# Zur Forschungsgeschichte und Methodendiskussion

JEROEN DUINDAM

## 1661: A TURNING POINT OF MONARCHY?
## THE FRENCH EXAMPLE IN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE*

## Introduction

French history occupies a special place in the historiography of Europe. The growth of the modern state, in particular, has frequently been presented mostly through French examples, replicated in various forms at various moments elsewhere in Western Europe. England has usually served as France's opposite number; its political development seemed to indicate a wholly different direction: a strengthening of the parliament instead of a disappearing *états généraux*; ›mixed monarchy‹ instead of absolute rule, and finally, a steady evolution towards modern democracy from 1689 onwards instead of a revolutionary downfall of the old order. In both countries, historians have long cherished the respective reputations of their fatherlands – leading to a strong *whig*-historiography in England and to a curious mixture of idealization of monarchical splendour as well as revolutionary zeal in France. The Holy Roman Empire offered less attractive a focus for national historians in its successor states. A multitude of baroque courts under nominal Habsburg suzerainty, undermined by French ›protection‹ of Germanic liberties – this seemed the antithesis of a vital national state. The Peace of Westphalia conveniently served as an ›end‹ of the old empire, and a starting point for the development of strong territorial states, most notably Prussia and a new Austria based not on the Empire but on the expanding Habsburg hereditary lands.

The heritage of nineteenth century ›national‹ historiography has been challenged, to different degrees, by historians in most countries. German historians have criticized ›Borussian‹ historiography focused heavily on the rise of Prussia as the proto-German national state. They stressed that the empire remained a viable political structure after 1648, losing relevance only after the great wars of the mid-eighteenth century – the new appreciation for the Empire's collective mechanisms nicely fitted Post-War Western Germany, firmly embedded in European cooperative structures. British historians have long since challenged

the accepted truths of whig history – now their successors are finding compromises between the old model and this critique[1]. French historians, François Furet among them, have critically reviewed the classic interpretation of the French Revolution; yet on the whole they seemed less interested in questioning the accepted wisdom regarding Louis XIV's monarchy.

Several instances have traditionally been cited to characterize Louis XIV's power and methods. The first concerns a relatively minor incident, mentioned by Voltaire in his »Siècle de Louis XIV« and popularized by Ernest Lavisse in his »Histoire de France«: the visit of the young king to the Parisian parlement on the 13th of April 1655. In full hunting attire, Louis allegedly pushed aside the worried queries of his magistrates by calling out *l'état c'est moi*[2]. As with so many other famous words, we can relegate this quote to the domain of literary embellishment. In recent literature, however, we can still find Louis' words, with or without qualifications[3]. The second instance is more significant, and better documented: Louis' decision to rule by himself after the death of Mazarin, 9–10 April 1661. The king dramatically reinforced his decision in September by arresting Nicolas Fouquet, the man seen as Mazarin's most likely successor. Louis XIV's move to Versailles in 1682, finally, adds a vital last level to the cumulative power of these images. With the machinery of the state in place the king lured his elites into a luxurious prison, that turned out to be a maelstrom of competition for prestige and empty squabbles. At the same time, the elites assembled in the palace strengthened the king's image of magnificence and power, propagated through a variety of media[4].

Do these instances selected from the career of the Sun King indeed reflect a momentous change in the fortunes of European monarchy? Can the ›revolution‹ of 1661 and its fulfilment in later policies, emulated elsewhere in Europe between 1650 and 1700, be seen as a watershed, separating the preceding phase of more or less traditional monarchy from the following phase of full-blown ›administrative monarchy‹, characterized by a strong central bureaucracy overseeing regional administration and by the implementation of fixed administrative routines at the highest levels of decision-making? Since the 1980's a range of mostly Anglo-Saxon historians has questioned the reputation of ›absolute monarchy‹, suggesting

---

1   See the revision-of-revisionism e.g. in: Alastair BELLANY, The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England. News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660, Cambridge 2002 (Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History, XVII).

2   VOLTAIRE, Le siècle de Louis XIV, René GROOS (ed.), (Paris, s. d.) I, p. 351–352; with the king arriving ›en habit de chasse ... en grosses bottes, le fouet à la main‹ but then gives a little speech far more plausible then the famous quote; this can be found in Ernest LAVISSE, Histoire de France illustrée. Depuis les origines jusqu'à la révolution (Paris 1918) VII, first part, p. 63, the same setting, but now: ›comme le premier président Pompone de Bellièvre invoque l'intérêt de l'État, il réplique: »l'État, c'est moi« ...‹ Lavisse, further discusses the ›moi du roi‹ and gives the standard account of the decisions of 1661 in the same volume.

