THE FUTURE OF "ABSOLUTISM" IN HISTORIOGRAPHY: RECENT TENDENCIES*

WOLFGANG SCHMALE
University of Munich


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In 1987, Richard Bonney contributed an article on “Absolutism: What’s in a name?” to the first issue of French History.\(^1\) It is not by chance that one of the early issues of the new Journal of Early Modern History also includes a review article on “absolutism.” Rarely has an historical concept generated so much study and debate. Bonney’s article focused on the French case and on studies in the English and French languages. The present review includes selected studies in English, French, and German, and concerns the French, English, and German cases. Absolutism doubtless constitutes a “European theme,” but its discussion is coloured by distinct national traditions. Or so it has been, but current revision of the concept of absolutism probably requires the revision of certain traditions in European historiography.

I. “Myth of absolutism” or revision of a concept?

Despite what Bonney called the “proliferation of writing” on absolutism, the concept has recently been called into question. The boldest attack was launched by Nicholas Henshall, whose Myth of Absolutism called for giving this historical concept a decent burial. Henshall does not represent an isolated attack. Partly as a reaction to Henshall’s book, several leading German scholars have been pondering the usefulness of “absolutism.” Rudolf Vierhaus introduced his study on the period 1648-1763 by declaring that he would not use the notion “period of absolutism.”\(^2\) This marks a certain evolution in Vierhaus’ ideas, as may be seen from an earlier book dealing with the same period: “The period from 1648-1763 I call the period of absolutism only because there does not exist any other handy notion comparable to absolutism.”\(^3\)

Heinz Duchhardt, discussing Henshall’s book in Historische Zeitschrift, has proposed replacing “absolutism” with the notion of the “baroque age.”\(^4\) A similar idea was rejected by Walther Hubatsch in the 1950s,\(^5\)

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2 Rudolf Vierhaus, Staaten und Stände. Vom Wesfälischen bis zum Hardertusburger Frieden 1648 bis 1763 (Berlin, 1990), 10.
3 Vierhaus, Deutschland im Zeitalter des Absolutismus (1648-1763), Deutsche Geschichte 6, 2d ed. (Göttingen, 1984). It is interesting to notice that the German edition of Jean Meyer’s history of France (1515-1789) is entitled, Frankreich im Zeitalter des Absolutismus, while the original edition, in French, is simply called La France moderne, 1515-1789 (Paris, 1985; German edition: Stuttgart, 1990).
5 Walther Hubatsch, “Barock” als Epochenbezeichnung? Zu neuerem geschichtswissen-