The Historical Journal, 40, 3 (1997), pp. 835–843. Printed in the United Kingdom
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NEW LIGHT ON OLD REGIME POLITICS

Louis XV and the parlement *of Paris, 1737–1755*. By J. M. Rogister. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xxv+288. ISBN 0-521-40395-2. £37.50, hbk.

Politics and the parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774. By Julian Swann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. x+390. ISBN 0-521-48362-X. £45, hbk, £19.95, pbk.

Revolt in prerevolutionary France. The Prince de Conti's conspiracy against Louis XV, 1755–1757. By John D. Woodbridge. Baltimore and London: the John's Hopkins University Press, 1995. Pp. xvii+242. ISBN 0-801-84945-4. £33, hbk.

French politics, 1774–1789. By John Hardman. London and New York: Longman, 1995. Pp. x+283. ISBN 0-582-23649-5. £15.99, pbk.

Preserving the monarchy. The comte de Vergennes, 1774–1787. By M. Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xi+256. ISBN 0-521-46566-4. £35, hbk.

For some time now it has been fashionable in some quarters to neglect eighteenth-century French politics, focusing instead on social and economic structures, *mentalités*, cultural history and, most recently, political discourse. The appearance of these five revised doctoral theses (two of which date from 1972), represents something of a challenge to these approaches. Do they signal a return to *l'histoire événementielle*, intended to remedy the dismissive attitude of a generation of historians? Three of the authors, Rogister, Swann and Hardman, are outspoken critics of discourse theories as represented by the influential work of Keith Baker, who has placed a new form of political contestation at the centre of ancien régime political culture.[1] This denial suggests that there might be a turn of the historiographical tide, as we are invited to take part in a renewed emphasis on nineteenth-century-style history. Although none of these authors has time for concepts, each throws new light on a neglected topic. Each draws upon new sources, previously hidden in private aristocratic archives, to recreate a fascinating series of episodes.

Given its crucial role in the fall of the monarchy in 1789, the Paris parlement has had pride of place in ancien régime politics, and Baker himself has focused closely on the wider debates occasioned by the parlementaire crises. Nevertheless, more recent approaches have paid little attention to the actual practice of politics. French and American discourse-oriented historians have studied closely the remonstrances and pamphlets published at the time, but have generally disregarded the evidence of manipulation of the parlements and the exploitation of rhetoric for more obscure or more traditional interests – such as the defence of the laws and corporate jurisdiction. They have not fully appreciated the significance of several important works on the parlements, which focus on the detail of magistral politics, published by Egret,

[1] The renewed interest in the political ideas of the period, be they Jansenist or Enlightened, has borne fruit in the form of several seminal studies, notably: K. M. Baker, *Inventing the French revolution* (Cambridge, 1990); R. Chartier, *The cultural origins of the French revolution* (Durham and London, 1991); D. K. Van Kley: *The Damiens affair and the unravelling of the ancien regime, 1750–1770* (Princeton, 1984); J. R. Censer and J. D. Popkin, eds., *Press and politics in pre-revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1987); S. Maza, *Private lives and public affairs. The* causes célèbres *in prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1993).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X97007462 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Shennan, Doyle, Hamscher, Gresset and Stone.[2] But these empiricist works have enabled us to move away from the simplistic notions of the sovereign law courts as either a selfish oligarchical group intent upon wresting a share of monarchical authority away from the crown, or, conversely, as a liberal and constitutional check on the despotic tendencies of the absolute monarchy. A picture has been emerging of parlementaire politics as dependent upon the interplay of factions operating both at court and within the parlement, where personal and institutional rivalries, a constant concern for the defence of jurisdiction, and often poor political management, were all factors in the generation of frequent crises. Indeed, this array of motives was quite as important as the more obvious causes of quarrels: royal, religious or fiscal policies. The latest offerings in this vein are by John Rogister and Julian Swann, who focus on crown–parlement relations from, respectively, 1737 to 1754 and 1755 to 1774; Munro Price and John Hardman also devote significant attention to the parlement in the 1780s. Although the first two monographs cover consecutive periods and each emphasizes the way the Versailles factions interacted with the law courts, they otherwise offer contrasting approaches.

