. 'I would rather clean windows than be Warden of Nuffield' he once remarked at a dinner he hosted in Paris, among whose guests was the then head of his college. There was also a serious aspect to his independence of temperament. What made Wright a superb historian was that he was doubly an outsider, constrained neither by disciplinary shackles within France (or for that matter anywhere else) nor by the tacit accommodations often necessitated by physical propinquity. He also wasted no time with all the fads which have seized the historical confraternity in recent decades, such as 'cultural' history ('the history of shitting' was the savage description he once gave of some aspects of this endeavour).

As a political scientist in Oxford, he was completely free to follow his historical inclinations, and in particular to give a free rein to his natural instincts towards intellectual heterodoxy. He revelled in the subversion of orthodoxy, at times indeed stretching this trait to the point of provocation. But his bold revisionism helped to revolutionise our understanding of the French state in the nineteenth century, and his studies of the Prefects and the Conseil d'Etat under the Second Empire will long retain their classic status among French historians. Wright thus belongs to that extremely small group of distinguished non-native historians—Richard Cobb, Theodore Zeldin, Robert Paxton are others who spring to mind—

who successfully established themselves in France during their lifetime as authoritative figures in their particular historical fields. There can perhaps be no more fitting tribute to his extraordinary talents than to remember that Wright achieved this feat while effectively holding down a job in an altogether different discipline, in which his achievements were equally remarkable.

The Comparative Categorisation of Untidy Reality

Resolutely shunning synthetic generalisations based upon spurious over-simplifications, Wright was not content simply to fall back upon the re-assuring singularities of historical description. While the subject matter was complex, explanation necessitated recourse to analytic conceptual categories. Although he retained a historically-sensitive allergy to models and a reluctance to let methodological concerns dictate the problems to be investigated, as a social scientist he accepted the challenge that model building and methodological rigour posed. So, while conceding that 'comparison and history are intrinsically ill-suited partners', he did not allow the historian's 'ingrained scepticism' and eye for detail to paralyse his concurrent work on comparative politics.[32] In fact, the two sides of his research were interdependent. His historical work protected him from the universalising fallacies which some political scientists have sought to import from economics—which Richard Rose calls 'landless theory'—while his comparative politics protected him from the historian's tendency to assume uniqueness.[33] Vincent Wright's systematic analyses combined the respect for national and sub-national diversity with the circumspect use of generic concepts capable of crossing national borders. He adopted what Richard Rose has dubbed a 'bounded variability' that avoided accumulating 'empirical data that will sink under its own weight'.[34]

Stylistically, Wright's splitter's predilection for stressing diversity means that his writings are replete with words such as complexity and cleavage, tension and dissension, variety and fluidity, diffuseness and

[32] Vincent Wright, 'The Path to Hesitant Comparison', in H. Daalder (ed.), p. 176. One may consider that Vincent Wright was too ready to concede the incapacity of political scientists to do creative work in comparative political history. The names of Sammy Finer, Stein Rokkan and Charles Tilly, among others, come to mind.
[33] Rose, R., 'Comparing Forms of Comparative Analysis', *Political Studies*, XXXIX/3 (1991), p. 452.
[34] Ibid., pp. 447, 448.

chaos, incrementalism and fragmentation, precariousness and fragility, contradiction, competition and confrontation. It is also reflected in the enumeration of impressively long checklists that are a distinctive feature of his attempts to avoid glib generalisations. However, while he was insistent on the need to particularise, Wright showed, first in the case of France and then in his more explicitly comparative work, that a superficial knowledge might rigidly separate what a more profound awareness could reunite. Paradoxically, Wright ultimately minimised the peculiarity all too frequently attributed and self-attributed to French politics by showing that when one descends to the detailed cases of what actually happens, French practice is not so different from that of other countries as French principles would lead one to believe. As such, it is a salutary corrective to a culturalist emphasis on what is irreducibly special and reunites the study of politics after appearing to dismember it. Thus, the impulse towards systematic comparison existed implicitly in his single country work, becoming capable of incorporation as a case study because it was intrinsically comparable. As we shall see, it was only in his later work that Wright accepted that the systematic comparison of a limited number of West European countries meant starting, as Rose puts it, from 'the logic of a matrix'.