3   William Ritchey NEWTON, L'Espace du roi. La cour de France au château de Versailles 1682–1789, Paris 2000, quote on p. 19, T. C. W. BLANNING, The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, Oxford 2002, p. 4, 185–186; see a balanced discussion in Philippe SALVADORI, La Chasse sous l'Ancien Régime, Paris 1996, p. 226.

4   The interpretation of Versailles was long dominated by Norbert ELIAS, Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie. Mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft, Darmstadt, Neuwied 1969; see the critical analysis in Jeroen DUINDAM, Myths of Power. Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court, Amsterdam 1995; my forthcoming Vienna and Versailles. The courts of Europe's dynastic rivals 1550–1780, Cambridge 2003 will present a comparative analysis of these two courts, leading to an altogether different interpretation. Peter BURKE, The Fabrication of Louis XIV, New Haven, London 1992, outlined the cultural policies of Louis XIV.

that state formation remained limited in scope and rigour. Following this reinterpretation, Nicholas Henshall wrote a provocative study comparing England and France, »The Myth of Absolutism. Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy« (London 1992). Henshall underlined the limits of absolutism in France and the structural resemblances in the history of these monarchies traditionally presented as diverging trajectories. Henshall's study, ›coarsened by an impatient voice‹ as the author himself admitted, was effective but lacked nuance; he brushed away somewhat easily the increased power of the French king – most notably his repeated practice of raising taxes without waiting for consent[5].

The debate on the nature and development of the European dynastic state is far from closed, and it needs to be refined. Two of the books listed note * p. 129 are close to this discussion: Béguin's »Princes de Condé« challenges the conventional picture of the Condé, and suggests a reassessment of Louis XIV's relationship with major noble dynasties. Elliott and Brockliss' »World of the Favourite« presents the favourite as a product of a phase in the process of state-building, fading after 1660. Richardt's biography leads me to a discussion of Louis XIV's exceptional status in French historiography. Hinrichs presents a brief outline and interpretation of many questions hinted at here, whereas Demel's history of Europe in the eighteenth century allows us to assess the particulars of the state in the enlightenment – a vital element in the assessment of the changes which occurred between 1650 and 1700.

## The Condé in the seventeenth century

Katia Béguin addresses a theme of major significance, and she does so with great skill, both as a writer and as a researcher. Her study of three Condé princes, Henri II (1588–1646), Louis II (1621–1686 – the *grand Condé*), and Henry-Jules (1643–1709) combines the dynamics of French monarchy with Condé family fortune[6]. Obviously, the *grand Condé's* rebellion was a break in the development. The hero of Rocroi and rebel against Mazarin was forced into subservience; his son languished at court in a prestigious sinecure: this sequence seemed to offer the perfect illustration of the *Verhöflichung der Krieger*, the domestication of a once proud and fiery *noblesse*. Béguin carefully reconstructs the major pillars of Condé power and the network of followers supporting this princely dynasty; she arrives at a balance sheet that stresses continuities rather than brusque decline, recurring cooperation with ministers and kings rather than revolt.

›Clientage‹ and ›patronage‹ are terms ubiquitous in recent social-political history of the early modern age. Yet the *fidélités* connecting patron and client usually remain rather vague, as does the scope of networks of friends and followers. Béguin goes far beyond such generalities. The prosopographical annex reconstructs in great detail the origins, functions, and offices of Condé clients. It will come as no surprise that many of them came from Burgundy, the major government held by the Condé; the Condé household at Chantilly formed another vital point of orientation. The *nébuleuse* – an elegant and precise French alternative for network – was not limited to a specific social group: it cut through social and functional divisions of the elite. After 1660, Louis II needed to restructure his household and more generally his following: his effort was remarkably successful partly because slum-

---

5  HENSHALL, Myth of Absolutism, ix.
6  See other important contributions on princely dynasties, e. g. for the early seventeenth century David PARROTT, A ›prince souverain‹ and the French Crown: Charles de Nevers, 1580–1637, in: R. ORESKO, G. C. GIBBS, H. M. SCOTT (ed.), Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe. Essays in memory of Ragnhild Hatton. Cambridge 1997, p. 149–187; for a successful lineage of royal *bâtards* in the eighteenth century, Jean DUMA, Les Bourbons-Penthièvre (1678–1793) Une nébuleuse aristocratique au XVIIIᵉ siècle, Paris 1995.

bering earlier loyalties could be revived. Henri II had cultivated his connection with Riche-lieu to further his interests, Louis II readily acquired Colbert's support, which helped Louis II and his son to reward their clients with offices and – notably fiscal – privileges.

