

On Second Thoughts . . .

THE MYTH OF ABSOLUTISM

Enlightened despots or imperial new clothes? **Nicholas Henshall** takes a fresh look at the realities of power in the bureaucracies and rulers of *ancien régime* Europe.

On January 20th, between one and four o'clock in the morning, each member of the Paris *parlement* or supreme court was awakened by two musketeers beating at his door with the butts of their weapons. He was handed a *lettre de cachet* offering him the choice of immediate exile or submission to Louis XV's policies. Less than half the magistrates yielded; the rest were deposited at remote distances from Paris and encouraged to pursue their legal careers in the sticks.

This shocking glimpse of dictatorship, replete with jack-booted militarism and contempt for legal norms and human rights, confirms liberal prejudices about absolute monarchy. But the real point is easily missed. The uproar that greeted this display of *force majeure* was the loudest before 1789. This suggests that the episode is a demonstration of how *ancien régime* France was supposed *not* to operate.

Monarchy was absolute by definition. That was the point of it. Decisions were made by one man and not a committee. That at least is what Frenchmen of the *ancien régime* understood by absolute power. Not so their nineteenth-century historians, who turned absolute power into 'absolutism'. It was identified as the autocratic enemy of consent, the despotic foe of popular rights and liberties, the bureaucratic subverter of society's natural élites. It was also seen as alien to England. Her limited monarchy was saluted as the standard-bearer of liberty and government by consent: 1688 was the final breach between England and the Continent. This is no sterile quibble about terminology. Historians of discourse now see the introduction of new words, or the use of old words in a new way, as one of the best indicators of shifts in political values.

Recent work on Bourbon France reveals that nineteenth-century historians had little idea how early modern monarchs operated. 'Absolutist'

kings were supposed to monopolise power. Institutions with authority in their own right, like representative Estates and *parlements*, were allegedly kicked into subservience or marginalised and left to rot. Louis XIV did neither. He recognised them as agencies of consultation and consent – showing that his regime was not autocratic. He respected them as guardians of corporate rights and liberties – showing that it was not despotic. And he employed them as agencies of administration – showing that it was not bureaucratic. While the old cliché is repeated, the edifice of 'absolutism' is cracking. The building still stands but few seem to have noticed that it is hanging in mid air. No one has assembled the materials for demolition, but nor has a case been made for a preservation order.

A way out of the present muddle is to ask what an early modern monarch was entitled to do. Few have done so. For most of the period the ancient prerogatives of royalty were not disputed, though nobles were quick to challenge them if wielded ineptly, and this introduced variations. Monarchs normally controlled foreign policy and the armed forces, appointed ministers and officials, summoned the Estates of the realm, initiated legislation, collected feudal and regalian revenues, issued ordinances and proclamations, created new courts and administrative bodies, regulated trade, industry and coinage, granted charters, controlled the highways, pardoned deserving convicts and were the fount of honour and patronage.

Neglect of royal prerogatives is easy to explain. In England the Whig tradition has emphasised the elements of the constitution which promoted liberty rather than authority. On the Continent belief in a 'rise of absolutism' in the seventeenth century has made historians overlook the inherent powers that monarchs had always enjoyed. It can be argued that monarchs were far

from seeking an 'absolutist' expansion of their powers. Instead they were recovering prerogatives lost to representative assemblies and aristocratic councils, most recently in conflicts over despotic attempts to raise royal funds for the Thirty Years War. Royal misconduct or plain incompetence were additional mishaps which could act as starting pistols for a tug of war over crown prerogatives. The theme has not featured on the agenda of early modern historians. Yet studying monarchy with vague notions of prerogative is like watching a tennis match on a court without lines.

Prerogatives were vulnerable during royal minorities. French regencies in the 1610s, the 1640s and the 1710s found that no royal powers were sacrosanct in the hands of deputies. The female ruler who succeeded Charles XII of Sweden saw royal powers over foreign and military matters transferred to a committee of nobles, only to be retrieved two generations later by a forceful ruler. Many constitutional conflicts which Marxists attributed to socio-economic forces can now be assigned to genetic lottery.

If monarchs were consolidating old areas of power rather than breaking into new ones, what was new about 'absolutism'? Nothing but the *announcement* that there was something new. Monarchy was marketed by baroque staging and propaganda techniques which were unrivalled for command of audience response. Not a string was left untwanged. Louis XIV's designers, Le Brun and Le Nôtre, were the Steven Spielberg of the Bourbon monarchy. The answer to mid seventeenth-century Frondes and crises was image-makers and news management. The novelty was not absolute power but its media coverage.