Wright preferred to initiate and edit most of his comparative work in collaboration. Given the need to mobilise a vast amount of information from a range of countries and his concern that only a specialist could be relied upon to have access to the detailed data and the understanding of how to evaluate it, there was a great temptation to recruit a team rather than undertake the work himself. However, it was also consistent with his inductive type of analysis, with the capacity to generalise coming at the end rather than at a beginning. To pull the various contributions together, not merely the conclusion but the introduction to the edited book or special issue of a journal had to await the findings of the others. Wright preferred to run the risk of a loss of overall coherence. To avoid the whole becoming less than the sum of the parts, Wright's own contribution would seek to compensate for the divergences between authors by incorporating as much as possible of their diversity into his comprehensive comparative analysis. The resulting complexity underlined the fact that the truth is seldom simple once it is subjected to close investigation.

Vincent Wright described the LSE Government Department (he was always keener on 'government' rather than politics as a focus) as his 'intellectual home'.[35] Rather than William Robson (who commissioned his *The*

[35] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 164.

Government and Politics of France) it was Michael Oakeshott who was acknowledged by Wright as the sceptical intellectual influence upon him, first as a student and later as a colleague. France was taught by William Pickles (he delivered the lectures and Dorothy wrote the textbooks) and it was he who aroused Vincent Wright's lifelong preoccupation with France and encouraged him to engage in postgraduate studies in France. It was by his personal example that Bill Pickles reinforced Wright's 'instinctive dislike for the pompous and pretentious . . . intellectual scepticism' and 'pugnacious and argumentative style'.[36] It was to Dorothy and William Pickles that he gratefully dedicated *The Government and Politics of France*.

Macro-politics from above: the view from Paris

Before publishing his general book on France in 1978, Wright—who in 1969 had returned to LSE—showed himself ready to generalise about the contemporary French politico-administrative system. With a self-assurance born of close contact with thoughtful state officials, as well as his solid grounding in administrative history, Wright successfully challenged in a highly influential article the view that senior civil servants occupied a hegemonic position in the French Fifth Republic. He forcefully made six points, of which three can be picked out. First, the Gaullist Republic had no consistent theory of administration because its proponents 'could not decide whether the basic aim of their measures was to make the administration more autonomous, more efficient, more subordinate or more democratic'.[37] Second, 'the French civil service is particularly prone to internal tensions and dissensions', between and within fragmented ministries.[38] Third, the politicisation of the senior civil service was not new and had been both exaggerated and oversimplified.

Wright used the insight into the workings of the French state provided by his historical perspective to show that 'the political and administrative traditions accumulate and survive in unhappy and precarious balance'.[39] Combining *Ancien Régime*, Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic, parlia-

[36] Howard Machin and Vincent Wright (eds.), *Economic Policy and Policy Making under the Mitterrand Presidency, 1981–84* (1985), p. ix.
[37] Vincent Wright, 'Politics and Administration in the Fifth French Republic', *Political Studies*, XXII/1 (1974), p. 50; cf. 51–2.
[38] Ibid., p. 52; cf. 53–5.
[39] Ibid., p. 63.

mentary and post-parliamentary sedimentations, 'it is a world composed of entrenched traditions, half-remembered rules and conveniently forgotten stipulations, of complicity and conflict, ideological clashes and masonic collusions, political chicanery and petty administrative corruption, personal rivalries and political alliances, unabashed self-interest and embarrassing idealism, compromising commitments and watchful opportunism, unforgivable cowardice and praiseworthy courage, naked ambition and calculated disinterest. It is a highly *personalized*, complex and confused world, rendered difficult to analyse and defiant of comparison by the unceasing interplay of irritating human imponderables.'[40] Wright ends by ridiculing the 'adepts of overarching theories of comparative administration, those unrepentant builders of models' whose ranks he was still refusing to join in 1974.[41]

