Absolute monarchy

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Introduction

Absolute monarchy has long been considered the essential form of the early modern state by historians and historical sociologists. It is often regarded as an intermediate stage in a chain of development going from a feudal state based on patrimonialism, to a ständestaat or 'state of estates' in which nobles and representative institutions have many powers, to absolute monarchy which eradicated these powers in order to rise pre-eminent, and finally to the constitutional and bureaucratic form of the state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] This pattern is problematic because it is a drastic oversimplification and because it poses but does not answer the question of how the transition from absolute monarchy to the succeeding constitutional form was made. Was a liberal revolution necessary for some absolute monarchies to become constitutional, and did change come from outside influences, or from wide social and economic changes, or did absolute monarchy itself engender the next form within its own institutions and developments? What then were the ruptures and continuities between these forms? Where the latter scenario took place, as perhaps in France, then we must ask how did the idea of a constitutional monarchy emerge, and was the idea of representative government really excluded from the absolute monarchy? And to what extent was there direct bureaucratic, administrative and conceptual continuity between the institutions of the absolute monarchy and those of the modern state? Was the operation of power in the absolutist state already centralised and bureaucratic before the

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[1] Historians and historical sociologists have tended to look at state formation and the nature of the state differently, the former seeking patterns and the latter steeped in empirical research. For a textbook sociological survey see G Poggi, *The development of the modern state* (London, 1978). Looking very schematic and misleading today, such a view has been updated in sociology with works such as C Tilly, (ed.) *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, 1975). The view that bureaucratic centralization was a 'rational choice' in the face of war and economic development underlies much sociological thinking, which continues to draw heavily on the late and untypical Prussian case. More recently 'third wave' theories have appeared. See T. Ertman, *The Birth of Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), especially. pp. 1–34; P. S. Gorski, 'Beyond Marx and Hintze? Third-Wave Theories of Early Modern State Formation', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Oct., 2001), pp. 851-86; and J. Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 2005); revisiting founding father Max Weber to rethink the role of the Protestant religion as an essential mental transformation facilitating the rise of the state, is P. S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism, Confessionalism and the Growth of State Power in Early Modern Europe*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Two sociological survey essays that integrate recent historical research and include the imperial dimension until recently neglected by historians are K.A. Stanbridge, 'England, France and their North American Colonies: An Analysis of Absolutist State. Power in Europe and in the New World', *Journal of Historical Sociology* Vol. 10 No. 1 March 1997, pp. 27-55; and J. C. A. Smith, 'Europe's Atlantic Empire's: Early Modern State formation reconsidered', *Political Power and Social Theory*, 17, 2005, pp. C100-c 150.

constitutional revolution, as the still influential French historian Alexis de Tocqueville believed, along with many historians before and since? If power was in fact not centralised but decentralised, shared, and negotiated, then surely the French Revolution must have been a much more creative rupture with the old regime state, and one that *may perhaps* have contributed more originally to the creation of a centralised state, than he was prepared to admit. The answers to these questions are not simple but they do suggest that the traditional views may need to be reconsidered. Perhaps the preoccupation with centralisation should now be regarded as an anachronistic question whose very asking oversimplifies the complex processes of compromise and negotiation that took place in this period between elites and the state. [2]

In the light of such concerns, this chapter will explore the nature of this 'absolute' form of political authority, focusing on its strengths and weaknesses. Using the major example of France, it will argue that, in spite of absolute monarchy's success in seemingly rising above society, it developed claims and practices that ran counter to long-term representative tendencies contained within its own structures. It was never able to suppress these, nor did it intend to, because they remained enshrined in corporate society itself, on which it was based. Although the corporate society of the old regime was very hierarchical, its elites retained a large measure of autonomy in their own spheres. This sense of independence and the continued vitality of privilege provided fertile ground for a revival of conciliarist and later commonwealth arguments, and an historical belief in an ancient constitution. These arguments in favour of limited royal power eventually empowered an opposition that was able to take advantage of the excesses and contradictions that characterised some of the practices of absolute monarchy, whose power to enforce its central will was somewhat illusory.

As a form of state structure, absolute monarchy has its origins in both the late medieval and the renaissance monarchy. It is generally thought to have reached its apogee in France under Louis XIV. The French monarchy of the eighteenth century is supposed to have been unable to modernise sufficiently to survive the challenges of empire and the rise of other European powers. The collapse of the French absolute monarchy as a consequence of its own contradictions,

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[2] A. de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution, Volume 1*, eds F. Furet, F. Mélonio, trans A Kahan, (Chicago, 1998). For historical views since the 1960s, which often deal with the state in terms of 'the ancien régime', see classic collections of articles by H. Lubasz, ed., *The development of the modern state*, New York, 1964, and R. Hatton, ed., *Louis XIV and Absolutism* (London, 1976). In the light of recent research, the French case, which has often been seen as paradigmatic, actually does not fit the sociological models very well, while historians have been reticent on broader questions of power. More dialogue between all these approaches is needed. See J.A. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, 2009) and for a highly pertinent monograph, D. Parrott*, Richelieu's army: War Government and Society in France, 1624-1642* (Cambridge, 2001).

inherent weaknesses, poor political management and efforts at impossible reforms, opened the door to revolution. In the early modern period, however, 'absolute monarchy' existed both as a form of political organisation, and as a theory of monarchical authority and its proper rights and limits. Absolute monarchies developed in Spain, the British Isles, Sweden, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Brandenburg-Prussia, Russia, and Savoy-Piedmont, notably, and formed the basis of the governance of several smaller states in Germany and Italy. It was a contemporary reality advocated by most as the best form of government. It could be described as a power that was absolved from the restraints of other powers, but in the sense of having the final word, rather than in the sense of having freed itself from all practical or legal restrictions. There was a difference between absolute power and absolute authority – for authority was never conceived as giving kings the right to exercise complete or unlimited power over their subjects. Absolute monarchies nevertheless had a tendency, common to most power, to try to further emancipate themselves from restraints on their action. In some states there was also a marked impulse towards ever greater regulation and control of the economy and local institutions. Theoretical justifications for royal authority were thus employed to enlarge the sphere of state power – but it must be stressed that much of this process owed much more to the ad hoc processes set in motion by the pressing needs of international warfare than to the independent influence of the theories in themselves.

This form of monarchy should never be confused with arbitrary authoritarianism, and for this reason the use of the term 'absolutism' to describe this government continues to sow considerable confusion. The word 'absolutism' was invented at the end of the eighteenth century as a propagandist condemnation of authoritarian monarchies, deliberately associating them with 'despotism' or 'tyranny', so it reflects a very misguided idea of the more complex realities of the earlier period. All too often 'absolutism' is used lazily simply to mean 'royal policy' or, just as unhelpfully, to refer to a centralised bureaucratic form of government that existed only to a slight degree, and which was rarely the aim of royal policy. Centralisation made little sense with slow communications, strong regional cultures and elites, and different ways of getting things done were developed. The ethic of the rational bureaucracies of the nineteenth-century constitutional states so well analysed by Max Weber was very different from that of the earlier period, when officers had purchased their posts, which represented for them both a financial investment and social status.[3] The system of venal officeholding embodied concerns about social ascension and

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[3] M. Weber, Guenther Roth, Claus Wittich, eds., *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology*, Volume 1, (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1978). On bureaucracy see Max Weber, 'The Presuppositions and Causes of Bureaucracy', in R. K. Merton, A. P. Gray, Barbara Hockey, and H. Selvin, eds., *Reader in Bureaucracy* , Glencoe,

family strategies; clientage also played a role, for to acquire an office a family needed to be accepted by the corps and spoken for by a well-connected courtier or minister. Until very recently, too much focus on the origins of the modern state led historians to stress more the elements that seemed to be progressive and to lead to the next form in the nineteenth century, rather than on the specificity of the various elements that characterised 'absolute monarchy'. But rather than regard absolute monarchy as just a hybrid form of the earlier and later Weberian categories, we should recognise it as a specific form of state that is based upon the central importance of the royal court in its culture and governance. [4]

A new state formation

For several generations of historians, from the nineteenth century right up to the 1970s, the dominant approaches to the state were the history of institutions and the history of legal doctrines, both usually based on administrative correspondence, legislation and lawyers's explanations. In recent years there has been a change of perspective and we have learnt to take other important elements into account: the role of patronage and clientage; the function of the court; political management; and the persuasive significance of the representation of monarchy in image and ritual.[5] Biography and studies of government in practice have drawn these elements together in case studies that reveal structures and processes that were anything but simple – for they made up a very 'tumultuous reality'.[6] A much more complete understanding of absolute monarchy has become possible. Instead of interpreting absolute monarchies solely through the history of theory and institutions, we should try to understand the spirit or way of thinking that gave rise to them, and the ways in which early modern men operated within them. We need to set the state in the context of society and its ideas – thus decentring our vision. Trying to understand the state from the point of view of the periphery rather than the centre helps to understand the

1952, pp. 60-68 and on war, the influential essay by Otto Hintze, 'Military organization and the organization of the state', in F. Gilbert, *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York, 1975), pp. 178–215.

[4] See P.R. Campbell and C. Grell 'La Cour et les modèles du Pouvoir', in Marcello Fantoni, ed., *Les cours en Europe : bilan historioghraphique* (Italy: Bulzoni collection "Europa delle Corti", 2011).

[5] B. Guénée, 'L'histoire de l'état en France à la fin du moyen age, vu par les français depuis cent ans', *Revue historique,* 232, 1964, pp. 331–60, and J. Vicens Vives, 'The administrative structure of the state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in H.J. Cohn, ed., *Government in Reformation Europe* (London, 1971), pp. 58-87. The latter is a critique of R. Mousnier and F. Hartung, 'Quelques problèmes concernant la monarchie absolue', in *Comitato internazionale di Scienze storiche, X Congresso internazionale di Scienze storiche, Roma, 1955, Relazioni,* IV, Florence, 1955, pp. 1–55 – a seminal article that provoked considerable debate.