Rogister's study is basically an analysis of the crisis of 1753–4 set in a long context. It begins with a fine chapter on the procedures and personnel of the parlement. The topography of the court is well explained, with engravings and plans reproduced, enabling us to see exactly where the action took place. We are even treated to a plan of Versailles showing the route the *gens du roi* took for their audience with Louis XV in 1749. Rogister argues that the zealous *parti janséniste*, so much in evidence in more recent work than his, was actually too small and too poorly connected to have had much of an influence on proceedings. This is highly contentious, for, while no one has claimed they did exert constant influence, it is known that they were deeply involved in the crises of 1730–2, 1737, 1753–4, 1756 and the trial of the Jesuits.[3] In a tendentious section (pp. 18–22) Rogister both concedes and denies their influence in his period. He seems to be trying to make the reasonable point that the Jansenists were not able to dominate the parlement consistently, and only had an effect when rivalries among the court's elite created an opening for them to exploit.[4] Unfortunately, he deduces this from procedures rather than from a close examination of the practice of the Jansenist magistrates and their legal and clerical friends outside the courts. When Jean-Omer Joly de Fleury, *avocat général* and elsewhere one of Rogister's principal sources, complains quite explicitly of the *parti janséniste*'s methods, his claim is described as 'exaggerated' (pp. 58–9). Rogister is determined to make his case that judicial politics was not primarily about ideology or issues: 'the conflict over *Unigenitus* and issues of finance simply added fuel to the latent struggle of personalities and factions' (p. 21). Both the

[2] J. Egret, *Le parlement de Dauphiné et les affaires publiques dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (2 vols. Grenoble, 1942); J. H. Shennan, *The parlement of Paris* (London, 1968); W. Doyle, *The parlement of Bordeaux and the end of the old regime, 1771–1790* (London, 1974); A. N. Hamscher, *The Paris parlement after the Fronde, 1653–1673* (Pittsburg, 1976); M. Gresset, *Gens de justice à Besançon, 1674–1789* (2 vols., Paris, 1978); B. Stone, *The parlement of Paris, 1774–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1981); idem, *The French parlements and the crisis of the old regime* (Chapel Hill, 1986).

[3] For the 1730s, see Peter R. Campbell, *Power and politics in old regime France, 1720–1745* (London, 1996), part 2, passim; on the 1750s see D. K. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757–1765* (New Haven, 1975), and Van Kley, *Damiens affair*.

[4] Were not such rivalries an almost permanent feature of the courts, generating frequent opportunities? He does concede that, if the Jansenist magistrates did predominate, it was because they worked harder than their colleagues – but might not this suggest a day-to-day preponderance in the courts that, perhaps, led to their influence?

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nefarious influence of ministerial factions, who would pull strings in the parlement to make things difficult for their rivals, and the intrigues of the rival families of leading magistrates, could disturb the normally harmonious relations between crown and parlement. 'Issues and parliamentary [*sic*] procedures could be manipulated in the interests of particular groups or individuals' (p. 35). His chapter on the period 1741–7 seeks to demonstrate this view both on fiscal and religious matters.

The rest of the book focuses upon the well-known quarrel over the refusal of sacraments, as this serious problem gathered force in 1751 and 1752 when Christophe de Beaumont, the archbishop of Paris, reintroduced certificates of confession, and matters escalated into a full scale crisis in 1753–4. The bishops supported Beaumont's confessional policy against the Paris parlement's stance that such refusals were a 'public scandal'. A royal commission attempted to come up with a satisfactory royal declaration, but a ruling in council was issued instead. This became the sticking point for the magistrates, who refused to register it, drawing up remonstrances which the king then refused to accept. The judges stopped work, and all except the members of the *grand' chambre* were duly exiled (and these were soon transferred to Pontoise). Some thorough research reveals the conflicting advice the king received, and the failure of negotiations undertaken by the prince de Conti. The exile lasted for a year and a half and was only brought to an end by a royal order and a compromise declaration of September 1754, which imposed silence on all parties to the dispute over sacraments.