The Government and Politics of France generalised this analysis by a Jacobin fearful of the fissiparous tendencies that were persistently turning the myth of a 'One and Indivisible Republic' into the reality of a dissensual and divided one. Wright's self-proclaimed 'Jacobinism' was exacerbated precisely by the fear that, despite its arrogant pretensions, the centre might not hold. Having demythologised the claims of the French state to omnipotence and omnicompetance, he proceeded to hand out lessons in modesty which prompted in his informed French audience an unsuspected masochism as this verbally sadistic foreigner held up for their contemplation a mirror in which they recognised familiar features which they refused to make explicit. 'Power is diffused' with the government resembling 'a huge Byzantine court riddled with feuding factions', interacting or mutually avoiding each other at the centre of 'a chaos of decision-makers', 'enmeshed in a concatenation of competing and contradictory forces . . . and if they are not always the helpless spectators of the fate of their country . . . their freedom of action is often singularly limited' by history and the outside world.[42]

While Wright was at this stage more inclined to Franco-French comparison, indeed suggesting—in words that mock the habitual examination question—that there was 'more to compare than to contrast'

[40] Vincent Wright, 'Politics and Administration in the Fifth French Republic', *Political Studies*, XXII/1 (1974), p. 65.

[41] Ibid., p. 65. By 1990, in a chapter on 'The Administrative Machine: Old Problems and New Dilemmas', Wright would structure his argument around 'The Napoleonic Model of Administration' and 'The Distortion of the Napoleonic Model', chap. 6, in Peter Hall, Jack Hayward, and Howard Machin (eds.), *Developments in French Politics* (Basingstoke, 1990).

[42] Vincent Wright, *The Government and Politics of France*, 1st edn. (1978), pp. 231–2.

between the Fourth and Fifth Republics' in their susceptibility to 'fitful and supine incrementalism',[43] he was prepared to extrapolate his comparison much further. His visceral scepticism led him to assert that in a world of perpetual flux (with much of it remaining in darkness, while most of the rest is impenetrably complex) the political analyst was hard put to locate where and by whom decisions were being taken.[44] One could be forgiven for despairing to the point of being deterred from engaging in so hazardous an investigation but Vincent Wright regarded the difficulties as a challenge to intellectual ingenuity rather than an alibi for defeatism.

At a time when it was customary to stress the omnipotence of the President of the Fifth Republic, Wright characteristically emphasised that 'he is enmeshed in a complex web of personal, historical, constitutional and political restrictions'.[45] Even before the 1986 advent of 'cohabitation' between an adversarial President and Prime Minister—a situation that Wright later called 'cohabitension'—he stressed that presidential power 'rests on precarious constitutional and political foundations . . . which may not last'.[46] Even when the Prime Minister and most ministers were selected by the President 'there has emerged around the President a system of institutionalised tension, not only between them[47] but also between his staff and theirs, between Prime Minister and the other ministers as well as among them and with their junior ministers'. Wright pointed out that while such tension damaged policy co-ordination and could result in vacillation or paralysis, it avoided the 'stultifying search for consensus' that he detected in pre-Thatcherite Britain.[48]

Wright catalogued the fragmentation, not only of the political and administrative executive but also the parties and parliament, rejecting the claims of the latter's Fourth Republic omnipotence and its Fifth Republic impotence. In the case of French pressure groups, he was not content with a simple dichotomy but presented four models . . . only to argue that 'all are inadequate and somewhat simplistic in their explanations'; saying of one of them that 'like most models, it raises more questions than it answers, and it is too neat and too selective in its choice of facts to con-