One marked omission surprises in this splendid book: there is hardly any discussion of the impact of the highest office at the French court, held by the Condé: *grand maître de l'hôtel*, or *grand maître de France*. This is relevant for Béguin's theme first of all because the *grand maître* had patronage over a sizeable number of offices in the royal household, allow-ing the Condé to establish their own followers in Versailles. The number of noble offices in the hands of the *grand maître* had been somewhat reduced after the ›treason‹ of the *grand Condé*, but it remained important. More generally, Béguin's penetrating analysis of the Condé could profitably have been extended into this quintessentially royal domain: were the rights, benefits, and daily routines of the office important for a princely dynasty kept aloof from the king's inner council for several decades?[7]

Finally, Béguin shows that Chantilly came to be a centre of cultural patronage in its own right, the Condé princes supporting a distinguished group of artists, writers, and scientists. Chantilly did not match the amplitude of Versailles, nor did the *mécénat* of the Condé rival the king's more extensive patronage. Yet if offered an alternative focus, modest in size rather than in prestige or quality. Béguin introduces a theme here that could well be enlarged to include all major princely households and their palaces in the vicinity of Paris – these were not merely satellites of Versailles. Peter Burke's »Fabrication of Louis XIV« and Gérard Sabatier's more recent »Versailles où la figure du roi« (Paris 1999) dealt effectively with the construction of a central example, an image intended to impress others. They were less effective in dealing with the reception of the image, or with rival centres of culture. Surely, these were never wholly absent – not even in Versailles' finest hour, as Béguin demon-strates[8].

## 1661: The twilight of the favourite?

Béguin showed that the productive connection between Henri II and Richelieu was in itself one of the reasons for the tensions between Mazarin and Louis II. Mazarin sought to create his own following by seeking support among Richelieu's opponents; his predecessor's friends were his rivals. This suggests another way of looking at Louis XIV's 1661 decisions: Beguin did so recently in an article that reviews Louis XIV's ties with the aristocracy, and she comes to conclusions of great relevance for the discussion of the ›favourite‹ at court[9]. While it is conventional to see the decades following 1661 as an age of stability, this notion is not commonly applied to noble power. Yet the fact that the king chose to rule without first minister had major consequences for the stability of high offices held by nobles. In earlier decades, governorships, high court offices, and other prestigious prizes, had been subject to violent changes, caused by the attempts of the ruling favourite to secure his position by finding support among the *grands* – alliances of the favourite *premier-ministre* with a spe-

---

7   Christophe BLANQUIE, Dans la main du Grand maître. Les offices de la maison du roi, 1643–1720, in: Histoire & Mesure XIII (1998) 3–4 p. 243–288 fills this omission, see further discussion of the impact of higher court offices in DUINDAM, Vienna and Versailles (see note 4).

8   Compare works delimiting the impact of royal propaganda in the regions, or in distant social groups: Roger METTAM, Power, Status and Precedence: Rivalries among the Provincial Elites of Louis XIV's France, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 38 (1988) p. 43–62; Jens Ivo ENGELS, Königsbilder. Sprechen, Singen und Schreiben über den französischen König in der ersten Hälfte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts, Bonn 2000, Pariser Historische Studien 52.

9   BÉGUIN, Louis XIV et l'aristocratie: coup de majesté ou retour à la tradition?, in: Histoire Econo-mie et Société 19 (2000) 4, p. 497–512.

cific high noble clan led to serious infighting in the upper echelons. If favourites ›managed‹ the patronage for the ruler, they did so mostly with their own position in mind: the changeover from one favourite to another almost invariably led to wholesale changes in the highest echelons – this holds true for Lerma and Olivares as well as for Richelieu and Mazarin[10].