The study has some undeniable merits. It has shed much light on details of magistral politics never before appreciated. The author has undoubted talent for the discovery of obscure and significant documents. He also has great insight into the *mentalité* of the upper echelons of the parlement. It is clear that, to a considerable extent, the senior families of magistrates were preoccupied with their own station, rivalries and advancement, often to the exclusion of wider political concerns, because they shared a view of the parlement's role, and that this is an important and neglected dimension of politics. Nevertheless, the awkward fact remains that the *parti janséniste* did succeed in influencing the course of events that led to the crisis of 1753–4. Exactly how they did this in terms of their own organization is almost entirely overlooked by Rogister. This is a great pity, for a fuller account more in tune with current Anglo-American historiography – a task surely possible in the twenty years at the author's disposal – would have been a more effective contribution. Further research in the Le Paige collection and in the pages of the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* would have been welcome, as would mention of the important role some lawyers played in advising and supporting their judicial colleagues – lawyers were a crucial group working in the parlement.[5] A wider brief (and longer period) might have led Rogister to see the circumstances leading to the *Grandes remontrances* of 1753 as in some ways typical or symptomatic rather than as 'an exceptional event because they were drafted in an unusual way in circumstances that were unique' (p. 176).

This is a narrative approach almost devoid of analytical categories. For all its incorporation of new sources (and Rogister's interpretation very much reflects Joly de Fleury's own vision), it avoids the wider issues and fails to provide us with conclusions. Major issues are too briefly summarized while minor details are dealt with at great length. Rogister is keen to make the point that the political world was a closed one that can be studied and understood without reference to discourse, public opinion or social conflict. In consequence, the confusion and mistakes of royal policy are well highlighted.

[5] D. A. Bell, *Lawyers and citizens. The making of a political elite in old regime France* (New York, 1994).

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The missing element is any exploration of the other forces at work in the genesis of a crisis, such as the concern to preserve an essential element of the court's jurisdiction, frustrated honour, or the role of the lesser magistrates, those ambitious, hotheaded and bored young men of the *enquêtes*.

Dr Rogister's aristocratic sympathies may account for one of the most unsatisfying aspects of the book. Barely a page is devoted to the wider significance of this crisis that included the publication of the *Grandes remontrances* and prompted serious reflection from d'Argenson, Le Paige and Mably. Yet 1753–4, along with 1730–2, 1756, and 1770–1, was one of the crises that most affected the standing of the monarchy in the long term. His dilemma is clear. He has argued that crisis could occur between the crown and the parlement because they quarrelled about very specific issues and were in basic agreement about the constitution: so his parlementaires are not *frondeurs* but loyalists at heart. If he were to admit that the crisis of 1753–4 contributed to the fall of the regime in 1787–8, or that it was even similar in nature, then his noble heroes would have been guilty of contributing blindly to the destruction of their own system. He insists that judicial politics can be studied without social history, and without considering outside interference. But surely the crisis brought outsiders in? The religious and constitutional debate can only be said to have had 'an unprecedented public airing' in 1753–4, if the twenty-five year efforts at publicity by the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* are ignored.[6] The considerable public debate that took place in the cafés and salons of Paris and in numerous pamphlets is never allowed to modify this tale of high politics. The appeal to wider arguments in the public sphere helped to widen the narrow space that existed for those excluded from the elite to voice their opinions. The opposition of the magistrates over several decades, expressed in constitutional, virtuous and patriotic language, must have legitimized other opposition. Rogister's lengthy appendix on one of the Comte d'Argenson's informants in the parlement would have been better replaced with fuller consideration of these areas. There is a troubling incoherence at the core of the book, exacerbated by an insistence that the individual trees are more important than the wood.