[43] Vincent Wright, *The Government and Politics of France*, 1st ed. (1978), p. 230, 232; cf. 106.
[44] Ibid., p. 231.
[45] Ibid., p. 227; cf. 228–9.
[46] Ibid., p. 57; cf. Vincent Wright, 'The President and the Prime Minister: Subordination, Conflict, Symbiosis and Reciprocal Parasitism?', in J. Hayward (ed.), *De Gaulle to Mitterrand. Presidential Power in France* (1993), chap. 4.
[47] *The Government and Politics of France*, p. 80; cf. 81–2.
[48] Ibid., p. 83.

vey the full complexity of the situation'.[49] Going on to describe 'the untidy reality' in all its complexity with delectation, Wright concluded: 'In short, the relationship between the state and the groups during the Fifth Republic is like the rest of government—infinitely complex and intrinsically untidy.'[50]

Wright was unduly dismissive of his 'textbook' (not all of which are born free and equal), which he only reluctantly updated,[51] preferring to concentrate upon first-hand research that did not force him to make generalisations and even implicit cross-national comparisons that still made him feel uncomfortable. Believing as he did that reality was always shifting, he did not relish the unending pursuit of a description and analysis that reduced a dynamic process to a misleadingly static picture. He preferred instead to reiterate that 'the biggest decision-maker in any political system is the past'[52] and was later to look with favour on the approach theorised as 'historical institutionalism' which he had been unconsciously practising for many years. However, further staging posts in his successive approximations to explicit reconciliation with comparison were necessary before a reluctant and minimalist theorist would be willing to accept some sacrifice of his intellectual scruples and enduring reservations.

Bilateral and circumscribed comparison

Vincent Wright explained his concurrent 1970s ventures into comparison in part by 'the constant stream of invitations to lecture in French universities on British politics, which forced me into constant, if largely implicit, Franco-British comparison. These invitations extended my contact to that tiny band of French academics who were beginning to be interested in explicit comparison.'[53] This led him to co-edit a book on *Local Government in Britain and France*, which did not attempt to conceal 'the revealing fact that different approaches to apparently similar subjects betray the differing preoccupations and priorities of France and Britain'.[54]

[49] *The Government and Politics of France*, pp. 174, 176.
[50] Ibid., p. 198; cf. 185–7.
[51] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 168.
[52] *The Government and Politics of France*, pp. 229–30.
[53] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 168.
[54] Jacques Lagroye and Vincent Wright, (eds.), *Local Government in Britain and France: Problems and Prospects* (1979).

More ambitiously, in February 1978 appeared the first issue of *West European Politics*, the brainchild of Vincent Wright and Gordon Smith, his LSE colleague in the Government Department. Mutual empathy led them first to create a Master's degree in West European Politics and then the journal. 'It reflected Vincent's approach to comparative politics via the best inductive route: an initial comprehensive grounding in the study of a single country, from bottom to top and then from top to bottom.'[55] Smith's German specialism and Wright's French specialism were extended and expanded pragmatically in latitudinarian fashion. In retrospect, Wright was fully entitled to confess: '*West European Politics* remains an object of some pride: its breadth, eclecticism and accessibility, its openness to young academics (and even to research students), convey, however unwittingly, a plea for pluralism and tolerance within the European comparative politics community.'[56]

The year 1984 saw the publication of an edited book (to which he contributed a third of the content): *Continuity and Change in France*, in which continuity of the Mitterrand presidency was emphasised institutionally, in its personnel and in its policies. 'The Socialists may claim that they are inaugurating a new régime but, in truth, they are merely strengthening the existing one.'[57] While his heart was not in electoral analysis, he demonstrated that he could undertake it with both the comprehensive clarity and mastery of detail that he showed with more enthusiasm in his studies of administration and public policy. He also attached great importance to the personality of political leaders as a contingent factor that discouraged attaching undue weight to the forces of anonymous determinism. His ability to sum up an important politician in a lapidary pen portrait is flamboyantly evident in the extended introduction to this volume. On the Right, Prime Minister Barre was described as 'a pragmatic liberal with a dogmatic style',[58] while Giscard's 'attenuated liberalism' masked 'the progressive transformation of President Giscard d'Estaing from an enlightened reformer into an apprehensive conservative'.[59] On the Left, Prime Minister Mauroy was 'conciliatory, jovial, extrovert, overtly political and avuncular',[60] while President Mitterrand

