
This is a most interesting book, on a topic highly important to seventeenth-century French historians, and, indeed, to anyone interested in the history of Absolutism. It is particularly significant because it represents a brave and on the whole successful attempt to get beyond the simplistic idea that most of us retain despite ourselves that the success of French Absolutism was largely the result of the application of the indomitable will of a very small number of clear-headed persons—Louis XIV and Colbert in particular. In 1661, Louis XIV is supposed to have decided that the hegemony of ministers and oligarchies (par excellence the Parlements) should end, the personal rule of Absolute Roi Soleil begin. But this can be at best only part of the truth. How, for example, did the frondeur magnates—typified by the prince de Condé, and institutions, typified by the Parlements, particularly those of Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Bordeaux, and Toulouse, and by provincial Estates, of Burgundy, Brittany, and, of course, Languedoc—transform themselves, or find themselves transformed into the pliant instruments of their erstwhile enemy, the modern royal absolutist administration?

The answer to this question is complex. In part it was indeed the royal will; in part, too, indubitably, the effect of Colbert—to read his correspondence is to be astounded by the energy, competence, thoroughness, savage brilliance and many other qualities of that prodigious if hardly likeable person. But, as Professor Beik points out, King and minister could not have had the effect they had without the active compliance of the ruling social and political élite. What people composed this élite, and how they acted, are now being revealed by study of particular groups (see R.R. Harding, The Anatomy of a Power Elite (1978)) and provinces, in this case Languedoc, which stretched from the Garonne and Toulouse in the west to the Rhône and Viviers, Beaucaire and Aigues-Mortes in the east; from Auvergne and Le Puy in the north to the foothills of the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea, Narbonne, Agde and Montpellier in the south.

Professor Beik tells us he has worked for a long time on this book. It is clear that his labours have been profitable. From all sorts of archives—national, departmental, municipal—he has mined a great richness of material, the focus of which is the complex interplay of central with provincial power, specifically the role of the royal Intendant (Claude Bazin de Bezons, 1653–73; Henri d’Aguesseau, 1673–85; Nicolas Lamoyon de Basville, 1685–1719) vis-à-vis the Parlement of Toulouse, the Cour des Comptes in Montpellier, the provincial Estates and the episcopate, together with the relationship of national and provincial authorities with lower jurisdictions—local Estates (e.g., those of Gévaudan), sénéchausées (local royal law courts) and so forth, with the govern-
ment of towns. It is quite clear that the provincial and local institutions in a convoluted, often halting and uncertain, way came to cooperate with Versailles. It was not the royal coup de main of legend, but a process of mutual accommodation in which, to be sure, the province as a whole conceded more than the Crown did, but far less than legend has it; and not from fear but for solid reasons of the multiform élite's institutional and social advantage. Crown and provincial élite needed each other, each to maintain the other's dominance. What emerges is a far more credible version of Absolutism, based on what really happened rather than on what Louis XIV wanted people to believe.

I have but one criticism. The first chapter, on "Absolutism and Class," lays out a series of fundamental questions about governmental power and local élites. The rest of the book is much more expository of detail, and does not test the hard-thought-out theoretical structure of the first chapter with brute fact anything like as closely as one would have hoped. Where there is analysis it tends to be impressionist; sometimes it is even naïve, as where Professor Beik trusts seventeenth-century official figures on taxation (e.g., pp. 258–9), which are, as any serious student of French public finance knows, an elegant filigree of obfuscation designed by officials largely to delude accounting agencies. The book would have benefited from a reinforcing structure of careful analysis of social groups, town by town and institution by institution. Of course the numbers and complexity involved in such an operation would have made the book much more difficult to write. Yet the brilliant first chapter leads one to expect that a more high-powered approach would be followed in the rest of the book.

Nevertheless, en fin de compte, Professor Beik has written an original and important book.

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Cet ouvrage, préparé par la Société française des seiziémistes, présente, pour la première fois sous une même couverture, les activités de la Société qui ont eu lieu les 4 et 5 octobre 1984 lors de son Colloque sur le mythe Mercure/Hermès. Le livre, en ce qui a trait à sa longueur, peut être divisé en trois parties inégales. La première partie présente trois études préliminaires commissionnées par la Société afin de déterminer si une étude de ce mythe particulier en valait l'effort. La deuxième—et la plus importante section du livre—réimprime neuf écrits présentés sur les divers aspects du mythe. La troisième partie présente un sommaire des discussions soulevées par ces écrits.

Chacune des études préliminaires traite très brièvement, mais avec force d'un aspect général des récits de Mercure/Hermès. Guy Demerson fait le point des