[6] For this phrase, see J. Vicens Vives called it, op.cit, p. 60. A new picture of this many faceted 'tumultuous reality' has been emerging in for example A. Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: la noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne, 1559-1661* (Paris, 1989), D. Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: la violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525-vers 1610* (Seyssel, 2005); M. Greengrass, *Governing passions: peace and reform in the French kingdom, 1576-1585*, Oxford, 2007; S. Carroll, *Martyrs and murderers: the Guise family and the making of Europe* (Oxford, 2009); R. Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 1988),

limitations on the exercise of central authority. A major omission from the institutional vision of the state has only been remedied in recent years. Focusing on bureaucratic institutions led legal historians and sociologists to ignore the one institution that remained vital to this form of state throughout the period: the royal household or court. This neglect was probably because it was hard to study an institution with so many different roles and therefore no single set of archival sources. The court was a political, social and cultural space that brought together all the elements necessary for successful governance.

Paying due attention to the social, cultural and political specifics of the period, we might therefore argue that the absolute monarchy was a specific form of the state that came into being in a recognisably coherent way towards the end of the sixteenth century, underwent rapid *ad hoc* development in the seventeenth century, and lasted until the Revolution. We can call this state formation a 'baroque state', not only in order to stress its key period of development associated with these artistic forms of representation, religious and monumental, – but also to highlight its evident weaknesses. Such a term highlights the fact that its characteristic seventeenth-century style of governance, based on a range of techniques, perfected but not substantially changed, would prove inadequate a hundred years later in an age of Neo-Classicism.

Absolute monarchy was thus a form of government with deep historical roots. It was also a theory of legitimate royal authority widely that was widely subscribed to by early modern European monarchies, with significant variations.[7] To explore its nature the example of France will be used. In some important ways its key concepts existed before the modern word for the state itself was invented. In 1589 when the crown passed from the Valois to the Bourbons, the throne of France had been inherited by members of the same family since the first Capetian in AD 987, and it was to remain Bourbon to the Revolution. This provided unparalleled legitimacy in Europe, and since AD 800 an explicitly sacred dimension enhanced this. In that year Emperor Charlemagne was crowned by the Pope, and ever since then the link between church and monarchy had remained fundamental, and not just in France. It was symbolised in many ceremonies, among which were those of the coronation, the funeral, royal entries, the lit de justice

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[7] See R. Mousnier, *La monarchie absolue en Europe : du Ve siècle à nos jours, Paris, PUF, 1982*. For early seventeenth century developments , see E. Thuau, *Raison d'État et pensée politique a l'époque de Richelieu* (Paris, 1966). Two more recent volumes trace the wider intellectual context: *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*, ed. J.H. Burns and M. Goldie (Cambridge 1995); and other volume European *European Political Thought 1450–1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy*, ed. G. Burgess and H. Lloyd (New Haven, CT, 2008), especially the chapters by J.H. Salmon and R. von Freidburg. On England in relation to absolute monarchy, see J. Sommerville, *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603–1640* (London, 1986); G. Burgess, *Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution* (New Haven and London, 1996) both largely summarised in the preceding volumes. See the meticulous integration of new research on ideas by F. Cosandey and R. Descimon in *L'absolutisme en France. Histoire et Historiographie*, Paris, 2002.

in the parlement, and the rituals of the court, which paralleled those the liturgy in regularity and analogous form; in a more popular vein, the royal touch or laying on of hands in a ceremony once a year, was believed to cure scrofula and reinforced the link with divine power in the mind of the people. Both the monarchy and the population were so catholic that in order to ensure that he kept the crown of France inherited in 1589, Henri IV, the first Bourbon monarch, and a Protestant, felt it expedient to convert to Catholicism in 1593. In 1598 the Edict of Nantes granted limited toleration to Protestants– and this was for practical reasons, not those of principle. The French monarchy was thus confirmed as essentially and irrevocably catholic.

Kings were also by definition warriors, protecting their dynastic interests with a bellicose foreign policy.[8] Foreign and civil war arose from both international challenges and internal religious tensions. The civil and religious wars of the second half of the sixteenth century tested the French monarchy and its embryonic state to the limits. Nevertheless, when Henri IV restored peace at the end of the sixteenth century, he was able to build upon some crucial developments in administration and governance of the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that his immediate predecessors had taken further. In terms of territory, France was larger because a number of provinces had been attached to the monarchy by purchase, inheritance or escheatment: Dauphiné in 1456, Burgundy in 1447, Provence in 1481, and Brittany was finally secured by marriage in 1532. The relationship of these provinces to the crown was contractual, which left them a fair measure of independence from French law, able to preserve their own legal and structures and governing traditions. In 1472 a concordat with the Pope had confirmed the French crown's rights over appointments in the French church and thus given access to a vast source of patronage that could be exploited by the monarchy in its relations with the nobility. During the reign of Francis I (1515-47) venality of office was regularised as a system, such that the crown could profit from selling offices to raise war finance. In 1604, an annual tax on office known as the Paulette was imposed, which allowed office-holders to pass their charge to their heir if they died. Further important steps were taken towards a more efficient organisation of royal business in the second half of the sixteenth century. Under Henri II (1547-59) four secretaries of state were created, each with a certain number of provinces to administer. Henri III (1574-1589) reorganised the court more along Spanish lines, Henri IV re-established royal finances and compromised sufficiently with courtly and provincial elites to restore and extend royal authority.[9]

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[8] J. Cornette, *Le roi de guerre. Essai sur la souveraineté dans la France du Grand Siècle* (Paris, 1993)
[9] Nicolas Le Roux, *Un Régicide au nom de Dieu. L'assassinat d'Henri III* (Paris, 2006); J. Boucher *La cour de Henri III* (Rennes, 1986); M. Greengrass, *France in the Age of Henri IV: The Struggle for Stability* (London 1984).

The power of the monarchy nevertheless remained very limited both in practice and theory. At this time the language used to discuss or describe the state was neither modern nor institutional. Authority was thought of in moral terms, for power itself carried with it, or was even defined as, a moral responsibility based on divine and natural law. It also reflected both the medieval and classical heritage. Relations between the king and his subjects were modelled in important ways on analogies between the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy, which were in perpetual conflict over their temporal powers. Thus 'the king is emperor in his own kingdom', often cited by royal lawyers, was a maxim based upon the imperial victory in this contest, and it meant that just as the Holy Roman Emperor had won independence from Rome in temporal matters, so too had the kings of France emancipated themselves the Holy Roman Emperor, recognising no suzerain. [10] There was also a sense that the kings had the same temporal rights as the Emperor did in his domains.

The political entity that would later be called the state was also known in the renaissance as the 'république' or commonwealth, for the modern sense of 'the state' had not yet come into being and the word still meant something like 'the status' (of monarchy).[11] People thought in terms of a body politic, with harmonious relations between its various parts, just as in the human body, of which the king was the head, and they conceived of government as paternal. Although supreme power was thinkable, its legitimate exercise was regarded as being confined to certain spheres of activity and the notions of counsel by the *grands* and consent from the people were still important. Notions of consultation and representation were deeply embodied in village assemblies, in elections to town councils (even though they were effectively oligarchies), in provincial estates, in the corporate institutions of society, in the guilds therefore and in the occasional meetings of the estates general that brought together deputies from the three orders of the realm. At this time, the rather hazy notion of absolute monarchy therefore included elements of representation and consent. Even though the monarchy in the seventeenth century developed institutions and powers that made it very much more powerful, and a separate entity from society, the legacy of this more consensual or rights-based tradition continued to make itself felt. Conflict over legal rights was often quite marked both within and between corporate institutions, such as

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[10] On conceptions of authority in France, see H. A. Lloyd, *The State, France, and the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1983); Cosandey and Descimon, *L'absolutisme en France.*
[11] On the meaning of 'lo stato' in Machiavelli, see J.H. Hexter *The vision of politics on the eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel* (London and New York, 1973) pp. 150-78. The limited vision of authority that prevailed in society is stressed by J. Russell Major, 'The French Renaissance monarchy as seen through the Estates General', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 9, 1962, pp. 113-125.

judicial bodies, trades corporations and even religious orders. Indeed, notions of rights and representation would undergo a notable revival in the last decades of the regime.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the language of monarchy developed, always in the direction of pre-eminence over society and institutions. New words and concepts were invented, perhaps the most important being 'sovereignty', but the content of these concepts would also develop over time. There was a self-conscious royal politics of language. After the wars of religion, the monarchy insisted on a language of service to the king or to the state, rather than to the commonwealth. Although the change in language reflected new strengths as well as goals, it also masked notable continuities in the relationship between state and society. Many political beliefs remained remarkably constant over the centuries. One was that the right of the monarchy to interfere with private property by levying taxes without consent was limited. New taxes were always contested, unless it could be argued defending the public good made them necessary, as in wartime. Another fundamental belief was that it was the king's duty to dispense justice and therefore to himself respect the laws and contracts that bound together society and the state. If Bossuet could argue in *Politics taken from Holy Scripture* (1709) that subjects (and not citizens) should never challenge an unjust or arbitrary ruler, for God would punish him, he nevertheless also argued that the ruler should always behave justly and respect the traditional checks on his power. Bossuet's sense of the limitations on royal power did not differ very much from those put forward by Seyssel writing about the monarchy in 1517.[12] Over time some core political beliefs might be expressed in different language, or even with different justifications underpinning them, because the language had changed over time as ideologies developed. In the period coinciding with the rise of absolute monarchy, education for the social in the classics and theology became the norm. In a regime based on precedent, tradition, and contract, the French and classical past was always present and available for exploitation by all parties. It is important to appreciate that for the educated classes in the eighteenth century, the source of political ideas was by no means entirely 'the Enlightenment', which might seem dangerously radical. Theology, French history and Classical Antiquity all remained powerful inspirations. Political writings and specific arguments also contained elements from the past that had been re-appropriated, revisited, and were then expressed in association with more modern concepts. In eighteenth-century France new bricolages were put in place with cross fertilisation from other countries, most notably from England but also from European civic humanism.