Swann's study is much broader and more approachable. His twelve evenly balanced chapters provide us with a well written and essential guide to the troubled relations between crown and parlement over twenty years. Like Rogister, he has a clear introduction to the world of the magistrates and procedure in the courts. His chapter on the rules of the game suggests that a basically harmonious relationship between king and courts, dating from the age of Louis XIV, was troubled by factional interference, the Jansenists, institutional rivalries and the failure of Louis XV to exercise his potential for good political management. Swann argues that the picture of Louis XV drawn from the *séance de la flagellation* in 1766 and the Maupeou coup of 1771 has obscured the better and more complex relations of his longer period. Furthermore, to study only the language of opposition is to see the relationship out of context. The magistrates had many informal links with the court of Versailles, including patronage, and had a genuinely conservative vision of government and society. Here he adds his voice to Hamscher, Doyle and Rogister, and his point that crisis occurs when the ministry is weak or divided supports Doyle's analysis of the 1770s and 1780s.[7] Swann's study

[6] See C. Maire, 'L'Église et la nation: du dépôt de la vérité au dépôt des lois. La trajéctoire janséniste au XVIIIe siècle', *Annales, ESC*, xxxxvi (1991), 1177–205, and A. Farge, *Dire et mal dire. L'opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992), pp. 63–88.

[7] W. Doyle, 'The parlements of France and the breakdown of the Old Regime', *French Historical Studies*, vi (1970–1) 415–58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X97007462 Published online by Cambridge University Press

provides the best analysis of the parlementaire crises of 1756, 1763, the Parisian involvement with the Brittany affair, and the Maupeou coup of 1771.

The judges have often been seen as increasingly militant in their response to royal fiscal policy. Swann agrees that the battles with the crown from 1756 to 1763, resolved by royal *lits de justice* and the ignoring of repeated remonstrances, did contribute much to the impression that the monarchy was despotic. However, the judges were not united in their opinions, and the parlement's 'resistance to innovations was still dictated by its aversion to taxation and an almost blind faith in the benefits of economy' (p. 190). Their opposition to the registration of a second *vingtième* in 1756 was encouraged by the *parti janséniste*, disgruntled at the royal policy over the religious disputes. In 1763 the crisis occasioned by controller general Bertin's edicts prolonging the *vingtièmes* in peacetime and instituting a land register was linked to the politics of faction at Versailles. Bertin resigned and his policy was abandoned in favour of Choiseul's policy of appeasing the parlements (and it was one of Choiseul's allies from the *parti janséniste* in the parlement who succeeded Bertin, just when Maupeou, later chancellor, became first president). This missed opportunity for the reassertion of royal authority did, however, give rise to some of the plans Maupeou later implemented.

Maupeou's famous coup of 1771 stemmed from the Paris parlement's involvement in the Brittany affair. This is set in context by highlighting its antecedents in the vacillation of royal policy and Choiseul's appeasement. The ministry thus compromised its position by abandoning or repudiating those of its loyal servants who had gone out on a limb for it in previous affairs, in Besançon, Toulouse and Rennes. The prospect of being left to the tender mercies of vengeful colleagues was to cause many a loyalist to prefer corporate solidarity to promises of royal protection. The main cause of the Parisian judges' involvement was not some inherent militancy but the setting up of a royal commission, for this was a challenge to their own jurisdiction. 'Although part of the debate between the two sides had been conducted in constitutional language, the source of the clash was the legal rights of magistrates and the legitimacy of royal commissions.' (p. 274) Yet he also admits that an increasing number of magistrates like Michau de Montblin now believed the pro-parlement rhetoric developed by the Jansenists during the 1750s.

Maupeou was not a determined reformer but a worried chancellor whose career was at risk in the shifting sands of court politics. In 1768 and 1769 he actually planned to reinstate the parlement of Rennes. As soon as he did so the recalled parlement instituted proceedings against its old enemy d'Aiguillon. This put Maupeou in an impossible position because he needed the support of the *dévot parti* at court, which included the prosecuted duc and was opposed to Choiseul (who had strong supporters in the parlement). Moreover, because in the eyes of the Paris parlement's activists the trial of d'Aiguillon was a continuation of the Jansenist struggle against the Jesuits, as well as a defence against despotism, it became important to have a showdown to reassert royal power after a decade of compromise. Since the parlement would not retreat, the only way out of the deadlock was to reform the judicial system. This was done with the help of many of those loyal servants abandoned in the preceding crises.

