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The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration

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Extrait de l'article

A generation ago a new view of French absolutism became the accepted orthodoxy. According to this view, the king ruled by collaborating with socially powerful elites — at court, in Paris and in the provinces. Government was characterized by compromise, negotiation, and sharing of resources in a manner which maintained and supported hierarchical differences. This approach replaced an older formulation dating all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville, according to which the Bourbon monarchs had laid the foundations for the modern state by reducing the nobility to obedience and beginning a process of national unification. The dominant paradigm thus shifted from a centralizing, modernizing monarch to a king maintaining and defending a traditional society.

While the social, collaborative model still prevails, cracks are appearing in this edifice. Most recent studies are questioning aspects of the interpretation, and one recent author, John Hurt, even calls for a more drastic shift of focus : 'Few historians today believe that there was anything very "absolute" about what was once reflexively called the absolute monarchy', he complains, and goes on to state, 'I do think that we have pushed the revisionist thesis beyond its appropriate limits, possibly because we have given up looking for evidence that contradicts it'.¹ Clearly the time has come for a reassessment of the evidence, and a number of important new studies provide the occasion.

The traditional view was grounded in the authoritative French works of Georges Pagès and Roland Mousnier, and in a [End Page 195] variety of other studies in English and French. By contrast, social collaboration has been a distinctively Anglophone preoccupation. There is no obvious explanation for this divergence of approaches, in which the social consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s was channelled by the French into studies of regional societal systems following the lead of Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and the Annales School, while English-speaking authors directed their social concerns towards a deepening of political history instead of abandoning the événementiel. It is only recently that the French have begun to join the discussion and take account of works written in English. One example is the alert, well-informed discussion by Fanny Cosandey and Robert Descimon.

Let me note at the outset that the present discussion concerns the practice of governance, not the theory of absolutism, for it was in practice that the king collaborated. There is little dispute concerning the theory that the king had absolute authority, that is, authority unchecked by any institutional body. His reach was limited only by religion, conscience and [End Page 196] the fundamental laws of the realm. But what could he really do ? I propose to summarize the varieties of 'collaborative' positions and then consider whether new research should cause us to rethink this current orthodoxy.

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