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[12] C. Seyssel, *The Monarchy of France*, ed Donald R. Kelley, trans. J.H. Hexter, additional translation by M. Sherman (1515, published 1519) (New Haven, Conn, 1981); J. B. Bossuet, *Politics drawn from the very words of Holy Scripture*, ed. P. Riley (Cambridge 1990).

Government and administration

Over the same two centuries, from about 1550 to 1750, many advances were made in terms of central and provincial administration. This was usually done by increasing the number of jurisdictions or adding a new layer to a pre-existing layer of office-holders.[13] Yet it would be quite wrong to imagine an administrative geography that was coherent and rational. The various civil, ecclesiastical, and fiscal authorities generally had different and overlapping areas or jurisdiction, such that it was hard for even the central government to understand the local situation. Communications were slow and accurate maps were lacking, though cartography was being developed. For most of the period, administrative developments were not prompted by an overall vision of a new kind of state or administration, but by needs and concerns that had to be addressed almost immediately. The two great impulses towards change were the fear of disorder and religious conflict, and the need for money to finance the foreign and civil wars. The nature of warfare was changing from mercenary forces to standing armies, and larger armies were needed for siege warfare.[14] Military costs rose exponentially, around three quarters of royal revenue was spent on war. Revenue needed to be increased and central authority enhanced in order to do so. There were challenges and resistances to this process. The development of central power and provincial obedience was not a story of progress on all fronts, for there were also periods of intense strain and even regression. We have noted the disorder of the civil and religious wars from the 1560s, and the long reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715) might more controversially (until recently) serve as another example of uneven development. This period has always been regarded as the crucial period in the development of absolute monarchy, largely because historians focus only on the first half of his reign. Even today there are very few studies of the period 1683-1715. For some historians the years from 1661 to 1683 witnessed the making of modern France, and a transformation in the very nature of the monarchy.[15] Wedded to an idea of institutional progress, they could not envisage that what they thought was made in twenty years was unmade in the next thirty. And yet the reign should not be regarded as a single period of progress, for although

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[13] A L. Moote, 'The French crown versus its judicial and financial officers', *Journal of Modern History*, 34, 1962, pp. 146-60; R.R. Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite. The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France* (New Haven and London, 1978); for a contrasting view see R.J. Bonney, *Political change in France under Richelieu and Mazarin, 1624-1661*, Oxford, 1976, which owes an interpretative debt to Pagès.

[14] The military establishment was a crucial part of the early modern state and the absolute monarchy, but considerations of space and overlap preclude its full discussion here. See in this volume, David Parrott 'Armed Forces', chapter **3**?

[15] See G. Pagès, Essai sur l'évolution des institutions administratives en France du xvie siècle à la fin du xviie siècle *Revue d'histoire moderne*, 12, 1932, pp.   and see his *La Monarchie d'ancien regime* (Paris, 1928). For the most recent French correctives, see O. Chaline *La France de Louis XIV* (Paris, 2005); L. Bély, *La France au XVIIe siècle: puissance de l'état, contrôle de la société* (Paris, 2009).

Colbert and Louvois brought about notable change, the extreme fiscal requirements of the later years may have witnessed the undoing of much of the administrative development. Many of the old expedients were revived out of desperation, to the extent that many of the practices of Richelieu's time were revived.[16]

The most positive argument that can be made is that the affirmation of administrative structures would later make it possible to extend the reach of the monarchy into and over society. Instead of accepting the idea of the making of the modern state, as Tocqueville did, most historians of the reign today stress the many weaknesses and contradictions that led Louis to create a working compromise with the elites, whose subjection owed more to the rewards on offer than it did to a policy of crushing noble power.[17] This compromise then became a permanent element in the structure, preventing subsequent reforms. Louis XIV was a master of political theatre and political management, able to create and manipulate an illusion of power without perhaps depriving other authorities and bodies of their powers as much as was thought. But behind the illusion lay nevertheless the extraordinarily costly achievement of fielding armies of 300,000 –400,000 men for decades of almost constant warfare. It was not a modern state that developed this capacity, but a compromise state that resorted to a wide variety of ad hoc measures, bluff, negotiation and intimidation to extract resources and of course it depended upon a huge system of royal debt. There was a price to pay: the monarchical state of the eighteenth century, while certainly more efficient and better ordered than its earlier incarnation, nevertheless suffered from the failures and compromises of the earlier period and found itself beset with contradictions and blockages, too weak to reform itself sufficiently to face even more expensive wars without severe strain. In the same period the Spanish monarchy failed to sustain itself, while in the British Isles a different kind of regime emerged with a more efficient system of public debt based on the confidence inspired by a representative regime.

Concepts

The concepts which gave structure to the monarchy also formed the basis of social organisation. For this reason, absolute monarchy should not be seen as separate from society but as a socio-political system. In the Middle Ages royal power was based on seigneurialism, with the

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[16] D. Dee, *Expansion and Crisis in Louis XIV's France: Franche-Comté and the Absolute Monarchy, 1674–1715* (Rochester, N.Y., 2009).
[17] For studies, see note 34, and for a comprehensive argument, W. Beik, 'Absolute Monarchy as social collaboration', *Past and Present*, 188, 1, 2005, pp. 195-224.

king as the seigneurial overlord, and to some extent this continued, until as a specific justification for royal authority it was largely superseded during the seventeenth century by other arguments. Other fundamentally important concepts that formed the basis of social organisation were hierarchy, privilege, and corporatism, while notions of order, tradition and precedent were crucial elements of the early modern psyche. Such notions were also deeply embedded in royal institutions, legislative practices and assumptions, because they shared by everyone including the crown's servants. So royal power was paternal, traditionally limited, reasonable and not arbitrary, and it could over-ride its traditional limitations in time of need, for the safety of the people was the supreme law. To ensure continuity in the legal traditions, in a society that thought in terms of order, justice and jurisdiction, the lawyers had even invented a fiction that the king never died: he had two bodies, one mortal and one immortal or symbolic. 'The King is dead, long live the king.' The kingdom's legislation remained in force, therefore, even when the actual person of the king died.[18]

It was agreed that authority to rule came from God, a notion we know as divine right. Royal authority was inextricably bound up with theological concepts and the monarchy is best described a theocratic from at least the time of Charlemagne. Many of the political ideas and debates that characterised the evolution of monarchical authority were rooted in the debates over the power of the pope within the church in the Middle Ages, and the authority of the pope over the Empire. Some argued that he was the supreme authority within the church, others that his power was limited by church councils – hence the word conciliarism. The same arguments and debates were transferred and applied to the secular rulers in the early modern period. Whatever the precise limits of church and state, the notion of divine right legitimised a patriarchal authority to command in matters pertaining to the state. Authority was limited by divine and natural law, and in 1519 Claude de Seyssel described the 'absolute power' of the kings of France as limited by three essential checks. These were religion, justice and police. The first obliged the king to protect the catholic religion and refrain from excesses, for "*selon la Loi et Religion chrétienne ne peut faire choses tyranniques*" – and if he did act despotically, clerics could remonstrate with him.[19] The second was justice, which meant that the king should respect all civil and criminal law and its procedures, just as his subjects should. The third is a particularly old-regime notion, police, which combined both justice and administration, since in their eyes justice carried with it the duty of enforcement. It meant that the king should respect the institutions that adjudicated and

[18] E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957) (Princeton, 1981).
[19] C. Seyssel, *La Grande Monarchie de France*, ed, Pujol (Paris, 1961), p.116.

administered the laws and ordinances, all the more so since power was regarded as needing to be exercised in a Christian and rational fashion.

These ideas remained powerful throughout the last centuries of the monarchy and characterised the debates of the eighteenth century between crown and parlement. The regime cultivated a sense of its own past through its ceremonies and rituals, the writings of its royal historiographers and of the men of letters it patronised. As we have seen, by 'absolute' power or authority, the mind of the old regime meant an authority that was rather limited: this sovereign power was first of all confined to the proper sphere of the monarch and within that sphere was subject to these further limitations. The existing laws – which might be as much customary as written, and certainly included the contracts made between crown and various towns and provinces – implied limits to taxation without consent. Different legal systems existed, seigneurial, customary and royal, making legal issues complex.[20]

We shall see below that there were also significant practical checks on the exercise of royal authority. However, the notion of the royal prerogative was a crucial advantage for the crown. It was of course a king's right to pardon the condemned criminal or judge specific cases himself, but that was of little significance compared with a much broader notion. Since the king had a duty to defend the commonwealth, it was acknowledged that he had wider powers when necessary. Just as God might dispense himself from following his own rational laws of nature on occasion, so too might the royal power be absolved from the usual limits when truly necessary. If such authority was exploited too frequently or for too long, as in England in the 1630s and France in the time of Richelieu and Mazarin, opponents and vested interests might argue that temporary expedients were becoming permanent and therefore unconstitutional. In an age of almost constant warfare and ever increasing fiscal necessities, the safety of the public good or later of the state meant levying heavy wartime taxes that were supposed to be rescinded when peace came. This was inevitably just when the royal debts were at their highest and when peacetime taxation was required to pay them off: so because such beliefs limited taxation, a fiscal crisis followed every major war.[21]

What was the proper sphere of the state and its king in which legislative and juridical authority should be exercised? We must take a step back from modern ideas of public authority

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[20] See R. Descimon in J. Le Goff, ed., *La longue durée de l'État*, as well as Cosandey and Descimon, *L'absolutisme*.
[21] Philip Hoffman and Kathryn Norberg, eds, *Fiscal Crises, Liberty, and Representative Government 1450-1789* (Stanford, 1994); see also note ? below

and remember that very many of the attributes of a modern state – education, welfare, transport, even the collection of indirect taxes and economic policy – were not yet considered essential functions for state control. Writing in 1610, Loyseau listed the regalian rights as the right to make laws, create offices, decide upon peace and war, to have the final decision in judicial matters and mint money.[22] They certainly did not include the right to tax at will – which is thought by sociologists to be a crucial characteristic of a modern state, like a monopoly on taxation and military force. Even in terms of law the situation was not clear-cut. In theory royal legislation was paramount, but in practice, the local judicial-administrative rules drawn up by the sovereign law courts, known as parlements, actually had the force of law in their areas of jurisdiction. Customary and provincial law was not necessarily subordinate to royal laws, and royal legislation was often modified by their existence. The king could indeed create offices, but the office-holders themselves decided who bought or inherited them, subject only to a small annual tax, and the royal administration was staffed by venal office-holders with mixed loyalties and conservative priorities.[23] Precisely because the crown's ability to impose long-term direct taxation was limited, the royal prerogative was exploited to the maximum, such that a whole second system of indirect taxation grew up alongside the traditional direct taxes, making for an extraordinarily complex fiscal system in which even accounting was difficult.

