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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

VERSAILLES REVISITED: NEW WORK ON THE OLD REGIME

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ABSTRACT. *Over the last thirty years, the absolute monarchy in France has been a subject of much controversy among historians. The traditional view, which can be traced back to Tocqueville, sees it primarily as an 'administrative monarchy', an essential step in the formation of a centralized French state. More recently, this approach has come under sustained attack from (mostly Anglo-American) scholars, who have emphasized in contrast the limits of absolutism, and in particular the persistent power of local and central elites in relation to the crown. In the light of these disputes, this article argues that the French absolute monarchy was above all a political compromise, in which neither crown nor elites had the definitive upper hand, but which could only function effectively through the co-operation of both sides. An aspect that has not sufficiently been stressed, however, is the fragility of the arrangement: it was ambiguous in practice if not in theory, and ultimately unable to deliver the resources necessary to sustain France's great-power status in the eighteenth century.*

Until recently, there was a standard interpretation of the French absolute monarchy. It saw the period from 1614 to 1789 overwhelmingly from one perspective: that of the formation of the modern French state. Between the mothballing of the estates-general and the Revolution, so the argument ran, France acquired a bureaucratic government, staffed by ministers and civil servants at the centre with all-powerful emissaries, the famous *intendants*, in the provinces, and a substantial standing army. To achieve this, a succession of single-minded monarchs and first ministers – Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Richelieu, and Mazarin – decisively broke the resistance of traditional elites whose attitudes owed more to medieval than to modern France. Before their ruthless will, *frondeur* princes, rebellious nobles, *parlements* and provincial estates inclined and finally accepted the supreme authority of state and king.

In France itself, this view of the early modern monarchy has always been dominant. Its greatest exponent was Roland Mousnier, whose conclusions were also broadcast to an English-speaking audience through the translation between 1979 and 1984 of his massive two-volume *Les institutions de la France sous la monarchie absolue*.[1] Mousnier died in 1993, but his approach is still echoed today in the standard French university texts, most notably Yves Marie Bercé's book – the title says it all – *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme*.[2]

[1] R. Mousnier, *The institutions of France under the absolute monarchy, 1598–1789*, trans. A. Goldhammer (2 vols., Chicago, 1979–84).

[2] Y.-M. Bercé, *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme, 1598–1661* (Paris, 1992).

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Over the last twenty years, however, this French orthodoxy has been increasingly challenged. The attack has come from the traditional quarter, the Anglo-Saxon world. American and British historians such as William Beik, Sharon Kettering, and Roger Mettam[3] searchingly questioned just how absolute the absolute monarchy was even at its zenith under Louis XIV. Central to their arguments is a reassessment of the true nature of the relationship between the crown and the elites Mousnier assumed had been so thoroughly tamed. In *Absolutism and society in seventeenth-century France* (1985), William Beik showed just how powerful one of the major provincial estates, that of Languedoc, remained in its dealings with the king throughout the period. Here at least, the defining feature of absolute monarchy, the crown's ability to raise taxes without the consent of a representative body, was conspicuously absent. Instead, the king bargained with the assembled estates, using a carefully constructed mixture of stick and carrot. If they refused the sums he was demanding, royal favour was withdrawn from the province; if they voted them swiftly, on the other hand, significant rebates were granted, most of which went conveniently into the pockets of the estates and their members. For her part, Sharon Kettering emphasized how crucial patronage remained in a political system which Mousnier and his followers assumed was being rapidly bureaucratized. Finally, in *Power and faction in Louis XIV's France*, Roger Mettam convincingly demonstrated that the nobility retained considerable influence at the heart of the absolutist state itself, in court and government at Versailles.[4]

From this perspective, the early modern French monarchy appears considerably less autocratic, and less 'modern', than the standard view has always insisted. Beneath the façade of absolute authority, the king remained reliant on the traditional leaders of society to enforce his writ throughout France – on aristocratic provincial governors to back up the *intendants* and deal with the estates, on local *parlementaires* to register his edicts, on five-yearly assemblies of the clergy to vote the 'Free Gift'. The Anglo-Saxon historians have restored to the old regime its central facet, brushed aside in the standard texts – its ambiguity. Between the appearance of royal power limited only by God, and the reality of the complex and delicate negotiations with elites on which that power was actually based, there was a subtle but substantial distinction. It was summed up in Chancellor Lamoignon's lapidary formula: the king of France was 'a king for whom everything is possible, but to whom not everything is permitted'.[5]