Both Swann and Rogister make a substantial contribution to their field, but neither pays much attention to rhetoric and ideology, and both retain a notion of history as a purely empirical discipline. So, we are left to enquire, why the outpouring of constitutional rhetoric, the ideologies of citizenship and patriotism in response to religious, jurisdictional and fiscal issues? This is an important matter for debate, because the crisis of 1770–1 has of late been elevated to a turning point in the nature of

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old regime politics, and Swann's convincing interpretation is, therefore, a challenge to those who espouse a theory of a 'new politics of contestation' or the clash of discourses. The mere fact that such an array of traditional forces was at work in bringing events to a head in 1770 invites us to reconsider some of the wider generalizations put forward about the nature of 1771, as deduced by some scholars simply from the pamphlet war it generated and the comments of *nouvellistes*.[8] For Swann, 'the contribution of the Jansenist magistrates to the ideas and actions of the court was immense' (p. 364). Yet Swann too prefers not to get involved with the extent to which constitutional arguments and rhetorical positions affected the crises, although they certainly had an importance. If not, why were they used? Maupeou may have adopted a ready-to-hand ideology of reform, and the courts may have had frequent recourse to notions of 'despotism', for spurious motives, but their actions were subsequently conditioned by this 'false' ideological stance. Their discourses may have been Jansenist, anti-despotic, patriotic, and reformist, rather than discourses of reason, justice and will (as Baker argues) – but they were still discourses or ideological positions. It is a pity that Swann does not explore the significance of 1771 more fully in the light of this situation. The fact that the Maupeou coup deepened the ideological rift surely needs further consideration.

It is, however, clear that some old myths about the parlements have been dispelled. If the idea of a 'rise of parlementaire opposition' meant that the magistrates as a body became more militant, more proactive, in their relations with the crown, then no such rise occurred. Parlementaire politics, as portrayed in Swann's study, was too conservative, too preoccupied with rights and privileges, too dependent upon ministerial management and factional rivalries, for either effective resistance to the crown or a self-conscious attempt to acquire much more power. The small groups of Jansenists and *frondeurs* amongst the magistrates could only dominate when the ministry was divided and leadership lacking. So the crises developed more because of faction and mismanagement than through a positive spirit of opposition. The effect of this argument should be to redirect our attention away from the parlement and towards ministerial politics and the royal court.

Swann suggests that the prince de Conti may have been encouraging parlementaire resistance to new taxation in 1756 (pp. 180–2). Woodbridge, in a study that links the schemes of the prince to the evolution of the protestant cause in mid-century France, goes further and sees a *fronde* in the making. The core of the book tells the obscure tale of how the king's cousin, for several years a trusted adviser and confidant involved in the *secret du roi*, but now aggrieved at being side-lined in the negotiations for the diplomatic revolution of 1756, encouraged a protestant uprising in the southwest at the beginning of the Seven Years War. In the event the plot seems to have involved a great deal of wishful thinking from a few militant protestant leaders, for the rising never materialized, even when a British expeditionary force approached the coast. This force, Pitt's great hope, failed to land. The whole affair was a fiasco that had repercussions in England and led to a last wave of persecution in Guyenne and the Saintonge. Fortunately, the loyalty of most protestants to France prompted the evolution of a *de facto* policy of toleration that in spite of catholic hostility became *de jure* in 1787.

This is a book in which the context is well explained, so the study has the merit of raising once again the question of citizenship and toleration for protestants from about 1750 to 1789. But Woodbridge is unsuccessful at getting behind the contradictory or

[8] See D. Echeverria, *The Maupeou revolution: a study in the history of libertarianism, 1770–1774* (Baton Rouge, 1985); K. M. Baker, ed., 'The Maupeou Revolution', special issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, XVIII (1992).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X97007462 Published online by Cambridge University Press

merely suggestive evidence to the reality of a planned revolt. The core of the book is simply unconvincing, because it is far too speculative and repetitive in its use of the extremely sparse evidence. If Conti really had been contemplating a *fronde* based on his links with the *parti janséniste* in the parlement and the protestants in the *midi*, it would be nice to have some hard evidence, rather than the self-interested innuendoes of police informers and factional spies. Was Conti tempting the protestants in order to collect evidence for the government, or was he, perhaps, setting up a threat that he could intervene to resolve to his credit – or was he a latter day *frondeur* conspiring to rebel in a hopeless and unrealistic attempt to seize the crown? Woodbridge, who seems never to doubt that the last was the case, has sidestepped the opportunity to explore a more precise picture of aristocratic political conduct a full century after the failure of the *fronde* had paved the way for a more subtle system of oppositional politics. On the evidence here produced it seems that Conti was nothing more than a once useful aide who, feeling spurned, turned into an irritating meddler.