The evolution of the absolute monarchy was profoundly conditioned by these severe conceptual limitations, and its policies on government were constructed with the aim of circumventing them. In an age of dynastic and religious warfare, fielding powerful armies and winning battles was vital, for at stake was the territory of the state and survival of the dynasty. To do this the crown took advantage of the haziness of the situation: there was no constitution, only a complex collection of practices, traditions and legislation. Edicts and innovations were endowed with propagandist preambles that justified them in terms of demand or traditional rights and duties. The great ordinances of the crown in the 1530s and 1660s were more of a codification than great innovations, although they did try to increase uniformity where possible.

The idea of a constitution did not exist for most of the period. When it did, by the 1770s, Turgot began an important *Memoir on the Municipalities* (by which he meant local institutions),

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[22] C. Loiseau, *Loyseau : Treatise of Orders and Plain Dignities*, ed. and trans, H. A. Lloyd (Cambridge, 1994).
[23] On venality of office see K. W. Swart, *Sale of Offices in the Seventeenth Century*. Utrecht, 1980; R. Mousnier, *La vénalité des offices sous Henri IV et Louis XIII.* Paris, 1971; D. D. Bien, 'Offices, Corps, and a System of State Credit: The Uses of Privilege under the Ancien Régime', in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture,* edited by K. M. Baker, vol. 1 (Oxford 1987) pp. 89–114.; W. Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1996).

by saying, 'Sire, the root of the problem comes from the fact that France has no constitution'. Madame de Staël, in her *Considerations on the French Revolution* agreed. Some historians would disagree, arguing that France had, like England, a customary constitution, oscillating around a point, sometimes towards more power and sometimes towards less.[24] This English analogy misses the point because it implies that conflicts were essentially constitutional, when in fact they were mostly about the jurisdictional competence of various bodies, including the king's council vis-à-vis other institutions. Jurisdictional conflict was the stuff of life, taking place between council and church, clerical and secular judicial bodies (where the parlements had an advantage because a Gallican tradition gave them supreme jurisdiction here, if they dared to exercise it), and between corporate bodies in the towns. The old regime lived with on-going confusions and contradictions that would be written out of any modern constitution worth the name. Legal historians have spilt much ink over the idea of fundamental laws in France. Yet, the only fundamental law that all sides agreed on was the Salic law, which prescribed inheritance of the throne in the male line and thus was an expression of paternalism. Even political theory had a jurisdictional tinge. Many of the 'political theorists' of the period were royal lawyers, or involved in state functions, and were therefore politically engaged. Discussion of royal policy or 'politics' was not encouraged, as these areas were mysteries of state that should remain veiled. With some notable exceptions, most authors were in the service of the king or his ministers. There were broadly speaking five types of writings that expressed ideas about monarchy. Royal legislation justified itself in terms of certain precepts that changed little over time, and these could be found in preambles to edicts as well as in speeches by the chancellors. There was a genre of advice to princes; another of royalist propaganda by loyal subjects or hired pens; the writings of critics of the monarchy, which were often prompted by religious persecution; and finally discussions of the nature of politics and authority by those we have come to regard as political theorists. The later notably include Hotman, Bodin, Lipsius, Loyseau, Hobbes, Fénelon, Montesquieu, d'Argenson, Rousseau, and Mably.

A rather indefensible tradition in the history of ideas has tended to exclude lesser writers and particularly the Protestant and Jansenist opposition doctrines. These were in fact very influential even on the major theorists, as the references in Rousseau's works will confirm, and they served to change the image of the monarchy with the reading public much more effectively than the texts of those in the 'canon'. In the eighteenth century the French debate on the authority of the monarchy included, in addition to leading secular theorists, the influential works of canon

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[24] Antoine, *Conseil du roi*, p. 21

lawyers such as Le Paige, Mey and Maultrot, all Jansenists, and translations from British writers in particular. From the 1750s the English commonwealthmen were read, along with John Locke, and Shaftsbury on virtue, Bolingbroke on the notion of a patriot king.

In an essay devoted to showing how the many different elements of absolute monarchy fitted together, we can do no more than mention the importance of the key political theorists. Jean Bodin's notion of sovereignty helped crystallise the idea of a state as an entity with the crucial quality of sovereignty. Justus Lipsius's neo-Stoic insistence upon moderation and rationality in the use of power, was perhaps even more influential, with the consequent development of the idea of rationality in the service of the state – raison d'état. Thomas Hobbes offered a defence of monarchy and the idea that the best form of legitimate power was a monarchy whose authority was based upon a contract that gave consent but which once given could not be revoked. In different ways, John Locke and Protestant opponents of the French persecution of the Huguenots after the revocation of the 1598 Edict of Nantes in 1685 stressed that government was based upon the consent of the people, in the form of a contract. Kings who behaved tyrannically broke the contract and forfeited their legitimate authority. The religious persecution by Louis XIV of both Protestants and Jansenists, to which could be added the devastation of the Palatinate, did indeed fuel an image of Louis as despotic or tyrannical. Fénelon and the Circle of the duke of Burgundy, educating Louis's grandson, provided a well-informed critique of the monarchy in practice and called for a nobility of service. François Fénelon's book *Télémach* published in 1699 was a hugely popular text of the eighteenth century; he advocated a monarch who would be more virtuous in a new and secular sense, devoted to the interests of his people. But during the eighteenth century the ideological hegemony of the monarchy was further undermined by a revival of conciliarism and republicanism – the latter not in the sense of a desire for a republic without a king, but in the sense of a monarchy subordinate to the wellbeing of the people. Rousseau, Mably and the Jansenists all challenged the notion of divine right monarchy with theories of legitimacy. The parlements expressed legal opposition to abuses of royal power, perhaps politicising the public as much as the persecuted Jansenists themselves did. The upshot was a decline in the sense of being ruled by a moderate and legitimate royal authority in favour of the idea that the French monarchy acted too frequently in a despotic fashion. Both the Jansenists and Rousseau regarded the source of sovereignty as popular, in the former case through a contentious interpretation of French history in terms of an ancient constitution going back to the Franks and in the latter, on the basis of a theory of social contract, The abolition of the parlements in 1771 by Chancellor Maupeou gave rise to a vehement patriotic critique of the monarchy in

practice. The rise of a new concept of secular virtue undermined the social privileges of the nobility and legitimised a more egalitarian active citizenship.[25] The monarchy attempted to reconcile this with its own traditions somewhat unsuccessfully, by adopting the new rhetoric of a patriot king.[26] The tarnished image of Louis XV the (too) well beloved gave way to Louis XVI as the philanthropist: *Louis le bienfaisant*. It failed to convince an educated public now steeped in a more participatory notion of citizenship.

Institutions

What were the institutions of the absolute monarchy that enabled it to govern France? Beginning at the top, was the king in his council of state where policy was made. While kings could call whomever they liked to their council, in the Middle Ages and sixteenth century there was a presumption that great lords and princes of the blood would be called upon as 'ministers' – as members of the council of state were known. When Louis XIV desisted from this policy some years after the Fronde (civil wars, 1648-53), in which the princes played a part, it was because he both wanted to make clear his emancipation from this group, and because could afford to do so. He found other ways of rewarding them with honours at court, in the army and with provincial governorships. The secretaries of state were members of the council of state, but not all were called to the highest council, although they would all be members of at least one lesser council such as those of despatches, for internal affairs, the judicial council, or perhaps the council for finance. The religious council would contain the royal confessor, the archbishop of Paris and perhaps another trusted cleric.