[55] Jack Hayward, 'Incomparable Comparatist. Vincent Wright, 1937–1999', *West European Politics*, 22/4 (1999), p. i.
[56] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 169.
[57] Vincent Wright (ed.), *Continuity and Change in France* (1984), p. 67; cf. 64–74.
[58] Ibid., p. 18; cf. 35–6.
[59] Ibid., p. 18; cf. 14–17.
[60] Ibid., p. 53.

was 'better as a manoeuvrer than as a manager'.[61] He concluded his 1984 review of the 1981 change of president: 'François Mitterrand inherited from his predecessor a long list of problems, broken promises and unsolved contradictions. The early evidence suggests that he may bequeath his successor with a similar record.'[62] Events were to show that Vincent Wright's scepticism was well directed.

A year later, *Economic Policy and Policy Making under the Mitterrand Presidency*, subjected a pivotal u-turn to searching criticism and heralded an increasing concern with political economy that would take a more comparative turn after nationalisation gave way to privatisation, following the Socialist new love affair with big firms. Owing to an 'overestimation of the potential of the public sector as an instrument of *dirigisme*' further nationalisation did not provide the leverage over industry anticipated, partly because government control was often ineffective and the firms were financially weak: frequently 'vast, fragile and incoherent holding companies'.[63] 'This post-1981 complex Hapsburgian industrial mosaic of some 4,300 firms, employing 2,400,000 people in France (or 22 per cent of the industrial workforce) and 24,000 abroad' exacerbated problems.[64] As a result, 'the processes of decision making accentuated the disjointed, reactive, confused, piecemeal, contradictory and often irrational nature of the decisions'.[65] Although none of this was new, the Left's ambitions made matters worse. 'In 1982, there were no fewer than 300 industrial policy mechanisms, 150 different procedures for aid to industry (including sixteen different categories of help for exports, eleven for boosting employment and eight for energy and saving)' so that piecemeal intervention frustrated the claims to planning.[66] Wright was to return to these problems in a comparative context when first privatisation and then core executive co-ordination were subjected to searching analysis.

The subject of 'The Politics of Privatisation in Western Europe' was chosen for a conference that led to the publication of a tenth anniversary special issue of *West European Politics*.[67] Edited by Vincent Wright with his Nuffield colleague, John Vickers, it was the political scientist rather

[61] Vincent Wright (ed.), *Continuity and Change in France* (1984), p. 42; cf. 43.
[62] Ibid, p.75.
[63] Howard Machin and Vincent Wright, pp. 17, 21; cf. 23.
[64] Ibid., p. 20.
[65] Ibid., p. 17.
[66] Ibid., p. 11; cf. 10–16.
[67] John Vickers and Vincent Wright (eds.), 'The Politics of Privatisation in Western Europe', *West European Politics*, 11/4 (1988).

than the economist who played the leading role. As Wright subsequently explained the choice:

> privatization is a gold mine for political scientists, for it raises profound philosophical and moral questions about property rights, about the concept of the state and of the nature of public goods, and about the balance between state, market and society. For public policy specialists, it provides valuable material for analysing well-known phenomena, ranging from policy diffusion and policy reversal to policy slippage and policy fiasco, as well as enabling the testing of rational choice theory, theories of regulation, interest group theory, and approaches based on policy networks and policy communities. My own interest in privatization is twofold. Firstly, as with public-sector reform generally, I am interested in the unintended and paradoxical nature of the reform programmes. Secondly, as a comparatist, I am interested in explaining the differences in the privatization programmes.[68]

The 1988 anniversary issue is concerned with the shift towards the policy preferences of profit-seeking entrepreneurs from the budget-maximising bureaucrats and vote-maximising politicians that had been the preoccupation of political scientists, and signposted a research focus that remained active until Vincent Wright's death.