It is left to Price and Hardman to focus exclusively on the politics of the king's ministers and the rules of their game: the use of patronage, faction, schemes and rumours, and strategies for discrediting rivals or advancing themselves. Price's highly readable narrative of the role of the comte de Vergennes in French internal affairs is a welcome introduction in English to the complex array of factions in the thirteen years up to 1787. Far less wide-ranging than Labourdettes's excellent French biography,[9] his aim is to explore Vergennes' role in internal affairs and court politics, so there is nothing here on his foreign policy except a chapter on the Dutch fiasco from 1784 to 1787. Vergennes is portrayed as a *dévot* and a royalist and, much more contentiously, as a reforming defender of the monarchy and a first minister in all but name. He was a *robin*, a Maupeouite, hostile to both Turgot and Necker. Almost from the first the affair of the comte de Guines embroiled him with the queen who backed Choiseul's supporters. But Maurepas was his patron, keeping him in office until, by 1781, he had established himself at court and in the king's confidence.

In 1781 Vergennes and Joly de Fleury, Necker's successor, supported the idea of a *comité des finances* to exercise conciliar control over the finances of each department. According to Price, 'Vergennes' appointment as *chef du conseil royal* at the same moment as the creation of the *comité des finances* not only makes it possible to talk of him as a first minister, it also reveals his serious desire to reform the structure of government of the ancien regime.' (p. 78) Yet elsewhere we are told that the reform stemmed not from a constitutional view of conciliar government but was forced on the proponents in desperation in 1783. It was 'the result of a group of ministers being driven to distraction by the non-cooperation of their colleagues' (war minister Ségur and marine minister Castries) (p. 70).

All this took place in the context of factional and ministerial conflicts. The other significant development of the 1780s was the *parti* of the queen, which then included the Polignac, acquiring two ministers, which turned what had been a reasonably coherent ministry under Maurepas into a split ministry. In 1782, just when Vergennes was a more powerful and potential first minister, the split widened into conflict, as he and Joly struggled to control the ruinous expenditure of the service ministries. So the *comité* of 1783 ran into deep hostility, and Castries was even irresponsibly prepared to risk creating a credit crisis to further his factional aims. For Price, the *comité* was a unique opportunity to save the state from ruin. He suggests that Joly and d'Ormesson did

[9] J.-F. Labourdette, *Vergennes. Ministre principal de Louis XVI* (Paris, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X97007462 Published online by Cambridge University Press

identify the financial and institutional problems and suggested in brief the measures Calonne was later to develop. However, as he later admits, the *comité* was defeated by *la finance* and the general farmers, and had little hope of further reform. The *comité* fell amidst a credit crisis, as Vergennes withdrew his support from d'Ormesson, who had exposed to Louis his shady attempt at profiteering from the sale to the crown of regalian rights over some of his seigneuries at inflated prices. It is difficult to agree with Price that we are watching a committed reformer in action.

The focus shifts to a deft analysis of judicial reform, ministerial relations with the parlement, the effect of the diamond necklace affair, and the Dutch fiasco. Faction and politics remain crucial. From 1783 to 1785 Miromesnil and Vergennes gained Calonne, who won over the Polignac circle with liberality. This transformed the previous scenario of king's ministers *versus* queen's ministers into one of Vergennes and his allies *versus* the queen's *parti* (now of Castries with Breteuil), diminishing the queen's influence but increasing rivalries and divisions. Although Vergennes failed to protect Lenoir the *lieutenant de police* from Breteuil, he did manage to have his own cousin and client succeed him. In the diamond necklace affair Vergennes actually supported his patrons, the Rohan, and exerted himself to gain evidence to show that the cardinal was a dupe and not a principal in the plot, almost certainly deceiving Louis XVI along the way. Vergennes had 'complete disregard for the damage that a victory for the cardinal de Rohan would do to the monarchy's prestige', because he knew the queen hated him so much he had nothing to lose (p. 195). In the event, the split in the parlement over judicial reform and Rohan's acquittal, brought about by the radicals and the excluded, destroyed the ministerial *parti* in the courts, leaving them open to control by the radicals, and so able to block Calonne's reforms. Moreover, and this is strange for a first minister, Vergennes' disastrous Dutch imbroglio was consistently undermined by his colleagues from 1784 on, as 'he was barely able to resist encroachments on his own department' (p. 193). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, in spite of Price's partisan defence, that preserving Vergennes is the main theme of this book, not preserving the monarchy. Indeed, by behaving as a typical minister, Vergennes did much to undermine it.