The central administration was in the hands of four secretaries of state: for foreign affairs; war; marine; Paris and the royal household combined; and at times a secretary for the Protestants; and in addition a superintendent of finances who was later, from Colbert's time, given the title of controller general; and a keeper of the seals and chancellor who were usually the same person. The chancellor had overall responsibility for the judiciary, the controller general for all aspects of financial administration, while the provinces were divided into four groups – one for each secretary of state, with the foreign affairs minister having the frontier provinces. The controller

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[25] See M. Linton, *The Concept of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Houndsmills, 2001).
[26] For patriotism, see D. A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France. Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001; E. Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750-1770: La France face à la puissance anglaise à l'époque de la guerre de Sept Ans*, SVEC 365 (Oxford, 1998); J.M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined. The Patiotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London, 2005).; P.R. Campbell, 'The Politics Of Patriotism In France (1770–1788)' *French History*, [In press def 2010 about to go online, so pp to follow in October.]

general did not have control over the ministerial budgets, so it was his duty to raise revenue, deal with the numerous commercial and economic issues that arose, as well as direct the intendants of finance. From the time of Louis XIV's minister Colbert, the financial bureaus were the most administratively developed in a bureaucratic sense. Sometimes the same minister held multiple offices, like Colbert, Louvois or Pontchartrain.[27] Policy decisions were as far as we know genuinely conciliar, for although detailed records of the council have disappeared, it is known that even Louis XIV always sided with the majority (but of course ministers might seek to please him by taking his line). Numerous royal lawyers attended councils, drawn from a corporation of masters of requests, from whom commissioners might be drawn to serve as intendants in the provinces. The royal council as well as dealing with administration and policy, was the final court of appeal, for this long remained a judicial system of government more than an administrative one. A characteristic of the modern state was the development of different specialised councils. By the mid eighteenth century many tasks had become a matter for routine administration, so some historians prefer to call the state at that point an 'administrative monarchy'. Given that so many aspects retained a juridical character and that informal techniques of power remained widespread, this remains a contentious assertion.[28]

The internal affairs of the kingdom can be considered as religious, judicial or financial. The church formed a separate estate in this society and largely governed its own affairs, with its own courts and financial management. Its many clerical sees and offices offered considerable patronage to the monarchy, which used it chiefly to gratify the nobility in return for loyalty. All the bishops, archbishops and cardinals were noble, as were the vast majority of abbots, canons, while priests tended to be bourgeois, with a tendency to a lower social station for priests in the eighteenth century. Thus the church offered careers to sons and daughters of the well off. The church was rich, owning perhaps 20% of the land, but it was not taxed directly by the king. The church prayed for society, so it offered a 'free gift' at its five yearly assembly of clergy, which it collected through its own financial institutions. The alliance of throne and altar was close but not always easy, though it brought great advantages to the monarchy, as the church preached obedience to divinely ordained power.

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[27] See 'Serviteurs du roi: quelques aspects de la fonction publique au XVIIe sicle', Special issue, *Dix-septième siècle*, 42-3, 1959; D. Richet, 'La formation des grands serviteurs de l'état' *L'Arc*, 65, 1976, pp. 54-61; more recently, J. Meyer, *Colbert*, Paris, 1984; C. Frostin, C. Frostin, 'L'organisation ministrielle sous Louis XIV: cumul d'attributions et situations conflictuelles, *Revue d'histoire du Droit français et étranger*, 58, 1980, pp. 201-26; an impressive survey of most aspects of the central government of France in the long reign of Louis XIV is now T. Sarmant & M. Stoll, *Régner et Gouverner. Louis XIV et ses ministres* (Paris, 2010).
[28] R., Mousnier ed., *Le conseil du roi de Louis XII à la Révolution*, P.U.F., Paris, 1970and M. Antoine, *Le Conseil du roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva, 1970);

In terms of the development and reach of the state, the administration of justice was accepted by society. While disputes and differences took place between courts, their very existence was not unpopular. The royal courts were in a hierarchy. At the lower level were the *prévôtés*, then came the bailiwick or seneschal courts, and lastly the thirteen parlements. The latter were courts of appeal, with wide powers of 'police', making them extremely powerful institutions in the provinces of France, while the Paris parlement alone had jurisdiction over about two fifths of France. Their *arrêts* or regulatory pronouncements had force of law, and royal legislation had to be registered by the parlements to ensure its conformity with previous legislation and provincial codes. They could and did remonstrate to the king if they felt that the law, the province or their interests were being undermined. Conflicts between competing jurisdictions were the stuff of life in this regime, and suits were taken by plaintiffs to the court most likely to give a favourable judgement, and appeals were exploited to profit from such conflicts. Early modern society was extremely litigious. By and large justice at this level was for the well off, and concerned property cases. Nearly 100,000 seigneurial courts existed to deal with the affairs of the poorer rural population. Since there was until the eighteenth century no police force, only inefficient companies of archers in rural areas, criminal cases depended largely on local people or the *maréchaussée* first catching the offenders, which was relatively infrequent. Penalties were often severe for those who were condemned, years in the galleys or the death penalty being frequent and accompanied by royal ceremony and ritual, which sought to impress and dissuade.[29]

Financial administration

Royal lawyers exploited the concepts of the king as first magistrate of the kingdom, and the first seigneur, to erode independent jurisdictions where they could, extending royal judicial authority as much as possible. With a population of twenty million in this period, the French monarchy was the richest and most populous of Europe. Nevertheless, the cost of war rose astronomically from the sixteenth century onwards, as siege warfare developed, necessitating larger armies that cost more and needed to be supplied. War was so constant from the 1630s that there were only brief periods of peace between then and 1713, while the eighteenth- century wars, lasting from three to seven years, were ever more costly. The strain on state finances was huge, always urgent, and it

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[29] I.A. Cameron, *Crime and repression in the Auvergne and the Guyenne, 1720-1790* (Cambridge, 1981); J. Ruff , *Crime, justice, and public order in Old Regime France: the Sénéchaussées of Libourne and Bazas, 1696-1789* (London, 1984); R. M. Andrews *Law Magistracy and crime in old regime Paris* (Cambridge, 1994), Part 2.

far outstripped the older-style credit system of the bankers. In the seventeenth century the crown needed to raise vastly greater revenues as well as develop different ways of raising loans, for credit was now crucially important. The great growth area of the state was therefore in the realm of fiscality and financial administration. A host of *traitants* and *financiers* came into being, as the credit system based on office and bankers in towns such as Lyon, gave way to a system based on office, estates and above all, 'la finance' – namely an extensive class of financiers tied to ministerial and noble clans. [30]

Two types of financial organisation existed in regional France, those of the *pays d'élections*, and those of the *pays d'états*. The *élections* were financial administrative areas for direct taxation created in the fourteenth century, and extended over northern and central France; they numbered about 150 in the seventeenth century. The extension of *généralités*, roughly conforming to the provinces of France in most cases, in the mid sixteenth century, provided a further fiscal circumscription, with military governors as well. Each *généralité* had a bureau des finances and a dozen or more treasurers general who oversaw the fiscal system there. The peripheral provinces, most acquired by the crown later than the institution of the *élections*, had retained their provincial estates composed of representatives of the three orders of society, essentially leading clerics, nobles and the mayors of important towns, presided over by the royal governor or a loyal archbishop. The estates had their own financial organisation and gave a free gift to the crown that was often agreed only after hard bargaining and royal confirmation of local privileges. Chancellor Marillac tried to extend the more productive system of *élections* to these provinces in the 1620s, but while he succeeded in Guyenne, he provoked revolt in Burgundy, Dauphiné and Provence. These provincial estates subsequently bought off this attempt, and thus along with others retained a privileged position compared to the *pays d'élections*, as they paid far less – and therefore remained ripe for further fiscal pressure from the monarchy. Some estates declined out of existence or were not convened again in the seventeenth century, such as those of Dauphiné, Guyenne, and Normandy, but notably vigorous ones survived in Burgundy, Languedoc, Brittany, as well as in some smaller regions, while Provence kept its liberties or

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[30] Recent work on state finance in practice has done much to revise the image of a powerful state by revealing its strategies: M. Wolfe, *The Fiscal System of Renaissance France* (New Haven, 1972); J. Dent, *Crisis in finance: crown, financiers and society in seventeenth.century France* (New York, 1973); R. Bonney, *The King's debts: finance and politics in France 1589-1661* (Oxford, 1981); F. Bayard, *Le monde des financiers au XVIIe siecle* (Paris, 1988); D. Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir et société au grand siècle* (Paris, 1984); D. Hickey, *The coming of French absolutism: the struggle for tax reform in the province of Dauphiné, 1540-1640* (Toronto, 1986); J.B. Collins, *Fiscal Limits of Absolutism: Direct Taxation in Early Seventeenth- Century France* (Berkeley, 1988); J. Félix, *Finances et politique au siècle des Lumières: le ministère L'Averdy, 1763-1768* (Paris, 1999); M. Potter, *Corps and clienteles: public finance and political change in France, 1688-1715* (Aldershot, 2004); and on the comparative weight of taxation, see R. Bonney, ed, *The rise of the fiscal state in Europe, c. 1200-1815* (Oxford 1999).

privileges but with an assembly of communities. Although the estates represented provincial particularism, the crown was not hostile in principle to the estates, for they were regarded as legitimate institutions providing a secure source of loans to the treasury on the basis of their relatively sound fiscal administration. Moreover, in a legitimate legal monarchy, there was no sense, until the later eighteenth century, that conformity should be introduced for its own sake.

The collection of taxes was of course an even more contentious aspect of the state. There was a strong belief that the king should live off his own revenues from his own lands or domain, from the taxes on commerce, the receipts from the sale of offices and the receipts from the *taille*, the latter being a hearth tax that had become permanent after the Hundred Years War. The parlements and estates would reject or undermine new peacetime taxes, and local hostility to agents of the fisc was often vehement. In this time of perpetual fiscal crisis, the government therefore increasingly resorted to indirect taxation. It did indeed raise the tithe as much as possible, but costs of collection were high, due to poor organisation and corruption. A host of monopolies, tolls, entry taxes, urban sales taxes, known as *octrois* and *aides*, and the hated salt tax, the *gabelle*, were increased, invented or extended. They were often collected by associations of tax farmers who paid in advance and kept the profits. The great finance minister of Louis XIV, Colbert, united many of these indirect taxes into five great tax farms run by forty farmers general who bought the lease for five years with ready money up front. These men and many of the financial officials were also bankers of a sort, investing the state's receipts that they held temporarily for their own benefit. The farmers general built up a huge force of *commis* or employees who collected the taxes and were highly unpopular. This organisation formed in part of France what some might wish to interpret as a privatised modern administration.

Corruption was a matter of degree at that time, but the whole system suffered from what we would regard as systemic inefficiency as well as more or less blatant corruption. The fact that the whole provincial and royal administration was run by people who had purchased their offices did not make for zeal and innovation. Venality of office was frequently extended as a fiscal expedient, effectively raising loans from the rich who in return for the price of the office, and the office itself, would receive *gages* amounting to a rate of interest on their purchase price. Because the commissions paid to financiers to sell offices amounted to 25%, and because the *gages* (which were interest payments not salaries) continued ever after, the sales provided a short-term gain and a long-term loss. The crown could never afford to abolish venality even though it was aware of the disadvantages.

