Paul Griffiths, *Information, Institutions, and Local Government in England, 1550-1700: Turning Inside*, Oxford UP, 2024, xx + 341 pp.

The ‘turning inside’ of Griffiths’ title refers to governors preferring keeping the flow of information and discussion of government internal to their circles over the public display of authority: a shift from open to closed systems of management when taking on a variety of governmental functions. The closed system did not replace the open, but these styles of government came to live uneasily alongside one another, and proved capable of pulling in opposite directions. The turning inside was characteristic of quite well-known phenomena, such as the use of Bridewell or the increasing importance of surveillance, but has not previously attracted such direct attention as a phenomenon in and of itself. As with all Griffiths’ work, the book is deeply researched and at the same time innovative and stimulating.

There is a growing body of work in this vein, exploring the sociology of knowledge and communication in governance—but like the best work of this kind Griffiths does not neglect the older historiography on the state—dealing with sociologies of class, age and gender for example. In fact, Griffiths is centrally concerned with how ambitions for social discipline intertwined with these new practices of government. It is not only an example of an archaeological approach to the archive—a body of material remains that is in itself revealing of a social process, regardless of the words it actually contains—but a study of the interaction of that process with others—notably the response of the middling sort to increasing social polarisation.

His starting point is the ‘animated localism that was amplified, not impaired, by the State’, and which ‘trained thoughts on the most effective ways to govern’ (7). The ‘turning inside’, occurred as governors became more self-consciously interested in information, its analysis and management, rather than the public ‘manifestation’ of their authority. It is not a story simply of the formation of the archive, therefore, but also of what the archive-makers were responding to: ‘A more questioning eye crossed towns and villages to weigh up more effective options to run local government in challenging times’ (7).

The book falls into 5 chapters: (mys)precyson, manifestaccon, punishment, institutions, information. Griffiths sees a new emphasis on ‘precyson’ in understanding and ordering the social world, and an enhanced hostility to misprecyson. Middling sort governors, primarily in urban settings, are shown in anxious and frustrated attempts to establish clear understandings, categorisations and definitions on relation to social order, in their practice and in their records. This concern for precision had implications for handling the risks of manifestaccon—how the public representation of authority might fail, or misfire. The third chapter charts a similar anxiety in relation to public punishments. Difficulties of achieving precision in these contexts help to explain the appeal of

carceral punishments—turning inside, to private settings, allowed greater precision in punishment and reform. The principle exemplar of this is the Bridewell, a national network of institutions in which the work of reform could be conducted effectively, but it was also manifest in the punishment of petty crime more generally. The final chapter explores how an ambition for precision was at work in the formation and policing of the archive—the information systems on which this turning inside depended. A coda reprises the argument and points to its broader significance.

Griffiths makes an intervention on the history of state formation, which under Keith Wrightson's inspiration emphasised the role of the middling sorts, but which paid scant attention to, or took for granted, these practices of government. He also acknowledges the family resemblance to Foucault, although he discounts Foucault for his weak understanding of early modern penal thought and for his exclusive interest in capital punishment: together these weaknesses produce both a grave chronological error and a misunderstanding of penal history.

The book is more than this though: an original and thought-provoking study in a maturing field. Griffiths acknowledges other work on the 'information state', notably by Nicholas Popper, whose own major study appeared almost at the same time but which is focussed on the records of national government. There is also a growing body of work in related areas, such as the use of print, or the emergence of population thinking and surveillance: the sociology of information systems employed in government and their associated epistemologies. Griffiths' book is a major contribution to this growing field and will be a key point of reference for any attempt to make overall sense of the changing practices of governance across this period.

Michael Braddick
All Souls College, Oxford