Against the marketising mania that had taken hold in the 1990s, Wright suggested that 'we may be witnessing less the process of state retreat than of state reshaping'.[69] This became the subject of a special issue of *West European Politics*, co-edited with Wolfgang Müller. American political scientists belatedly decided from the mid-1980s to bring back the state they had unceremoniously expelled from the behavioural analysis of politics, while from the mid-1970s, European political scientists were empirically downgrading the role of the state, victim simultaneously of domestic overload and European integration. In their generalising introduction to 'The State in Western Europe: Retreat or Redefinition?' Müller and Wright identified five major interconnected pressures combining to reduce the role of states. They were ideological, political (including public opinion), international, European Union and technological. More specifically in a characteristic Wright enumeration,

> state retreat may be seen in the adoption of a wide range of policies: budgetary squeeze; privatization (a multi-dimensional phenomenon); deregulation (which ranges from the removal of controls to the reduction in administrative formalities); marketisation (the introduction of competitive market forces to some sectors to replace bureaucratic systems of allocation); devolution of state authority

[68] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 173.
[69] Vincent Wright (ed.), *Privatization in Western Europe* (1994), p. 40; cf. 1–43.

> to non-elected state officials at the territorial level, in public sector industries or in semi-autonomous administrative agencies, or to private agents charged with the implementation of public policy; territorial decentralisation to sub-national 'governments'.[70]

In his personal contribution on 'Reshaping the State: the implications for public administration', Wright insisted that 'each West European country has a unique blend of factors which explains persistent divergences in spite of clear evidence of convergence. In short, national contexts matter'.[71] Specificities could not simply be submerged under generalities.

Vincent Wright returned to this theme in his 1997 introduction to the special issue of *Modern and Contemporary France*. Asking whether we were witnessing the end of *dirigisme*, he 'emphasised that, *in comparative terms* [his emphasis], extensive *dirigisme* was a distinctive feature of the French system'.[72] However, he pointed out that '*dirigisme* was probably always more powerful as a rhetorical mobilising device and as a pervasive myth—hence the persistent nostalgia for a politically constructed golden age—than as a strategy or coherent set of matching policies. In truth, the French model masked a messy reality in which public and private intertwined, in which private interests were often more powerful than public actors, in which the latter were fragmented and divided, in which macro- and micro-economic objectives were frequently in conflict, and in which "industrial policy" was inconsistent and sometimes incoherent, reactive and defensive rather than proactive and strategic. . . .'[73] However, 'the state has retained its role as travelling *salesman* (and is especially active in France's important arms trade), as *advocate* (in trade negotiations and in the EU generally), as *regulator*, and as *cushion* for its companies (through tax relief, subsidies, grants, research contracts, export aid, and public procurement and various ill-concealed protectionist devices) . . . In short, *dirigisme* has been transformed, but this had entailed neither the end of the state nor of French exceptionalism.'[74] What Wright described as his 'instinctive and intellectual Jacobinism (which survived the years of mindless centralisation in my own country)',[75] achieved a more landless, theoretical and comparative formulation in the 'new institutionalism',

[70] Wolfgang Müller and Vincent Wright (eds.), 'The State in Western Europe: Retreat or Redefinition?', *West European Politics*, 17/3 (1994), p. 8.
[71] 'The State in Western Europe', p. 122.
[72] Vincent Wright 'La fin du dirigisme', *Modern and Contemporary France*, V/2 (May 1997), p. 151.
[73] Ibid., p. 151.
[74] Ibid., pp. 152–3.
[75] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 194.

particularly in its historical institutionalist variant, which became the final resting place for this tireless champion of the resurgent state.