In the context of this historical debate between 'absolutists' and 'anti-absolutists', what new light do the books reviewed here shed on the nature of the French monarchy between the accession of Louis XIV and the Revolution? Each concentrates on a particular aspect of the state at different moments in the period. Ian Dunlop's *Louis XIV* deals with the man who personified it for seventy-two years and left a legacy that shaped the actions of his successors down to 1789.[6] William R. Newton's *L'espace du roi* analyses in meticulous detail the setting Louis built for himself and which also acted as one of the principal organs of his government – the court of Versailles.[7] In two volumes, *Les arrêts de règlement du parlement de*

[3] W. Beik, *Absolutism and society in seventeenth-century France: state power and provincial aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985); S. Kettering, *Patrons, brokers and clients in seventeenth-century France* (New York, 1986); R. Mettam, *Power and faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 1988). For a stimulating synthesis of the Anglo-Saxon school's conclusions, see N. Henshall, *The myth of absolutism* (London 1992).

[4] Mettam, *Power and faction*, pp. 45–101.

[5] Cited in M. Antoine, *Le conseil du roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva, 1970), p. 11. This and all subsequent translations are my own.

[6] I. Dunlop, *Louis XIV* (London, 2000).

[7] W. R. Newton, *L'espace du roi: la cour de France au château de Versailles, 1682–1789* (Paris, 2000).

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Paris au 18ème siècle: dimension et doctrine and *La physiologie de l'arrêt de règlement du parlement de Paris au 18ème siècle*, Philippe Payen reassesses one of the major functions of another key institution of the monarchy, the *parlement* of Paris.[8] In *Utopia's garden*, E. C. Spary examines the only one of these old regime institutions that still survives today, the *jardin des plantes*, and traces how it transformed its role from the days of Buffon to those of the Directory.[9] These books cannot provide one central new insight – their range is too wide and diverse for that. But separately, each one, and especially those of William R. Newton and Philippe Payen, make significant points about particular aspects of the absolute monarchy that can be applied to the whole.

There are surprisingly few up-to-date scholarly biographies of Louis XIV. The standard study in English, by J. B. Wolf,[10] is over thirty years old, while the most recent widely read French biography, by François Bluche, is simply a restatement of the orthodox 'absolutist' argument.[11] The only exception to the rule is Andrew Lossky's important *Louis XIV and the French monarchy* of 1994.[12] On the other hand, Louis has always been a favourite subject for popular biography, beginning with that classic of its kind, Nancy Mitford's *The sun king*.[13] *Louis XIV* sits firmly in the second tradition. Indeed, it descends directly from Nancy Mitford, since Ian Dunlop began his writing career as a researcher for *The sun king*. The central theme of both books is the same: the sixty-year relationship between Louis and Versailles. Dunlop makes his focus quite clear in his preface. 'I am not trying to reassess [Louis XIV's] reign', he writes. 'There are plenty of recent works in English, American and French which supply this need. This book is in many ways complementary to those studies.'[14]

Within these self-imposed limits, *Louis XIV* fulfils its aims. It is lively and well-written, and evokes in fascinating detail the life of the court and the king's stupendous building projects of which Versailles is only the most famous. Yet this is not just *petite histoire*: for Dunlop, the great cultural flowering of the reign, in music, literature, painting, and above all architecture, represents the sun king's principal claim to greatness. There is evidence that Louis himself recognized this. 'You may judge, Messieurs', he wrote to the members of the newly created *Petite Académie* in 1663, 'the esteem I have for you, because I am entrusting to you the most precious thing to me in the world – my *gloire*.'[15] It is one of Louis XIV's great achievements that France's political supremacy in Europe for most of his reign was reflected in a much longer-lasting cultural supremacy that has endured almost to this day. Few monarchs have had the distinction of patronizing such talents as Molière and Racine in their lifetimes, and of being commemorated by Voltaire after their deaths.