Louis' rule led to the ascendancy of several ministerial clans – Le Tellier, Colbert, and, on a different level, Phélypeaux. Major noble families on the other hand, were confirmed in their offices at court, in the army, and in the provinces[11]. No single grouping was allowed to push aside others, even less to determine the king's distribution of graces. Combinations between the ministerial clans and the major princely and ducal dynasties at court still occurred, but as long as the king ruled and kept the distribution of honours firmly under control, they remained relatively harmless. Why would the great families rebel, if their rank, property, and offices were respected? They may have been pacified and appeased, but surely they were not domesticated, or ousted from power. Louis XIV undoubtedly looked at his closest rivals, the princes, with a wary eye – he would not allow them a vested right to attend his inner council. Likewise, he prevented any of his ministers from approaching the status of first minister. The king ruled by giving the various groups under his authority what he thought was their due, and by preventing each of them from accumulating suffi-cient power to threaten his reputation.

This reinterpretation does not necessarily clash with the thesis defended by Jean Bérenger in a thought-provoking 1974 Annales article on the *ministériat*[12]. Lerma, Olivares, Buck-ingham, Richelieu, Mazarin: why did they all surface in the same decades, whereas we hardly find similar figures in the second half of the century? Apparently, rulers in these years were unable to cope with the accumulation of paperwork, ceremonial duties, and other burdens confronting them. They sought the assistance of minister-favourites, coordi-nating the process of decision-making as well as managing the distribution of graces. Why did these towering figures disappear halfway through the century? Bérenger suggested that the consolidation of administrative monarchy took away some of the pressures and allowed rulers to regain their personal hold on power[13].

Yet the rise of minister-favourites may have been connected mostly to the disruptive impact of religious strife and lasting warfare in the preceding century, while their disappear-ance must have been hastened by the fact that their prominence in preceding decades had almost universally been seen as harmful. If rulers could do without a favourite, they would now choose to do so. They knew that relying too much or too openly on the support of one favourite would be held against them, and they saw the disruptive consequences of unduly biased patronage. Louis' 1661 example itself may have had a major impact, turning the issue into a matter of prestige for other dynastic rulers – the king's decisions were broadcast by

10  See Antonio FEROS, Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III 1598–1621, Cambridge 2000, who underlines the consequences of the change in favourite after the death of king Philip III – Lerma was lucky to escape alive, but his cronies lost office. Feros, who contributed an interesting discussion of the images of favourites to The World of the Favourite, ends his book on a surprising note, citing Louis XIV's memoirs and reiterating the conventional 1661 thesis.

11  In a lucid and important article Leonhard HOROWSKI stresses the remarkable presence of dynasties of courtiers in other prestigious high offices, see Pouvez-vous trop donner pour une chose si essen-tielle? Eine prosopographische Studie der Obersten Chargen am Hof von Versailles, in: Mit-teilungen der Residenzenkommission 11 (2001) 1, p. 32–53, available at http://resikom.adw-goet-tingen.gwdg.de.

12  Jean BÉRENGER, Pour une enquête européenne: le problème du ministériat au XVIIᵉ siècle, in: Annales ESC 29 (1974) 1 p. 166–192.

13  BROCKLISS, World of the Favourite, p. 296–297 reiterates the thesis, then adopts a more questioning attitude, but finally maintains it.

medals and other media. In his memoirs, written in the decade following for the benefit of the *dauphin*, but never intended for publication and known only to an extremely limited circle, the king explained his intentions. Among his motives, the fear of acquiring a reputation for weakness was dominant[14]. After the death in 1665 of his mentor and favourite, *Obersthofmeister* Portia, Emperor Leopold I sought to follow the example of his fellow-monarch. Explaining his determination in some detail to Count Pötting, his confidant and ambassador in Spain, the emperor unwittingly replicated the reasons given by Louis in his memoirs: he stated that the mere suspicion that a courtier was turning into a favourite would be sufficient to undermine his reputation[15].