In the face of its fiscal difficulties, the crown created a new level of administration, the intendants. They were invariably officeholders, often clients of governors or ministers, most often also masters of requests from the council, with special commissions that gave them wide powers of inspection to root out corruption and increase revenues. Like other corps of office-holders, they intermarried extensively. What made them different from many officials was the fact that their powers depended upon their royal commission. They were thus judicial officers specially appointed to a generality (province) or army, to serve as the eyes and ears of the ministry with wide powers of intervention. Naturally, they often engaged in conflicts with existing authorities, most notably with the officials of the *élections* (financial circumscriptions headed by a financial officer called an *élu*) whose task they almost supplanted. Their role developed over a long period, with the period of Colbert being the most systematic. Officers with royal commissions had begun to be used under Henry II, they then became much more frequent in the 1630s, and were so extensively employed and so unpopular in 1648 that they had to be withdrawn upon the demand of the rebellious parlements. Cardinal Mazarin returned to them after the civil war, and then Colbert made them a mainstay of his administrative efforts in the provinces. He conferred a huge range of tasks upon them, requiring reports on all manner of matters, from the loyalty of local elites to fiscal corruption, commerce and manufacturing. Too many local conflicts undermined their powers of action, and Colbert for example often had to remind them to respect established jurisdictions and work with powerful local allies. Naturally with so many tasks, they needed help, and gradually, in the eighteenth century, the intendant became an intendancy, with sub-delegates and commis who were recruited locally. Tocqueville and later historians saw them as ruling provincial France and as the prime agents of administrative centralisation. The picture today is more nuanced, for studies have shown that compromise with the local elites was often the way forward… or could lead back to an easier life in Paris or Versailles or a post as First President of a provincial parlement. Some intendants were efficient administrators, others less so. In the eighteenth century some, like Turgot in Limoges, were notably enlightened and worked to prevent noble exploitation of the peasants, and to improve life in their generality. Their functions became increasingly well organised as the century progressed.[31]

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[31] On intendants, see Harding, op. cit, R. Bonney, op. cit, A. Smedley-Weill, *Les Intendants De Louis XIV* (Paris, 1995); F.-X. Emmanuelli, *Pouvoir royal et vie régionale en Provence au déclin de la monarchie* (2 volumes, Lille, 1974), H. Fréville, *L'intendance de Bretagne , 1689-1790*, 3 vols, I (Paris, 1953); M. Bordes, *L'administration provinciale et municipale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1972) and the classic J. Marchand, *Un intendant sous Louis XIV: administration de Lebret en Provence : Etude sur l' administration de Lebret en Provence (1687-1704)* (Paris, 1889).

Notwithstanding the work of the intendants, because of the way the system of privileged exemptions from direct taxation worked, the great problem for the absolute monarchy was how to tax the rich. Most nobles and clerics were severely under taxed in terms of their wealth, and even the richer urban bourgeois could manage to buy some minor office that would exempt them from the tithe. Forced loans were levied on the corps and corporations, urban privileges were threatened and thus required to be bought off, and nobles might be subject to *taxes d'office* by intendants and those who claimed exemptions had to produce their titles for royal inquiries. Failure to produce their written titles could of course could push them down into the ranks of the bourgeois, as usurpers, and the inquiries were highly unpopular. Such an inquiry preceded the revolt in Brittany in 1675, where the local elite was more or less complicit with the rebels and notably failed to re-impose order. Nevertheless, such inquiries were successful in stamping out illegitimate exemptions through usurpation under Louis XIV– leaving the door open wider for the monarchy to sell titles of nobility to those who could live nobly and afford to buy the office of (strictly non practising) royal secretary. Thus the nature of nobility changed such that at the end of the old regime about half of the order, whose numbers declined, had been ennobled since 1660.[32]

Means and techniques of government

How did the absolute monarchy make use of the various means of government open to it, how did it operate in practice? The administration and judicial institutions of course provided a vital source of control over society. This was limited by the isolation of many areas of France, poor communications, a relative ignorance of provincial society and even geography by the central government, and by the serious limitations inherent in a venal system of office holding. Provincial parlements and estates may have been powerful, acting on behalf of the king, but they were often able to resist his demands by inefficiency, foot-dragging and even open opposition. They were fiercely attached to their privileges and to their provinces, and were often dominated by conflicting factions. On the other hand, they tended to perform their functions relatively well given the prevailing standards, and were afraid of the king and his ministers. The fact that provincial society was dominated by powerful elites could be an advantage for the monarchy if it knew how to use them. These families either had ties to grand courtly families or had networks of

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[32] On the size of the nobility Michel Nassiet, 'Le problème des effectifs de la noblesse dans la France du XVIIIe siecle', in *Traditions et innovations dans la société française du XVIIIe siècle,* Paris, 1995. Nassiet supersedes the estimates in G. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985).

friends and relations in many of the important local offices.[33] Far from such relations declining in the early modern period, they were co-opted into the service of the state over time, and perhaps the most efficient centralisation that took place was the centralisation of patronage and clientage in the hands of the king during the seventeenth century. As governors, the Condé dominated Burgundy from the 1630s right up to the Revolution, and controlled access to many local offices through their favour and their regiments provided important opportunities for local nobles. Under Louis XIV the duc de Chaulnes was powerful in Brittany, the Villeroy for generations in the Lyonnais, the Noailles in Languedoc, the Harcourt in Normandy. Let us not accept the myth of the domestication of nobility that was essentially in opposition to the monarchical power. The nobility as a whole had never been in opposition to the monarchy, only some families and interests, and the nobility had much to gain from the honour of service, and access to patronage and royal finance at court. The monarchy continued to rely on the informal techniques of political management that employed trusted members of the higher nobility right up to the 1780s. [34] Later in the eighteenth century it is possible that the noble or upper bourgeois elites, encouraged by their power sharing, yearned for fuller local control in the face of what they regarded as an inefficient, corrupt and increasingly despotic monarchy. The urban elites were becoming citizens and wanted fuller rights.[35]

The price of advancement to lucrative and prestigious offices, in finances in particular, and social ascension, was loyalty to the crown and its ministers. While sixteenth century France suffered from much weaker royal power in some regions, the ruthless policy of Richelieu and the astute political management of Louis XIV effected a transformation. A compromise emerged during the reign of Louis XIV between crown and local elites. Conflicts remained, for the differences of interest and perception were sometimes too great, but cooperation became a

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[33] On patronage as government, see P. Lefebvre, "Aspects de la fidélité en France au XVIIe siècle: le cas des agents du prince de Condé", *Revue historique*, 250, 1973, pp. 59-106; Y. Durand, *Hommage à Roland Mousnier: clientèles et fidélités en Europe à l'époque moderne* (Paris, 1981); S. Kettering, *Patrons, brokers and clients in seventeenth- century France* (O.U.P., New York, 1986); Mettam, *Power and Faction*; Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France* (London, 1996); K. Béguin, *Les princes de Condé: rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du Grand Siècle* (Seyssel, 1999).
[34] The first study to stress compromise, management and negotiation under Louis XIV was A.N. Hamscher, *The Parlement of Paris after the Fronde: 1653-1673* (Pittsburgh, 1976) and almost all recent work on the parlements agrees, see n. ?? below; So too for other institutions: F.-X. Emmanuelli, *Un mythe de l' absolutisme bourbonien: l'intendance, du milieu du XVIIe siecle la fin du XVIIIe siecle (France, Espagne, Amérique)* (Aix-en-Provence, 1981); M. Biard, *Les lilliputiens de la centralisation : des intendants aux préfets, les hésitations d'un modèle français* (Seyssel, 2007); M.-L. Legay, *Les États provinciaux dans la construction de l'État moderne aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Geneva, 2001); J. Swann, *Provincial power and absolute monarchy : the Estates General of Burgundy, 1661-1790* (Cambridge, 2003).
[35] The implications of this independence are drawn out in for example, Z.A. Schneider, *The King's Bench: Bailiwick Magistrates and Local Governance in Normandy, 1670-174* (Rochester, N.Y., 2008), and M.-L. Legay & R. Baury, eds, *L'invention de la décentralisation. Noblesse et Pouvoirs en France et en Europe XVIIe-XIXe siècle* (Lille 2009).

mutually beneficial system. The local elites, both urban and rural, worked for the monarchy, and for themselves. By means of their control of provincial estates, tax burdens were transferred to the peasants in *pays d'états*, and the elite profited from the attractive investment opportunities in royal finances, as recent has shown. Nevertheless, such was the need for finance in the reign of Louis XIV, and so limited his means to raise direct taxes on the poor, that the nobility and officer-holders came under huge fiscal pressure and it is clear they deeply resented it. Two direct taxes fell on them, a new departure: the *capitation* of 1695 and the *dixième* of 1710, both intended to do away with exemptions. These formed the basis for the *cinquantième* of 1725 and the *dixième* of 1733 and the *vingtièmes* of 1749 and later.