Yet this is not the whole story. From the mid-1670s, the king's administrative and cultural achievements became increasingly overshadowed by darker forces – war, religious persecution, and brutal repression of peasant grievances. How much personal responsibility Louis bears for this remains controversial – most recently, Andrew Lossky has argued that by the mid-1680s he was exhibiting signs of megalomania.[16] Dunlop is far kinder to the king. He concedes that Louis's 'love of war brought France into humiliation and earned

[8] P. Payen, *Les arrêts de règlement du parlement de Paris au 18ème siècle: dimension et doctrine* (Paris, 1997); P. Payen, *La physiologie de l'arrêt de règlement du parlement de Paris au 18ème siècle* (Paris, 1999).
[9] E. C. Spary, *Utopia's garden: French natural history from old regime to revolution* (Chicago, 2000).
[10] J. B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (London, 1968). [11] F. Bluche, *Louis XIV* (Paris, 1986).
[12] A. Lossky, *Louis XIV and the French monarchy* (New Brunswick, 1994).
[13] N. Mitford, *The sun king: Louis XIV at Versailles* (London, 1966). [14] Dunlop, *Louis XIV*, p. xi.
[15] Ibid., p. 198. [16] Lossky, *Louis XIV*, pp. 167–75.

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her the hatred of Europe',[17] but consistently gives him the benefit of the doubt when examining his role in the more dubious decisions of his reign. The clearest example is the chapter on the revocation of the edict of Nantes. Dunlop claims that Louis's attitude toward the Huguenots was more humane than that of his ministers and *parlements* – even referring to his 'gentleness and reasonableness' in the first years of his rule – but merely concludes that 'he had little understanding of the protestant zeal which had faced the tortures of the inquisition in Spain and the fires of Smithfield in England.'[18] His final conclusion on the king echoes Voltaire's: 'his great qualities and achievements, when ultimately put in the balance, outweigh his faults. Time, which ripens men's judgements, has put a seal on his reputation.'[19]

Louis's limitations and his mistakes – particularly in foreign policy – cannot be passed over so lightly. In many ways, France in 1715 was in a weaker international position than on his accession. His policy of *réunions* decisively alienated the goodwill of the German states and damaged France's influence beyond the Rhine. His clumsy implementation of the will of Carlos II unleashed the war of the Spanish succession, and left his kingdom on his death resembling, in Fénelon's memorable words, 'one vast hospital'. Yet France's misfortunes during the king's last years cannot be attributed to a single individual, even one so dominating as Louis XIV. They were also the product of systemic flaws in the absolute monarchy he helped create, and which his successors' failure to remedy brought crashing down in 1789.

One of the most crucial weaknesses lay at the heart of the sun king's design, in the dynamics of Versailles itself. This is a central theme of William R. Newton's *L'espace du roi*. The palace's political function was inseparable from its architectural one; by drawing the great nobles, and especially the princes of the blood, into attendance on the king at an opulent royal court, it aimed to distance them from their regional power-bases and prevent the recurrence of another *Fronde*. As Louis himself put it in his *Mémoires*: 'The princes of the blood for the good of the state, should never have any other retreat than the court, nor safe haven other than their brother's love.'[20]

Yet even before the sun king's death Versailles was ceasing to fulfil this role. Newton traces this failure through one of the court's most crucial, and neglected, aspects – its spatial dimension. He does this by constructing a remarkable 'index-dictionary' of the palace's apartments and their successive inhabitants over 207 years, basing his work on an important but neglected source, the eight *états des logements* prepared for the court between 1722 and 1789. This is set in context by an important introduction which shows how quickly the rigid order the sun king imposed on his surroundings began to crumble. The most critical factor was simple shortage of space. The demands of housing so many of the high nobility soon proved too great even for such a vast palace as Versailles. In the mid-1750s, beyond the royal family's lodgings there remained 226 apartments free for courtiers. By 1781, this figure had dropped to 188 – a diminution of almost a third in the course of the century.[21]

The main cause of this contraction lies in the demography of the royal family itself. Between 1715 and the Revolution it expanded significantly, with consequences that have not sufficiently been stressed by historians. Admittedly, it started from a low point: the sun king only ever had one legitimate son, while the devastating smallpox epidemic that carried off most of his progeny in 1711–12 ensured that at his death his only unchallenged heir was

[17] Dunlop, *Louis XIV*, p. xiv. [18] Ibid., p. 269. [19] Ibid., p. 469.
[20] Cited in Newton, *L'espace du roi*, p. 16. [21] Ibid., p. 26.