»The World of the Favourite« takes Bérenger's contentions as a starting point. This conference volume, edited by major authorities in the field, includes excellent contributions. With five contributions, England is particularly well-covered: both the practices of favour and its representations are discussed on a high level. Spain comes next with two major articles, and three more general discussions written by specialists of Spanish history. France, on the other hand, is discussed somewhat erratically, in three texts: a brief description of Concini by Jean-François Dubost, a discussion of the different vocabularies used by Richelieu and Mazarin by Orest Ranum, and finally an interesting analysis of Fouquet as the favourite *manqué* by Marc Fumaroli. Together, they have less to offer than the discussions of Spain and England, nor to they explicitly address the conventional interpretation of 1661. The Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, Württemberg, and Denmark form the subject of three isolated but interesting contributions. Bérenger himself presented a rather general discussion of the demise of the minister-favourite in Austria. The introduction by J. H. Elliott, nestor of the field, the general discussion by I. A. A. Thompson, and the ample, wide-ranging, and intelligent conclusion by L. W. B. Brockliss help to give substance to this volume[16].

The table of contents of the volume suggests a ›rise‹ in the late sixteenth century and a ›twilight‹ after 1660; the idea is questioned only briefly in Brockliss' conclusion. Yet did the favourite indeed disappear? The French record raises doubts. In the early eighteenth century, Dubois held the titles and rights previously enjoyed by his two more lasting predecessors. The regent himself briefly followed in Dubois' footsteps, and he was succeeded by the Duc de Bourbon – a *Condé* prince back in the heart of government. Fleury roughly matched the two seventeenth-century cardinal-ministers in longevity and probably in influence, though not in formal titles[17]. Towards the end of the régime, Loménie de Brienne was again formally styled *premier ministre*, whereas Maurepas had previously tried with some success to acquire its essentials without fussing over the title[18]. Elsewhere, we can cite other examples of notoriously powerful ministers, throughout the eighteenth century. If we broaden the category of favourites to include mistresses and companions, the phenomenon

---

14  Mémoires de Louis XIV pour l'instruction du Dauphin, Charles DREYSS (ed.), Paris 1860, I–II, II, p. 270–271.

15  Privatbriefe Kaiser Leopold I an den Grafen F. E. Pötting 1662–1673, A. F. PRIBRAM, M. LANDWEHR VON PRAGENAU (ed.), Vienna 1903–04, I–II Fontes Rerum Austriacarum LVI–LVII. I, p. 104–107, 18.2.1665.

16  See Andreas PECAR, Michael KAISER (ed.), Der zweite Mann im Staat. Oberste Amtsträger und Favoriten im Umkreis der Reichsfürsten im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert (forthcoming: Beiheft der ZHF, 2002) on favourites in the empire, with the same focus on the male minister-favourite. This may be remedied in a forthcoming volume edited by Clarissa CAMPBELL ORR, Queenship in Europe 1660–1815: the Role of the Consort, Cambridge 2002.

17  See the discussion of their responsibilities and attitude in Peter R. CAMPBELL, Power and Politics in Old Regime France, 1720–1745, London 1996.

18  On Maurepas, see John HARDMAN, Louis XVI, New Haven, London 1993; and by the same author Louis XVI. The Silent King, London, New York 2000.

seems even more widespread and persistent. After the death of Louvois in 1691, Madame de Maintenon, Louis' morganatic wife, turned into an informal variant of the *premier ministre*, the inevitable go-between and ›fidèle interprète des pensées du roi‹; a situation exacerbated by the deaths in the royal family[19]. After relying on Fleury, Louis XV allowed Madame de Pompadour to play a central role; Louis XVI, in dire straits after the failure of the *assemblée des notables*, sought the support of Marie-Antoinette. For most other courts, a list of exceptionally trusted servants, confessors, friends, and consorts can be given. They form the tip of an iceberg: the dynamics of access and favour, usually visible only in its more outspoken forms, were an inevitable component of early modern monarchy – nor would they wholly disappear in the great cleanup of 1789–1815.

»The World of the Favourite« is a title too comprehensive for the contributions in this important volume. This is a presentation largely of the minister-favourite in a critical phase of European monarchy ca. 1560–1660. The chronology mistakenly takes for granted the ›twilight‹ of the favourite; the delimitation of favour to the male minister-favourite leaves out equally relevant other forms of favour.