In the last twenty-five years historians have come to understand the importance of patronage and clientage not only for social mobility but also for political control. As conflict was endemic between centre and periphery and between institutions in this corporate society, and because the monarchy rarely had the leisure to resolve issues in wartime, workable compromises had to be found. Although official documentation was careful to avoid any suggestion of negotiation between crown and corps, the reality was different. Governors and intendants, loyal clients of royal ministers or of the king himself, would intervene behind the scenes to manage assembles and effect solutions. Ministers would try bluff, threats, often in parallel with covert intervention. Over generations these techniques created an impression of obedience and most of the time genuine obedience. Complex networks of patronage and clientage stretching out into the provinces, and back, came together at the royal court. Largely as a consequence of recognising the importance of patronage, historians have re-evaluated the role of the court in the absolute monarchies. The court was a characteristic and defining institution in a monarchy, for every monarch had a household which reflected his *gloire*, his power and influence. The court was a theatre of power, bringing together the principal actors in all spheres. Ceremonial and display were employed to exalt the monarchy, to impress foreign ambassadors and the nobility. Representation was an important facet of the government in all absolute monarchies. Courts brought together an impressive range of performance and image designed to enhance the *gloire* of the monarch and create a sense of the permanence and legitimacy of royal power and authority.[36]

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[36] On the representation of royal power see Y. Bottineau, *Versailles, Miroir des princes*, Paris, 1989; J.-P., Néraudau, *L'Olympe du Roi-Soleil, ou comment la mythologie et l'Antiquité furent mises au service de l'idologie monarchique sous Louis XIV*, Paris, 1986; G. Sabatier, 'Representare il principe, figurer l'État. Les programmes iconographiques d'état en France et en Italie du XVe au XVIIe siècle' in *Genèse de l'État moderne: Bilans et perspectives* (Paris, 1990), pp. 247-58; P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (London 1994); N. Hochner & Thomas W. Gaehtgens, *L'image roi de François 1er à Louis XIV* (Paris, 2006).

This cultural management emanated out into the provinces, challenging provincial cultural autonomy and creating a sense of unity.[37]

The style of the courts that so characterised these monarchies, had its roots in the renaissance, and courts as social and cultural spaces represented the new codes of civility. This is a theme much stressed by the earliest sociologist of court society, Norbert Elias, whose work was taken up by historians in the 1970s. Elias made an invaluable point about rulers preserving equilibrium, because they could never entirely dominate their courts, and they therefore adopted a policy of maintaining a balance between rival factions. Elias saw court society as a coherent social figuration of key significance for the whole period and indeed for the subsequent spread of civility out into provincial and bourgeois society; more recent historians, while concurring, have extended the perspective into the political domain.[38] As English historians were the first to argue, the court was in fact the central institution of government in absolute monarchies. Ministers were courtiers, kept in place by factions, and their bureaux were often in close proximity to the court, if not actually in the same building (as in Versailles). To survive as bureaucrats, they had to operate within a realm dominated by the king and his courtiers, any of whom had posts giving them access to the royal ear. Such access carried influence, certainly for patronage, but also for policy in the case of aristocratic trusted advisors. The court was intimately connected to the royal finances, as the financiers in France at least, were mostly nobles who were connected to ministerial clans and channelled the huge wealth of the rich seigneurs into royal financial contracts. Constant pressure was needed to make sure the crown did not renege on its deals, access was vital, and so the web of influences at court was crucial to the higher nobility. Many of these families had not only captured the important court offices under Louis XIV, to retain them for generations, but were also patrons of provincial networks of clientage and influence.[39] These were now put at the service of the king, as we have seen above. The court was thus the centre of power broking in an age when the administrative system with its embryonic bureaucracy was too corrupt, inefficient and conflict ridden to sort out a crisis. Thus the court was a vital institution for political management.

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[37] C. Grell and A. Zysberg, *Histoire intellectuelle et culturelle de la France du Grand Siècle 1654*-1715 (Paris, 2005). Cultural unity ws challenged by local elites in a culture war: R. Mettam, 'Power, station and precedence: rivalries among the provincial elites of Louis XIV's France', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 38, 1988, pp. 43-62.

[38] N. Elias, *The Court Society*, London, 1983; Campbell, *Power and Politics*; J. Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam, 1996).

[39] L. Horowski 'Such a Great Advantage for My Son". Office-Holding and Career Mechanisms at the Court of France (1661 to 1789, *The Court Historian*, 8 (2003), pp. 125–175; idem, 'Der Preis Des Erfolgs. Gunst, Kapital und Patrimonialisierung am Hof von Versailles (1661 – 1789)', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 36, 1, 2009, pp. 71-91.

Resistances

In spite of its lapses into force and exemplary punishments, the absolute monarchy was certainly not a dictatorial regime removing all rights and privileges from estates and corporations in society. On the contrary, it was acknowledged as the guarantor of justice, security and religion. All groups in society needed this role to be played, and there was no credible alternative in France to monarchy. Republics existed elsewhere, but were considered viable only in small states, while those that came into existence like the Dutch and English republics, emerged more from the failure of a monarchical alternative than from strong sense of republicanism. Not until the American constitution was agreed as late as 1789 was there a credible republican alternative for a large state. Monarchy was therefore not challenged and it provided what France wanted. Opposition came from the defence of interests within the regime and was not fundamentally opposed to it ideologically. Most nobles had remained loyal to the monarchy or their conception of it. The officeholders who sometimes resisted royal authority nevertheless had much to gain from loyalty to the regime, for their office was their investment. Nevertheless, although venality of office ensured a low cost administration, it was hardly proactive and the beneficiaries could drag their feet to prevent innovation and change. In the seventeenth century if serious local disorder threatened they would generally repress it if they could or dared, but they were not above secretly encouraging resistance to fiscal demands from the state that undermined their own position as well as that of their peasants – most officeholders owned rural property with seigneurial rights attached. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries popular revolts against fiscality were common, with some lasting some months, until harvest time, and involving villages, towns and sometimes whole regions. Such were the Croquants of Périgord in 1594, the Nu-Pieds in Normandy in 1639, or the Breton revolts in the revolt of the stamped paper tax in 1675. Urban revolts were common, a typical one being in Aix-en- Provence in 1630. These revolts reveal intense hostility to the hated *gabeleurs,* as any employee of the fisc was called, in the seventeenth century.[40] In the eighteenth century the hostility was redirected towards the seigneurs and seigneurial dues. We do not know precisely why this was. It was probably due in part to an increased acceptance of the legitimacy of state claims and institutions, and perhaps the

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[40] On the changing relationship of revolts to the demands of the state, see Y.-M Bercé, *History of peasant revolts: the social origins of rebellion in early modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); , Foisil, *La révolte des nu-pieds et les révoltes normandes de 1639*, Paris, 1970; R., Pillorget, "Gen se et typologie des mouvements insurrectionnels: La Provence de 1596 1715, *Francia*, IV, 1976, pp. 365-90; W. Beik, *Urban protest in seventeenth-century France: the culture of retribution* (Cambridge, 1997); J. Nicolas, *La rébellion française: mouvements populaires et conscience sociale, 1661-1789* (Paris, 2002); J. Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1996).

population was more respectful because of transformation through the determined inculcation of catholic reform, with internalised authority and respect for hierarchy.[41] And yet, the seigneurs were increasingly challenged… but by whom? Was it by richer peasants and even by other seigneurs, resentful of attempts to exploit even them, or was it by poorer peasants resentful of profit-oriented encroachments on common lands and much needed traditional rights of pasture and gleaning?[42] In 1789 the outpouring of hostility to the seigneurial system in the countryside showed how far hostility to seigneurialism had developed.

In France the monarchy had been able to do cease calling a national representative institution after 1614. This gave it a huge advantage over England, with a parliament often reluctant to fund wars, while the Spanish monarchy in the seventeenth century made a sort of deal by which the nobility in the Cortes sold out the peasants to the monarchy.[43] In France the Estates General remained alive in historical thought, but this victory left the monarchy pre-eminent. In France the only institutions that could cause serious disruption to royal policy were the provincial estates, which could be useful if well managed, and the parlements, and in particular the parlement of Paris. In the mid seventeenth century a number of parlements resisted royal fiscal policies and administrative changes that accompanied them. They had little in common, for their own particularism prevailed, and even less in common with the princes who also joined in the Civil War known as the *fronde*, so the monarchy was able to put an end to the strife by 1653. The royal victory was less outright than subsequent propaganda suggested, as the breakdown of royal control showed clear limits to royal authority and power itself. In a policy not dissimilar to that of Henri IV after the Wars of religion, Louis XIV and Mazarin offered concessions and honour at court in return for princely submission. Thus the *grands*, who had harboured ambitions of

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[41] For social disciplining, see J. Delumeau, *Catholicism from Luther to Voltaire* (Westminster, 1977); N. Elias, *The civilising process* (2 vols, Oxford, 1969-82); R. Muchembled, *L' invention de l'homme moderne: culture et sensibilités en France du XVe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1994); and P. Gorki, *Disciplinary Revolution*.

[42] So much of the debate focuses just on Burgundy: the seminal work is P. de Saint Jacob, *Les paysans de la Bourgogne du nord au dernier siècle de l'Ancien Régime* (1960) (Dijon 1995); the revisionist position of H. L. Root, *Peasants and King in Burgundy* (Berkeley, Ca..1992), is based on untypical villages, as shown by the recent work of J. Hayhoe, *Enlightened Feudalism. Seigneurial Justice and Village Society in Eighteenth-Century Northern Burgundy*. (Rochester, NY, 2008); Robert Swartz, 'The Noble Profession of Seigneur in Eighteenth-Century Burgundy' in Jay M. Smith, ed., *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century. Reassessments and New Approaches* (University Park: Pennsylvania, 2006)**.** On Artois, refreshingly, see J.-P. Jessenne, *Pouvoir au village et révolution. Artois 1760–1848*, (Lille, 1987).

