REVIEW ARTICLES

ABSOLUTISM AND THE RISE OF CAPITALISM IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

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This book is a major re-examination of French absolute monarchy. David Parker, the well-known author of a variety of studies exploring the analytical foundations of seventeenth-century state and society, has now set himself the task of developing a comprehensive Marxist analysis of the subject that takes account of the latest scholarship while "steering a course between a structureless relativism on the one hand and economic reductionism on the other" (xi). In the current scholarly climate it probably needs to be said that this is a challenging, meaningful, and immensely interesting endeavor. On the one hand Marxist analysis encourages reflection on the structure of a society and the nature of its distribution of burdens and advantages, especially with respect to the disadvantaged majority; on the other it provides tools for understanding comparative social change or—perhaps even more significantly—the lack of it. Parker's book is an ambitious synthesis that connects recent work on society with the latest studies of absolutist institutions. It is also a critique of current post-modern styles of interpretation and, as an unexpected bonus, Chapter Seven offers a forty-page discussion of that most classic of historiographical themes, the comparative development of capitalism in early-modern France and England.

Parker begins with a discussion of interpretive frameworks, offering interesting observations about system-builders like S. N. Eisenstadt, Norbert Elias, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Fernand Braudel and devoting a section to criticizing Roland Mousnier's theory of a society of orders. He then critiques Marxist theories of absolutism. He rehearses the ambivalence of Marx and Engels as to whether absolute monarchy represented an equilibrium of social forces or the beginnings of a bourgeois state,
and whether capitalism grew out of urban, commercial activity or out of new social relations in the countryside. He finds Perry Anderson's generalizations about the displacement of feudal coercion upwards towards a centralized feudal state to be contradictory and schematic; Porchnev's and Lublinskaya's cruder versions of class conflict he also finds unconvincing. He approaches my own attempt to show the state as a collaboration between central monarchy and regional elites favorably as "a more sophisticated way of sustaining the essentially feudal nature of French absolutism" (18), and indulgently reserves his real critique, that such views fail to explain "either the precise character of absolute monarchy or the mechanisms by which political stability was achieved" (135), for a later section.¹

Parker is determined, then, to explain absolutism in broad class terms, while avoiding the reductionism of simply stressing surplus extraction, the contest of rudimentarily-defined classes, or the weight of a crude base-superstructure determinism. The book proceeds through chapters on the economy, social conflict, social structure, the transformation of the nobility, and the theory and practice of state, each of which covers a wide range of monographic literature. Parker is especially eager to incorporate cultural, legal, and intellectual dimensions into the argument. Broadly speaking, he sees absolutism as a backward-looking attempt to reconstruct a system shattered by a generation of conflict. It was neither an economically progressive launching pad for capitalism nor a state generated in response to the dictates of international warfare. Crudely speaking, it was a recharged mechanism to manage the extraction of surplus from the peasantry. But the essence of Parker's argument is that this class-based definition of absolutism as a late feudal society, though perfectly valid as a first approximation, does not have the explanatory power to predict the particular contours of seventeenth-century French society. What made France distinctive was on the one hand the intense quarrelling within the ruling class, even as it skillfully redefined its cultural hegemony, and on the other the degree to which the state became an arena for the working out of these intra-class conflicts. Thus a relatively autonomous state was influenced by, and itself influenced, three major processes: the extraction of traditional forms of wealth, the coordination of the in-fighting of a diverse and divided ruling class, and the growing rationalization of organized state power in response to international military competition.