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his five-year-old great-grandson. The prolific Louis XV, however, soon reversed this trend, producing six daughters and a dauphin who in turn sired four sons, two of whom (Louis XVI and the comte d'Artois) went on to father two sons each. By Louis XV's death in May 1774, the royal succession was solidly established.

Yet both Louis XV and Louis XVI signally failed to manage the consequences of this increased dynastic fecundity. As more and more royal children reached maturity and were given households, they placed growing demands on the living space around the king. Spreading out from the central body of the palace, they pushed the courtiers and princes of the blood ever further away from the king's apartments. Eviction from the royal presence, the fountainhead of favour, was naturally resented, and physical distance soon became an index of political alienation. Introspective and unimaginative, the sun king's two successors did nothing to arrest this process.

Two telling examples make the point. With his political access to Louis XV blocked by Mme de Pompadour and his physical space encroached upon by the king's imperious daughters, the prince de Conti left Versailles definitively in 1757. He spent the rest of his life in Paris as the *éminence grise* of Jansenist and *parlementaire* opposition to crown policy, and only ever returned twice to his cousin's palace – for the baptism of the king's grandsons in 1761 and the dauphin's marriage in 1770.[22] A similar fate befell the duc d'Orléans under Louis XVI. Faced with a concerted attack from the king's sister Mme Elisabeth and her lady-in-waiting (and one of Marie Antoinette's most notorious favourites) Diane de Polignac, d'Orléans hung on grimly to his coveted apartment on the garden front until 1780, when he finally gave in and moved to less prestigious lodgings in the north-eastern corner of the princes' wing. From then on, however, he too spent most of his time at his Paris residence, the Palais-royal, and in the oppositional circles of the magistrature. His son the next duke was to complete the process by transforming the Palais-royal into a rival public space to Versailles, the epicentre of the revolution of July 1789, and himself into Philippe-Egalité.[23]

It would be too much to say that the layout of Versailles was a prime cause of the French Revolution. Yet the fact that such powerful figures as Conti and the Orléans were allowed to withdraw from the king's presence and, above all, that nothing was done to attract them back, had great significance. In the most concrete, physical terms it widened those cracks in the governing elite that were to prove so fatal during the crisis of the old regime. By that time the increasing distaste of the royal family for living in public, their failure to manage patronage, and their inability to ensure the constant attendance of the high nobility at court had robbed the palace of much of its point. By 1789, the Bourbons had broken all the rules bequeathed to them by Louis XIV.

Comparison with other European states underlines these mistakes. As T. C. W. Blanning argues in his most recent book, *The culture of power and the power of culture: old regime Europe, 1660–1789*,[24] the failure of the 'representational culture' pioneered by the sun king at Versailles was twofold. It failed in its own terms, through his successors' inability to maintain the constant attendance of the nobility upon the monarch. It also failed on a wider level, by insulating the crown from the massive eighteenth-century growth of the new force of public opinion, and hindering the Bourbons from projecting their leadership on to a rapidly changing society. These mistakes were carefully avoided by Frederick

[22] Ibid., p. 36.
[23] Ibid., pp. 34, 37.
[24] T. C. W. Blanning, *The culture of power and the power of culture: old regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 384–7.

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the Great of Prussia and Joseph II of Austria. Living quite deliberately without a court, Frederick assiduously promoted his image as 'the first servant of the state'. Joseph II moved out of Schönbrunn, originally conceived as an Austrian Versailles, and set up house instead in a modest villa in the Augarten.[25] At the same time, both monarchs embarked on programmes of rationalizing, egalitarian, Enlightened reform carefully calculated to appeal to an increasingly literate, educated public. The contrast with their French counterparts could not be more striking. Immured in their obsolete palace, Louis XV and Louis XVI became, in François Bluche's words, 'the curators of a museum where paintings were no longer restored and objects never moved, and which was no longer replenished with new acquisitions'.[26]