Prerogatives recognised as absolute were subject to no one save the king. Within the area they staked out he could do what he liked. The crown had no superior within or without the



Monarch of all I survey – Louis XV of France in his robes of state.

realm. Louis XIV's spokesman Bossuet declared the king independent of all human authority: there was no legal means of controlling him if he did wrong. 'In the exertion of lawful prerogative the king is and ought to be absolute; that is so far absolute that there is no legal authority which can

delay or resist him.' Bossuet is usually wheeled out as the oracle on 'absolutism'. Yet his comments were as true of the English crown as of Continental ones – and under Hanoverians as much as Tudors. The quotation is not from Bossuet but Blackstone, the classic authority on England's eighteenth-century

constitution.

While the monarch retained his prerogatives his court was necessarily the centre of politics. There could never be a rigid division between courtiers and politicians, or between domestic and governmental functions. The king naturally sought much political advice



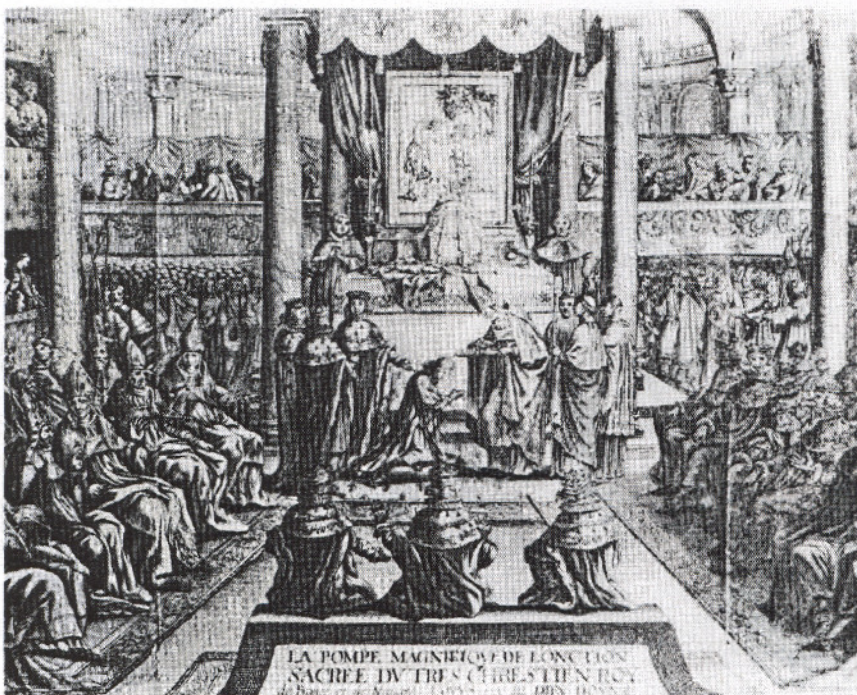
'Woe to the land/whose king is a child' – royal minorities, such as that of Louis XII, (seen here on his accession in 1610 with his mother, Marie de Medicis) obviously increased the potential for faction fighting around the monarch, not least because criticism could be more safely levelled at a monarch, anointed, as in the coronation scene of Louis XIV below, with the sacred oils of Clovis and in the 'image of God'.

stairs and in bed. This perspective was formerly relegated to the realm of historical gossip presided over by novelists such as Nancy Mitford. Serious historians are now interested in court faction and its management, but they have not examined the prerogatives which made monarchs the centre of attention. Yet it was only their stupendous powers that imparted national importance to the royal taste for bim-bos or pretty-boys.

The rediscovery of court faction as the decisive generator of political action means that constitutional conflicts can be re-scripted as gangland feuds. Resistance to royal policies by powerfully privileged bodies was secondary to the crown's handling of faction. With groups at court intriguing to replace one other in royal favour or office, it was an obvious move to extend their rivalry to Estates and *parlements* which could be manipulated into sabotaging the policies of rival ministers. While despotism often provided the issue, the crucial ingredient was the existence of groups avid to exploit it. Opposition to Turgot's economic reforms in 1776 stems at first glance from an embattled *parlement* defending privileges. Closer investigation has identified the instigators as his colleagues in the ministry.