[43] I.A.A. Thompson, 'Castile: Polity, Fiscality and Fiscal Crisis', in Hoffman & Norberg, *Fiscal crisis*, pp. 140-80. Resistance was strong, see R. McKay, *The limits of royal authority: resistance and obedience in seventeenth century Castile* (Cambridge 1999): 'What has come to be known as Spanish absolutism did not conform to any of our available models, which leads me to suggest not that Spain was an exception but, rather, that the models are deficient. The seventeenth century Spanish monarchy was a hybrid of elements – localism and centralization; representation and autocracy; traditional aristocracy and modern state builders; order and improvisation… the form of rule in seventeenth-century Castile was not absolute in any sense.' Pp. 2-3.

aristocratic liberty and a natural right to offer royal counsel, especially during a regency, began to appreciate the advantages of cooperation, at which point the era of the over-mighty subject ended. During the reign of Louis XIV the courts were dealt with through a mixture of repression and intimidation combined with sensible political management that allowed them preserve most of their powers of jurisdiction and recruitment. They were after all necessary for the preservation of order and the governance of the regions. Late in the reign of Louis XIV, in 1713, the crown's religious policy provoked several parlements to resistance, along with a number of bishops and many curés and ecclesiastical orders. The thorny issue of the relative powers of throne and altar, independence from Rome, and fiscal policy, fuelled a number of severe crises between crown and parlements. These have been variously interpreted as jurisdictional disputes, or as more constitutional conflicts. The correct view is probably that jurisdictional conflict gave rise to constitutional rhetoric and claims. The result of decades of struggles, notably the 1730s, the 1750s, 1771-4, was to educate the public in those mysteries of state, and expose the constitutional issues that were best left under a veil.[44] In the 1760s there was significant conflict over fiscal reforms in which accusations of ministerial despotism were levelled by the courts at the ministry because fiscal measures were now regularly enacted without going through the royal council of state. The rhetoric of despotism was becoming increasingly familiar under the absolute monarchy.

The monarchy had, in spite of its fiscal pressure, remained largely respectful of intermediary institutions. It preserved its legitimacy by according respect to the parlements, except to those in areas that revolted. These were not of course representative institutions, but in the absence of the estates general after 1614, it was widely believed they defended France against an excess of royal authority. To exile them, or worse to remodel the parlements and exile the recalcitrant magistrates as Chancellor Maupeou did in 1771, exposed the monarchy to accusations of 'despotism'. These had been rehearsed during the parlementaire crises, because the religious group appealing to the courts to defend themselves from persecution (the Jansenists) revived earlier constitutional arguments from the middle ages and the sixteenth century about despotism. Just as for the Protestants, who saw the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes that had granted them freedom of worship as an illegitimate act and their persecution as tyrannical, the Jansenists believed persecution of their beliefs was equally tyrannical. The Jansenist quarrel dominated the

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[44] On the parlements, whose history is undergoing complete renewal of late, see W. Doyle, 'The Parlements', in K.M. Baker, ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, pp. 157-67; P.R. Campbell, 'The Paris parlement in the 1780s', in P. R. Campbell, ed, *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Houndsmills, 2006); and J. Swann 'Repenser les parlements au xviiie siècle : du concept de l' "opposition parlementaire" à celui de "culture juridique des conflits politiques", in A. J. Lemaître, *Le monde parlementaire au XVIIIe siècle. L'invention d'un discours politique* (Rennes, 2010), pp. 17-38.

politics of the period 1713 to 1771, providing a political education for the Parisian bourgeoisie and artisans. Thus, in 1771, the Maupeou coup destroyed the equilibrium in the state, and led to the association of monarchy with despotism. It set the stage for the revolution and for the idea of absolute monarchy that this essay has tried to counter.

The baroque state in the eighteenth century

The eighteenth century witnessed important developments in the monarchy and equally some important failures. The absolute monarchy took on more tasks more efficiently and its administration became more routine. The intendancies became more like governing agencies, with sub-delegates and numerous commis, while their powers of interference were increased. In comparison with the sixteenth century France was more policed, more ordered, but we should still not imagine that the forces of order were able to face the challenges efficiently. The state took on more tasks, from poor relief to road building for military purposes, to forestry management (for maritime construction). The successful development of an overseas empire was challenged by Britain, spectacularly so in the Seven Years War. Nevertheless the West Indian colonial trade fuelled a major expansion in French seaports like Nantes, Saint Malo and above all Bordeaux. But in an age of ever increasing military and naval expenditure, the absolute monarchy struggled to play its role as the dominant European power. At the root of this was its most important failure: the monarchy was unable to reform and adapt the fiscal system sufficiently. Reforms were indeed undertaken, but resistance at court and from the privileged and continued to undermine attempts by controllers general to include the wealthy more in the tax base. Administrative progress was made in gathering information on landed capital, making under-declarations more difficult, but the three major wars, of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years War and the American War of Independence all resulted in fiscal crises. In spite of the spectacular growth in overseas trade, as a more consumer society developed, commercial wealth was never sufficiently taxed by a system that remained directed towards landed wealth. Alongside this went the inability to develop a system of state credit that could deliver loans in wartime at a low interest rate. The failure of John Law's system of paper money tied to a state bank in 1720 made it impossible to move away from the seventeenth-century credit mechanisms based on the farmers general, the sale of rentes (annuities) through provincial estates and municipalities, and loans registered through the Paris parlement. French credit was more expensive than British, based on the Bank of England and the assent of parliament. Necker, the finance minister, favoured a more British model for French

finances, but he over-borrowed. The fiscal crisis that followed the American War prompted controller-general Calonne, with the support of Louis XVI, to attempt major reforms that fell short of conceding a share of power to the notables in society. At this point the resistance of the privileged and parlements to what seemed to them to be an extension of despotism was crucial, and the final failure of the absolute monarchy was assured by incompetent political management. What could have been a fairly limited rescheduling of debts was turned into a huge crisis that snowballed.[45]

The court system of government dating from Louis XIV's time had developed serious weaknesses under his successors. Ministerial rivalries paralysed the system in the 1780s. The political culture of the regime required constant political management from the ruler, which was an art that Louis XIV excelled at, but Louis XVI was sadly lacking in this ability, while his Queen, Marie-Antoinette was a political disaster. Her Austrian origins and association with an unpopular alliance provided an excuse for vitriolic whispering and pamphleteering that originated at court from opposing factions and disappointed interests. The final crisis of the regime saw the political institutions of the monarchy in conflict with each other and a notable failure of management. The baroque state was not necessarily doomed to failure, but it had prolonged structures and practices that dated from its greatest period into an eighteenth century that underwent significant economic, social, cultural and intellectual developments.

As we have suggested, the absolute monarchy survived and developed by rising above society, by taking an authoritarian direction shared by all states in this period, of necessity. With the benefit of hindsight, it could be argued that the absolute monarchy was in contradiction with the European heritage of representative ideas that, albeit weakened for generations, remained characteristic of many corporate institutions even in the monarchy. The eighteenth century witnessed the rise of a new language of virtue, citizenship, and patriotism, which found expression in a new public sphere in which the elites notably participated. The new ideas of the Enlightenment were widely diffused among the elites, and integrated into the monarchy itself, but the court and the nobility came to be seen as unvirtuous from 1750s onwards. There was a cultural shift that made it hard for the mystery of monarchy to survive without major concessions or reforms in a more rational and sceptical age. Demystification of the monarchy was apparent in the relative failure of its own representation programmes. Neo classicism was inimical to

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[45] For the crisis of the ancien regime see W. Doyle *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980, 3rd edition, 1999); Campbell, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2006); and T.E. Kaiser and D. K. Van Kley, eds., *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford, Ca., 2011).

monarchy, because of its classical republican imagery. A public sphere developed, with public participation increasingly taking place: in towns, public health measures, lighting embellishments, one senses a rise of citizenship in many small ways. This was legitimised by patriotic discourse and the concept of virtue. Virtue was no longer essentially Christian, it was no longer associated with warlike qualities befitting a noble or a king, but with *bienfaisance* and participation, with active citizenship.

Conclusions

From the later sixteenth century onwards the absolute monarchy developed into a state. This process owed most to *ad hoc* responses to internal disorder and external military requirements in an age of new military strategies, economic crisis and fierce dynastic rivalry. The state was far from simply modern or bureaucratic, for it employed a range of techniques of government, from administration to patronage to representation. It was on the one hand increasingly above society, and on the other deeply embedded in it and dependent upon the social conceptions that structured it. In the end the absolute monarchy fell out of step with society and some of the strong European traditions of representation and liberty, and it had never been able to put an end to traditional forms of resistance. The pre-eminence of the monarchy, its incursions into everyday life, its corruption and inefficiency, it spectacular own goals such as imprisoning writers with *lettres de cachet*, or remodelling the parlements, as well as the far from majestic qualities of its later rulers – all these generated criticism. From the mid eighteenth century everyone knew reform was necessary, but it was going to be conditional on granting more power to the nation. Thus the issue of who represented the nation became increasingly important. The royal claim was that the nation was embodied in the king himself. Critics saw the nation as separate, but who could speak for it? The parlements were not representative institutions, though they were able to block reform. Yet Maupeou proved that they could be abolished, while no one wanted an oligarchy of magistrates any more than they did an arbitrary government. Frenchmen remained royalist, but they wanted more participation, more citizenship, and less despotism from the monarchy.

In response to the reform proposals in 1787-8 society fractured along many different fault lines, some traditional, some new. This in turn led to a situation too complex and ideologically charged for the ministry to resolve it successfully using the traditional techniques at its disposal. The credit crisis led to the calling of the long dormant Estates General in 1789 just when an economic crisis hit hardest. The traditional form of the Estates was widely criticised, and even

before it met the tensions between the nobility and the Third Estate promised bitter conflict. Many were already arguing that what was needed was an assembly with wider powers truly representing the France of the day, not that of 1614. Such an assembly would be called not the Estates General, but a National Assembly. Perhaps this road to a constitutional monarchy was inevitable, certainly it had an element of European typicality. Although the French conflicts of 1789 were significant, it is worth bearing in mind that from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, whenever an absolute monarchy was forced to call upon its representative institution to ask for money, it usually had to trade power for money. The fiscal needs of monarchies at first led to more powerful states, and then in many cases tipped the balance in favour of representative institutions. This is what happened in 1789. A spectacular collapse spelt the end of the French absolute monarchy. What was new in 1789 was the desire of significant sections of society to participate in government not just to control money supply, but also to play a role in governing themselves in a more liberal regime. The collapse of absolute monarchy created the space for the contentious construction of a representative regime. That process more than any other set the scene for the end of absolute monarchy in Europe during the following century.

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