The Historical Institutionalist Reconciliation: the empirical analysis of inertial reality

In his last, posthumously published contribution to *West European Politics* (a special issue on 'The Changing French Political System', a project that he supported from its inception) Vincent Wright expressed his pleasure that 'Political scientists have once again become more interested in institutions, and even at last, in the law. It is now generally accepted that individual and group preferences are embedded in and shaped by institutions, an historically-forged amalgam of bodies, rules, procedures, norms, customs, rites, which generates its own conventions, path dependencies and notions of appropriateness.'[76] While common to all West European countries, this was especially true of France, as he had shown in his work on bureaucratic reform. However, when it came to explaining cross-national differences in privatisation programmes, 'Historical institutionalism is without doubt a good explanatory starting point, but my research suggests two caveats. The first is that in an area such as privatization institutionalism needs to be extended beyond the already broad category of political and governmental institutions, conventions, rules, customs, prejudices, instincts and culture, in order to embrace economic and financial institutions . . . The second caveat relates to the growing impact of the cumulative and intense pressures of an economic, ideological, political, financial and technological nature—some international or European Union in character, others purely domestic—that are sweeping aside some of the impediments rooted in historically-embedded institutionalism.'[77] The 'indispensable bedmates' of history and political science[78] were proving to be turbulently inclined to tumble each other out of bed.

Vincent Wright was persuaded, partly as a result of his increasing encounters with American political science in its non-rational choice manifestations, to countenance the use of theoretical frameworks, but

[76] Vincent Wright, 'The Fifth Republic: From the *Droit de l'Etat* to the *Etat de Droit*', in R. Elgie (ed.), *The Changing French Political System* (2000), p. 92.
[77] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), p. 174.
[78] Ibid., p. 172.

being allergic to abstraction, he did so in a highly circumspect manner. He acknowledged in particular the influence of Peter Hall, James March, Johan Olsen, and Guy Peters in the final approximation to a theorised cross-national comparison. It was the ultimate stage in an ongoing dialectic between the 'intellectual indolence' of confinement to historical singularity and the intellectual exertions of generic conceptual frameworks providing guidelines to bounded variability.[79] Thus, of one of several unfinished ambitious pieces of research, 'Governing from the Centre: Core Executive Policy Co-ordination', a six country comparative project that adopted the comparative 'logic of the matrix' referred to earlier, Wright could not refrain from declaring: 'As with all comparative work, an apparently straightforward project, based on a relatively simple matrix, quickly ran into a methodological and definitional quagmire . . .'[80] from which it has, fortunately been possible to re-emerge, if not unscathed.

Vincent Wright was a towering figure in the study of comparative politics, where one's personal contribution is more especially a function of a capacity to collaborate and learn with others. He had an exceptional ability to bring out the best in others by provocative intellectual interaction. His unselfish singularity was to find its full embodiment in the multiplier of collective effort. Bridging as he did the humanities and the social sciences, he found a natural home in the British Academy, to which he was elected in 1995, serving in its Overseas Policy Committee.

An insatiable intellectual curiosity in exploring differences comparatively provided the motivating impetus to Vincent Wright's many sided activities as a committed political scientist. To the end, Vincent Wright remained willing to pay the price in complexity of exerting a grip on political reality. In the tireless task of tidying up reality, he was finally prepared to work with matrices and models, at least as points of departure. His typologies clarified without simplifying because tidiness came second to authenticity. The dialectical clash of interpretative thesis and antithesis of strategic interaction in shaping political outcomes was more important than building an ephemeral synthesis.

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[79] Vincent Wright in Daalder (ed.), pp. 173, 176.
[80] Ibid., p. 175. See Jack Hayward and Vincent Wright, *Governing from the Centre. Core Executive Coordination in France* (Oxford, 2002).