## Louis XIV and the French

1661 recurs in its conventional form in the pages of Aimé Richardt's puzzling »Le Soleil du Grand Siècle«. The book, written by an author who previously published a string of other *grand siècle* biographies, appeared in a series aptly entitled »Raconter L'Histoire«. This is exactly what Richardt does: retelling a familiar story. His account is basically competent but only incidentally surprising in detail or colour – one vainly looks for new materials or interpretations here. Probably, the audience is not expected to know more than the bare outline of the Sun King's life. Nor are they enabled to learn more than the author wants to tell them: there are many quotes, but no notes; the bibliography is almost entirely French, and very sketchy. There is nothing wrong with popular works, but it is not clear what this particular work has to add to previous biographies, e.g. those by François Bluche (1986) and Jean-Christian Petitfils (1995). While Bluche and Petitfils are more interesting scholars, and added minor or major accents, there seems to be a recurring problem with Louis XIV. It is voiced in the preface to Richardt's book by an avowed royalist, Bertrand Renouvin: ›Louis XIV est une passion française, il suscite des sentiments complexes d'amour et de haine, ou du moins, d'attirance et de rejet. Cette passion nous aveugle ...‹. Renouvin concludes his preface by stating that the reign of Louis XIV was a great moment in French history, and even though contemporaries may not universally have appreciated the Sun King, his rule was a milestone in the formation of the French state, for national unification, and last but not least, for the ›rayonnement de l'esprit français‹[20].

Bluche, editor of the impressive »Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle«, and prolific writer with a detailed knowledge of the upper layers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, showed a strong identification with the Sun King in his biography. He more recently published a tongue-in-cheek ›diary‹ by the Sun King, a joke that underlined his uncomfortably close relationship with his object[21]. While the Annales-group published series of invaluable works relocating the Sun King in a wider social and economic environment, they did not

---

19  Mark BRYANT, Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon: Religion, Power and Politics. A Study in Circles of Influence during the Later Reign of Louis XIV, 1684–1715, unpublished PhD thesis London 2001, quote from Villars' memoirs, cited on p. 274; compare the entirely different and less plausible interpretation of Louis after Louvois' death in Jean-Christian PETITFILS, Louis XIV, Paris 1995, p. 523–525.
20  Preface by RENOUVIN in: RICHARDT, Soleil du grand siècle, pages 8 and 11.
21  François BLUCHE, Louis XIV, Paris 1986; Le journal secret de Louis XIV, Paris 1998.

contradict the age-old interpretation of French monarchy. Between the methodical aloofness of the Annales-school, and the rather traditional political history of the grand siècle, we find little evidence of a questioning of the old images regarding the Sun King's rule. Joël Cornette's recent overview of the historiography of 1980–2000 lists many titles, but fails to erase the impression that French historians have hardly challenged the fundamentals[22]. The financial underpinning of Louis XIV's absolutism forms a major exception: Daniel Dessert's »Argent, Pouvoir et société au grand siècle« is probably the single most influential revision of Louis XIV's ›system‹[23]. Dessert showed that ›absolute‹ monarchy depended on a series of fiscal-financial expedients made possible mostly because of the cooperation of elites previously depicted as ›vanquished‹ by state power. Later, he retouched the image of Colbert, showing that this ›modern‹ minister par excellence firmly belonged to the world of clan-based clientism. Paradoxically, questioning the standard interpretations of French monarchy, particularly in the seventeenth century, seems to have become the domain mostly of British and American historians. Joseph Bergin, David Parrott, William Beik, and Roger Mettam, among others, have critically reviewed the notion of ›absolute‹ power of French monarchs[24]. This makes Béguin's book all the more important; while her bibliography shows familiarity with the major revisionist theses, she not only integrated these perspectives in her work, but went beyond them in richness of material and analysis.

## Absolutism and reform

Hinrichs' »Fürsten und Mächte« is admirable in many respects: it is lucidly and concisely written, and it shows a firm grasp of the problems hinted at in the preceding paragraphs[25]. The opening and closing chapters, in particular, offer a well-balanced and profound assessment of absolutism. They go far beyond what one could expect in a textbook. In the first chapter, Hinrichs traces the origins of the concept and provides short introductions to five approaches critical to the notion ›absolutism‹. The two middle chapters are based on a chronology and a discussion of *Strukturmerkmale* respectively. The overview is accurate yet predictable; but the ›structures‹ are well chosen: legitimacy, bureaucracy, courts, finances, the army, the church. These are briefly discussed, and therefore the analysis tends to remain on the surface. One can question details or interpretations. I was not quite convinced by Hinrichs' depiction of the bureaucrats as *Zauberlehrlinge*, and would have liked

22 Joël CORNETTE, L'Histoire au travail. Le nouveau »siècle de Louis XIV«: un bilan historiographique depuis vingt ans (1980–2000), in: Histoire Economie et Société 19 (2000) 4, p. 561–605, and an extended bibliography on p. 607–620.