If the opulence of Versailles had been tempered by some sterner virtues, it might not have been so disastrous to the French monarchy. Louis XIV understood this well: he joined his armies in the field through most of the war of devolution and the Dutch war, and as late as 1692 at the siege of Namur.[27] Yet Louis XV only saw action once, at Fontenoy, and never ventured to the front again, while Louis XVI preferred navies to armies and fought with neither. Sedentary except when hunting, the last Bourbons of the old regime were hardly likely to appeal to the salient characteristic of the new public opinion – its militaristic nationalism. Next to Frederick, the greatest soldier of the age, they cut poor figures indeed.

L'espace du roi thus reveals a major paradox. Versailles, built to project the power and grandeur of the absolute monarchy, soon came to symbolize its fragility. Yet by the mid-eighteenth century this fragility was no longer confined to the court. Above all, it had spread to the crown's relations with its key institutional collaborator, the *parlement* of Paris. In the absence of the estates-general after 1614, the registration of royal edicts by the sovereign courts, and especially that of Paris, played a crucial part in legitimizing the king's policy and ensuring its general acceptance. The growing conflict between the crown and the magistrature after 1750 has long been recognized as a major cause of the breakdown of the *ancien régime*. In contrast to the court and the ministers, the *parlements* have received considerable attention from historians over the last forty years, from Jean Egret's *La pré-révolution française* to Julian Swann's *Politics and the parlement of Paris under Louis XV*.[28] Yet concentrating as they do on the turbulent second half of the eighteenth century, these works concentrate on the collapse of the crown-*parlementaire* relationship. The factors that led to such a close symbiosis between monarch and magistrates in the first place, and sustained it for centuries, necessarily form only a background to these studies.

In two substantial volumes, both derived from his *thèse d'état* of 1993, Philippe Payen seeks to shift the emphasis from the weaknesses and final dissolution of the partnership between the king and the sovereign courts, towards the strengths that enabled it to flourish for so long. He does this by analysing not the great political and constitutional struggles of

[25] Ibid., pp. 430–1. [26] Cited in ibid., p. 415. [27] Dunlop, *Louis XIV*, pp. 153–61, 224, 313–14.

[28] J. Egret, *La pré-révolution française* (Paris, 1962), and *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire* (Paris, 1970); F. Bluche, *Les magistrats du parlement de Paris au 18ème siècle, 1715–1789* (Paris, 1960); J. H. Shennan, *The parlement of Paris* (Ithaca, 1968); W. Doyle, 'The parlements of France and the breakdown of the old regime, 1771–1788', *French Historical Studies*, 6 (1970), pp. 415–58, and *The parlement of Bordeaux and the end of the old regime, 1771–1790* (London, 1974); B. Stone, *The parlement of Paris, 1774–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1981) and *The French parlements and the crisis of the old regime* (Chapel Hill, 1986); J. Félix, *Les magistrats du parlement de Paris, 1771–1789* (Paris, 1990); J. Swann, *Politics and the parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995).

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crown and *parlements* from *Unigenitus* to the Revolution, but the less spectacular, yet equally revealing, administrative and judicial collaboration between the two. His focus is the *arrêts de règlement* of the *parlement* of Paris, the judgements it issued in disputes between private individuals that acquired force of law throughout its jurisdiction. Payen skilfully shows the subtlety and ambiguity of the *arrêt de règlement*, with its dual private and public nature, as an instrument of legislation. Yet he also shows how effective, and adaptable to different situations, these qualities made it.

The result is an important contribution to our understanding of the judicial functioning of the old regime. The traditional primary source for the *arrêts de règlement* is the papers of the *parlement* of Paris, grouped in *série X* of the Archives Nationales, but for this particular subject they are poorly catalogued and unreliable. Payen has chosen instead to base his work on the archives of the family that monopolized the office of procurator-general to the *parlement* from 1717 to 1790, the remarkable Collection Joly de Fleury in the Bibliothèque Nationale.[29] This offers a number of advantages: not only is the collection voluminous, but since the papers Payen exploits are those of such a crucial legal officer as the procurator-general, they contain not only the texts of the *arrêts de règlement* themselves, but precious insights into their elaboration.