This suggests we should focus not on narrative but the nature of the system: exactly John Hardman's point. This review therefore ends on a high note: Hardman's exploration of 'high politics' under Louis XVI will be an indispensable *vade-mecum* for all scholars of the period. True, as a rewritten thesis of 1972 it is hard going at times, but the rewards are certainly there. This is a pioneering archival study that has already influenced subsequent scholars. It focuses on what Hardman calls 'pure politics', the triangular relationship between the king, his ministers and the parlement of Paris, and in so doing explores and clarifies the political conventions and the processes of decision-making. The book is in two parts: the first gives an account of the appointment and circumstances of the dismissal of every minister of Louis XVI up to 1789. They were a more varied group than those of Louis XIV, and their individual fates, almost always culminating in exile from the court, make the point that there was no collective ministry, only individual ministers subject to the pressures of faction. Hardman attributes the re-entry of 'grand seigneurs' of the sword (prevented for a while under Maurepas's leadership) to the patronage of the queen in the 1780s. 'Instability and division' were the hallmarks of ministerial politics.

The chapters of the second part are more analytical. One chapter explains that the true 'first ministers' – Maurepas, Brienne, and Breteuil briefly in 1789 – had rights of interference in other departments, a say in appointments, but all were dependent upon the vacillating king and had largely informal powers. Vergennes (*pace* Price) was no

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more than a powerful departmental minister. The policies and dilemmas of the finance ministers are clearly explained in a key chapter. From 1775 to 1778 most decision-making on internal policy is revealed to have taken place in small *comités* of the king and three or four ministers, or in the *travail*. This gave the king an important role, which he often failed to rise to, preferring silence. Marie-Antoinette's intervention grew in significance, as she became identified with a queen's party or faction by the 1780s, with Castries, Ségur and Breteuil as 'her' ministers. The ministerial factions fought through the Paris parlement, blocking Calonne's fiscal policies, and the fiasco of the trial of Rohan over the diamond necklace affair was a symptom of this. It all looks so traditional, so unlike a new politics of contestation involving public opinion, of which all ministers were aware but which they defined in their own interests.

Scholars will learn much that is new and important about the processes of decision-making at Versailles during the last two decades of the regime.[10] This is an important work of reference that every specialist will pull down from the shelf to consult, both on the details of high politics and for the numerous insights expressed in ministerial correspondence. It is a pity that the insights are not further developed in conclusions that engage more directly with other interpretations. In keeping with the monographic tradition, the reader is left to draw the wider conclusions.

It has been hard to summarize and evaluate these studies, for all of them are wary of putting forward overall interpretations or even a theory of politics. Only Hardman is prepared to tell us how his study fits in with current debate and to conceptualize the problems of politics. All seek to remind us that narrative and chronology are neglected at our peril, and implicitly suggest that, while there are so many aspects of politics still to be explored in the archives, the new theories will stand like houses built on sand. This is a strength of these studies, but their shyness of theory leads them to neglect important aspects of the political scene. From the 1750s ideology was emerging as a significant feature of politics, and constitutional rhetoric did have an effect both in defining the perameters of courtly activity and in enlarging contemporary conceptions of legitimate political involvement. We now need more studies of how ideology and practice interacted.

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[10] For a more extensive analysis of the role of Louis XVI, see J. Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven and London, 1993).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X97007462 Published online by Cambridge University Press