23 Daniel DESSERT, Argent, pouvoir et société au grand siècle, Paris 1984; see also his La Royale. Vaisseaux et Marins du roi-soleil, Paris 1996, his previous study, Fouquet, Paris 1987, and with J.-L. JOURNET, Le lobby Colbert: un royaume ou une affaire de famille, in: Annales ESC 30 (1975), p. 1303–1336.

24 David PARROTT, Richelieu's Army. War, Government and Society in France, 1624–1642, Cambridge 2001; Roger METTAM, Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France, Oxford, New York 1988; Joseph BERGIN, The Rise of Richelieu, New Haven, London 1991, and Cardinal Richelieu, Power and the Pursuit of Wealth, New Haven, London 1985. William BEIK, Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France. State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc, 4 (Cambridge 1985, and Louis XIV and Absolutism. A brief study with documents, Boston, New York 2000. Many titles can be added to this list.

25 Compare the same careful apporach to absolutism and the revisionist critique in: Ronald ASCH, Heinz DUCHHARDT (ed.), Der Absolutismus – ein Mythos? Strukturwandel monarchischer Herrschaft in West- und Mitteleuropa (ca. 1550–1700), Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 1996 (Münstersche historische Forschungen 9).

a more careful breakdown of the different forms and levels of *Beamtentum* in France. On the whole, however, the presentation is effective.

In the concluding chapter, the author presents a careful ›post-revisionist‹ panorama of the early modern state, avoiding the pitfalls of *Trennungsdenken* frequent in this field: the expanding administrative institutions were not necessarily dominated by rulers; regions may have become more closely tied to the centre, but this did not mean that regional elites were unable to defend their interests effectively in the centre. Hinrichs presents the century 1560–1650 as a period of crisis, 1650–1750 as the reestablishment of monarchical power: yet he does not reiterate the mythology that 1661 granted the ›state‹ or the king a lasting victory over unruly noble elites – although the Danish example, described by Hinrichs, came far closer than the French. Interestingly, Hinrichs notes that while we tend to associate absolutism with the internal power structures of states, contemporary regimes would invert the priorities: dynastic rulers were interested mostly in securing their power and reputation elsewhere, and used their power over their subjects to sustain this greater ambition. Hinrichs takes distance from the notion of ›enlightened absolutism‹ as a general *Epochenbezeichnung* and stresses the instrumental character of rulers' association with enlightenment thinking and thinkers. Yet he underlines the fact that in the later eighteenth century, the presence of the state became more notable, while at the same time the legitimacy of dynastic rule was questioned.

In his history of Europe in the eighteenth century Walter Demel is not interested only or mostly in the fate of monarchies and states, but in eighteenth-century societies. His book is thematically organized, with a first long chapter on social history, a relatively short discussion of economy and communication, a third chapter on Europe as a *Kulturraum*, and two political chapters: reform and the lack of reform, and finally the European state system. Demel draws examples from a wide geographical range: although he notes in his introduction that he will concentrate on Central and Western Europe, he frequently includes other examples, and seeks to be European in scope and spirit. The thematic scope too is comprehensive, Demel's »Geschichte« combines most major perspectives (social, economic, cultural, and political history), and integrates issues current in recent research. Whenever he can, Demel gives concrete examples, including numbers and costs; his book contains a wealth of information throughout the text – with additional material in five tables and an annex. This very comprehensiveness makes Demel's book less focused and somewhat less elegantly written than Hinrichs' text: the density of examples and regional variants is not always fluently organized into a coherent argument. But then, Hinrichs' project, a long-term study focusing on one theme, was easier to structure than Demel's, a comprehensive textbook covering one century.

On the themes discussed here, Demel follows the same line as Hinrichs, indicating a qualified acceptance of revisionism. He states: ›Der eigentliche führende Stand, *die* Elite in der Selbst- wie in der Fremdwahrnehmung war der Adel, und zwar wahrscheinlich mehr als je zuvor und danach‹[26]. Yet at the same time, he, too, underlines the increasing presence of the state in everyday life. In the chapter on internal political developments, it is difficult to find a general analysis of the predicament of the dynastic state in its last pre-revolutionary decades, nor do we find it in the concluding chapter, a rather general digression on cosmopolitanism and national loyalties. In fact, the major virtue of this work, the richness of well-ordered information on a variety of themes and regions, entails its major shortcoming: more attention could have been devoted to a general appreciation of problems typical for the eighteenth century.