Thanks to Payen's work, we now know a great deal more about a vital part of the *parlement*'s administration than we did before. But even here the ongoing debate about the court's political role is inescapable. Payen shows scant sympathy for the *parlements'* claim that they had a right to share in royal legislation as well as simply promulgate it. Indeed, he refers to one of this argument's principal eighteenth-century proponents, président Durey de Meinières, much as Louis XV himself would have done, as 'That pigheaded de Meinières … one of the most meddling Jansenists'. Instead, he upholds the historically more accurate conclusion of Le Bret and Loyseau that the *parlements'* legislative function was entirely delegated by the monarch, and had no independent foundation. 'The regulatory power of the *parlement* must be recognized, but this can only be seen as an exception to the rule that only the king could make laws.'[30]

Payen reinforces his point by emphasizing the critical distinction the crown always made between politics and administration:

> Right up until the end of the old régime … the *parlement* retained its power to repel trespassers on its domain of maintainance of public order … What it could not and should not do was to involve itself in political matters, and play an oppositional role under the guise of administration when this was in fact inspired by a political plan. Apart from this, the *parlement* kept all its competence.[31]

Where he is at his best is in emphasizing just how much power even this restrictive definition of the *parlement*'s role left it over the affairs of the kingdom. Within its own domain – from law and order in Paris to price controls on bread and construction of roads and canals, to say nothing of the vast number of individual legal cases it judged – the *parlement* reigned supreme. Most important of all, as long as it forbore from challenging the king's ultimate political authority, the crown was quite happy to let it do so.

This perspective enables Payen to escape the flaws and anachronisms of the orthodox view of the 'modernizing' absolute monarchy. An important case in point is his treatment

[29] Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Collection Joly de Fleury, MSS 203–2560. There is also a biographical study of the Joly de Fleury family in the eighteenth century: P. Bisson de Barthélemy, *Les Joly de Fleury, procureurs-généraux au parlement de Paris au 18ème siècle* (Paris, 1964).

[30] Payen, *Les arrets de règlement*, pp. 13, 111–12.

[31] Ibid., p. 212.

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of the controversial relationship between the *parlements* and the *intendants*. For a generation of French historians, the *intendants* were the standard-bearers of the rationalizing central power in its steady penetration of the provinces. To Gaston Zeller, they were 'the new proconsuls',[32] while Mousnier emphasized the burgeoning numbers of administrative personnel they created, who became, according to him, the first modern bureaucrats.[33] The problem with this approach is that it takes the crown's claims to absolute authority at face value. *Pace* Mousnier and Zeller, in reality the number of salaried servants at the state's disposal in the localities was always far too small to enforce its will unaided. Yet Payen does not fall into the opposite trap, of assuming that this left the king's agents constantly on the defensive against the pretensions of the *parlements*. The secret of the relationship was co-operation: if the crown's right to ultimate obedience remained unchallenged, it was perfectly happy to allow – indeed it positively encouraged – its provincial *intendants* to implement policy through consensus rather than confrontation.

Payen's approach thus offers an eminently sensible solution to the historical 'storm over the *intendants*'. If they are treated neither as enforcers of the central state or conversely as hapless victims of the provincial privileged, they can be seen for what they really were – just one more example of the historic compromise that was absolute monarchy. Payen's conclusion on the respective – and often overlapping – roles of *intendants* and *parlements* is both shrewd and judicious:

> To say that [the *intendants'*] domain was enlarged by special attribution is not the same as saying that administration supplanted police. Can one say that evocation by the king suppressed justice? There is no reason why the *parlements'* role in maintaining public order should shoulder the weight of a theory that modernizes excessively the old régime monarchy.[34]

Through examples like this, Payen builds up an excellent analysis of how the crown–*parlement* relationship worked at its apogee under Louis XIV and then Louis XV up until the death of the cardinal de Fleury. What he does not do is explain how that relationship progressively collapsed from 1750 on, and in so doing brought the absolute monarchy down with it. This, of course, is not the aim of a book that sets out to stress co-operation rather than conflict, but in any work on this subject the question remains implicit. In fact, Payen's study of how the crown worked successfully with the sovereign courts up to 1750 offers many clues to how it stopped doing so thereafter. It is the story of how a system that was well adapted to the circumstances of the late seventeenth century increasingly failed to meet the demands of the eighteenth.

There never has been consensus among historians about the reasons for this failure, and there probably never will be. Over the last thirty years alone, the collapse of the *ancien régime* has been successively ascribed to the rise of the bourgeoisie, changes in linguistic and cultural perception, the rise of the public sphere, Jansenism, and the desacralization of the monarchy.[35] Obviously, all these factors played a part in undermining the political system, and ensured that it would have to adapt if it were to survive. Yet the crucial ingredient that transformed these long-term, evolutionary processes into a revolutionary one came from

[32] Cited in ibid., p. 132.

[33] Mousnier, *The institutions*, II, p. 561.

[34] Payen, *Les arrêts de règlement*, p. 195.

[35] Examples of Marxist, Habermasian, and post-modern interpretations of the fall of the *ancien régime* are too numerous and well-known to be cited here. For Jansenism and the desacralization of the monarchy, see respectively D. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757–1765* (New Haven, 1975); and J. Merrick, *The desacralization of the French monarchy in the eighteenth century* (Baton Rouge, 1990).

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elsewhere, from the very centre of the regime. This was the crown's inability to manage, on its own terms, the one area over which it had successfully maintained its supreme authority since 1660 – finance. It may be a truism to repeat that without the financial crisis there would have been no French Revolution. Without it, however, and Louis XVI's bungled response to it between 1787 and 1789, it is impossible to explain how the king's opponents were able to seize the political initiative from him so swiftly and decisively.[36]

Payen's work throws into relief some of the monarchy's most crucial failures in this domain. Much of the book is devoted to the essential nexus of crown–*parlement* relations – the collaboration between the *gens du roi* and the senior magistrates in despatching the king's business. In particular, Payen emphasizes the multifaceted role of the *gens du roi*, and in particular the procurator-general, in liaising between the king's ministers and the leading *parlementaires*, of which the elaboration of *arrêts de règlement* was only one example. Yet the single most important cause of the collapse of the old regime was the breakdown of this liaison after 1782, under the intolerable pressure of war finance and debt repayment. Payen's stress on the delicacy and sophistication of the relationship helps to explain how this came about. A fragile mechanism at the best of times, by the end of the eighteenth century it was simply unable to deliver the wide-scale consent necessary for a significant increase in the crown's resources.[37] Even the *gens du roi* began to grow restive at their master's demands. They had a shrewd idea of just how much the public could take, and had no desire to sacrifice their own credibility through over-eager co-operation with unpopular policies.

One example illuminates this process. In the summer of 1782, in response to a crushing naval defeat inflicted by the English at the battle of the Saints, the absolute monarchy imposed its last new direct tax, the third *vingtième*. It passed through the *parlement* of Paris, but only just; an elaborate compromise over the issue of remonstrances had to be worked out, and it was clear that the magistrates would refuse to register any further tax edicts for the foreseeable future. In this darkening atmosphere, the first president of the *parlement*, d'Aligre, wrote a private letter on 6 July to the king's keeper of the seals, Miromesnil. Beneath its courtly phrases, it contained a clear warning: that the consensus between crown and magistrature that had underpinned the absolute monarchy since its creation was coming to an end, that it could not indefinitely absorb a series of increases in the tax burden:

> You see by the details I have the honour to send you that I am doing all I can, but it is a very difficult task … Since the king has been on the throne he has experienced no difficulties on the part of the *parlement* of Paris. It has always registered everything straight away, and I hope it will do the same now. The king should take very seriously the motives of those who feel it their duty to plead the condition of the people at the foot of the throne before registration.[38]

[36] The classic modern work on the finances of the French monarchy on the eve of the Revolution is still J. F. Bosher, *French finances, 1770–1795: from business to bureaucracy* (Cambridge, 1970). Other important works are H. Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la révocation de l'édit de Nantes à la Révolution* (2 vols., Paris, 1959–61); J. C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the old regime in France: the economic and financial toll* (Princeton, 1986); and J. Félix, *Finances et politique au siècle des Lumières: le ministère L'Averdy, 1763–1768* (Paris, 1999). See also R. Bonney, 'What's new about the new French fiscal history?', *Journal of Modern History*, 70 (1998), pp. 639–67.