Both the legitimation and the practices of European monarchy changed in the later decades of the eighteenth century. Rulers themselves adopted a less ceremonial posture and

---

26 p. 46.

frequently curtailed their courts. Administrative services gained political weight and expanded, whereas the household tended to become smaller, household office less clearly politically relevant. Much like their predecessors, however, rulers were forced by financial crises – caused invariably by warfare – to confront their elites with unpalatable demands. Yet challenging the rights of noble elites also could undermine their own legitimation. We can observe these phenomena in most countries, but the processes led to different outcomes. In recent discussions of these changes, we often find Habermas as a major source of inspiration and the ›public sphere‹ as a vital ingredient. In one of the more challenging books, Hillay Zmora looks at the relationship between nobles, monarchy, and the state from 1300 to 1800[27]. He sees the ties between monarchy and nobility in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a ›loose alliance‹ developing into an ›institutionalized interdependence‹ after the crisis of religious rebellion and war. The compromise of nobles and monarch was the basis for ›absolutism‹, and it strengthened both parties. Monarchy and nobility were in the same boat, condemned to each other. Only in England does Zmora construe a relatively loose relationship, without legal privileges and with nobles more dependent on private property. When in the course of the eighteenth century, the intersections of private and public came under increasing pressure, monarchy and nobility had to untie the knot. The symbiosis was questioned from both sides. Yet the monarch could not abolish noble privilege without revising his legitimation, and the nobles would not accept loss of special rights without compensation. In the end, Zmora reverts to a position not unfamiliar, with France in the role of the monarchy that went astray, England as the successful model, and German princes as somewhere in between[28]. Clearly, we cannot simply see the revolution itself as evidence for the inevitability of sweeping and violent change, but the French system, characterised by venality of offices and privileges of many kinds, made reform particularly difficult. All changes needed to be compensated, and a reformist ministry was vulnerable to the accusation of despotism.

## Conclusion: towards a comparative perspective

After 1815 the state had become much stronger, because the patchwork of regional corporations and the dense web of special rights and privileges were swept away by the turmoil of the Revolution, and the Empire consolidated a more uniform system of law and governance. For 1661, we cannot be so categorical. A wide gap opens between the traditional interpretation and the revisionist perception. It is determined partly by the persistence of national heritages, particularly strong in France, partly by the period one looks at – 1661–1682 is still relatively comforting for the traditional image; 1661–1715 decidedly less, and 1661–1750 not at all. Henshall showed that comparison can help to decide these issues. It was the national focus that deformed the state-building paradigm in the first place, and we should go beyond it in reassessing this interpretation as well as the revisionist response it generated. Attempts along these lines have been exceedingly rare: we have volumes where different authors discuss different territories, and textbooks where the development as a whole is outlined for various territories, but few monographs based on first-hand archival research in two or more different countries. The issues, too, need rephrasing. There is no reason to question the differentiation of institutions dealing with government, or the growth of the number of persons serving in these institutions. Undoubtedly, moreover,

---

27  Hillay ZMORA, Monarchy, Aristocracy and the State in Europe 1300–1800, London, New York 2001.
28  We find the same ranking in: BLANNING (see note 3) who tends to overstate the cultural dominance of the Sun King, contrasting it with the vulnerability of later Bourbon rulers for the increasing power of a variety of spheres they no longer controlled.

paperwork became a far more dominant aspect of government, and the impact of government action in the country at large increased in the course of the early modern age. The crucial question seems to be: were early modern monarchs ever able to go beyond the traditional idiom of dynastic rule, characterized by a notable presence of noble elites in the heart of the state, and a decision-making process that was determined by access and favour as well as by bureaucratic procedure? While I would answer this question negatively now, more research has to be done before we can feel secure. We have to outline carefully the responsibilities and activities of household and administrative services, and chart the personnel of these institutions; we have to look again at familiar documentary evidence, and seek to add the informal and unwritten stages of the processes of decision-making whenever we can; we need to know more about the *nébuleuses* of major families and their ramifications throughout the country – an agenda, finally, that can never be fulfilled entirely, but it should suffice to create a more convincing ›political history‹ of early modern Europe.