[37] For a study which points up the contrast between French failure and English success in this domain, see J. Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (New York, 1989).

[38] Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Mémoires et Documents France, vol. 1392, fos. 169–70.

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Five years later, d'Aligre's prophecy came true. The crown's next attempt to increase taxation – its most ambitious yet – was rebuffed not only by the *parlement* of Paris but also by two assemblies of notables hand-picked with the purpose of rubber-stamping the initiative. The 'noble revolt' had started, and was swiftly to turn into a fully fledged revolution. The system whose administrative workings Payen describes in such detail had reached the end of the road.

The *parlement* of Paris did not long survive the absolute monarchy; along with all the other sovereign courts, it was prorogued indefinitely by the national assembly on 3 November 1789 before being definitively abolished on 6 September 1790. Yet other old regime institutions, more modest and less political than the high magistrature, survived. One of these was the *jardin du roi*, and it is the subject of E. C. Spary's book *Utopia's garden: French natural history from old regime to Revolution*. Built up by Buffon during his forty-nine-year intendancy between 1739 and 1788 into a leading centre of natural scientific enquiry, the *jardin* weathered the Revolution relatively intact, transforming itself into the *muséum d'histoire naturelle* and entering its golden age under such distinguished professors as Jussieu, Lacépède, Cuvier, and Lamarck.

The *jardin* was spared by the Revolution because, unlike the *parlements*, it had something to offer it – in this case scientific legitimation. Profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment, the new regime proclaimed its aim of perfecting human society in the light of the truths revealed by the progress of science about the natural world. This placed the scholars of the *jardin* in a privileged position. After all, the most famous precept of the Enlightenment – 'Il faut cultiver son jardin' – was a botanical one. Exploiting this advantage, they shrewdly presented themselves as essential collaborators in the Revolutionary experiment. As Spary comments: 'During the early 1790s, naturalists in Paris described their activities in an increasingly utopian tone, claiming to be able to regenerate French nature through enlightened teaching, and thus to transform French society. The expertise which they claimed to possess inextricably linked knowledge about cultivation and the natural economy with the good of the nation.'[39]

The results of this strategy were sometimes comic. Buffon and Montesquieu had both stressed the importance of climate as a factor in shaping human societies. In 1792, the botanist Louis Reynier analysed all surviving references to the climate of ancient republican Rome. He concluded that 'the climate of Rome was approximately the same as the present climate of Paris', thus giving, in Spary's words, 'the climatic seal of approval to Paris as a seat of republican government'.[40] But absurd as some of its manifestations were, the naturalists' policy worked. Although the ambitious schemes for expansion encouraged by their greatest patrons, the Jacobins, were stillborn, by the end of the 1790s the *Muséum*'s future was secure.

The books discussed here deal with widely differing aspects of the absolute monarchy. Yet, with the exception of Ian Dunlop's more popular work, they have one thing in common – they are all institutional studies. While they are all in their various ways illuminating, they show that the old regime has yet to escape from the *histoire des institutions* approach that, from Marion to Mousnier, has dominated the field for so long. For all its richness, this approach does impose restraints, and it would be good to see the subject break free of at least some of them, and expand into other areas. The political history of France between 1660 and 1789, and particularly of the ministers who helped shape it, has been remarkably

[39] Spary, *Utopia's garden*, p. 141.

[40] Ibid., p. 133.

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neglected. There are no full scholarly biographies in any language of figures as important as Desmarets, Maurepas, Choiseul, or Turgot, which would be unthinkable for their British counterparts. The same is true of the *histoire événementielle* of the period. There has, for example, been no adequate book-length study of the French crisis of 1771–4 along the lines of Paul Langford's *The first Rockingham administration* or John Cannon's *The Fox–North coalition*.[41] If the British *ancien régime* can be studied in this way, why not its old French rival?

[41] P. Langford, *The first Rockingham administration, 1765–1766* (London, 1973); J. Cannon, *The Fox–North coalition: the crisis of the constitution, 1782–1784* (Cambridge, 1969).

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