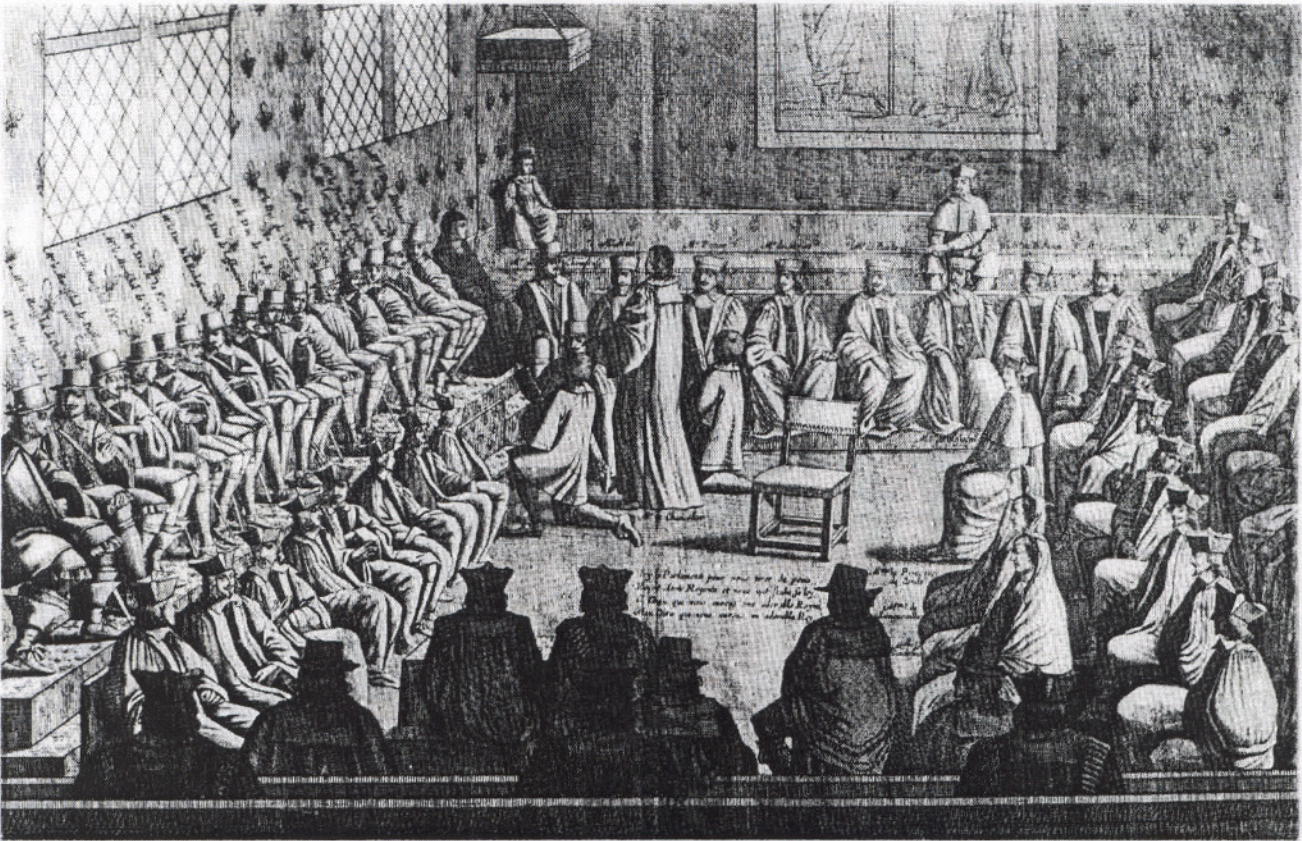
Faction was also the agency by which monarchs ran the provinces. From the court radiated the networks which enmeshed all the rest. In the localities kings relied on those with influence in their own right, which could be hijacked for royal purposes if its possessors were generously rewarded. Monarchs governed with the co-operation of provincial élites or not at all. Official 'bureaucratic' hierarchies worked only if reinforced by traditional mechanisms of power and obedience – clientage, patronage and kinship. National governments did not command enough physical force or respect to do without them. What passes for bureaucracy in the text books fails the first bureaucratic test – the ability to stand on its own feet. Louis XIV's intendants were helpless without the support of local élites.

François de Castellane, Comte de Grignan, occupied a monumental château dominating the Rhone valley north of Avignon. As military lieutenant-general, he led the nobles of Provence in Louis XIV's wars and in 1707 halted Eugene's advance into France. He died on the road from Marseille at the age of eighty-five, coming home after representing the king at the annual meeting of the Estates. Yet the nearest he got to an official civil position was acting-governor: historians of the formal



from those present in his household. Since a monarch's hardest task was deciding whom he could trust, it was sensible as well as convenient to rely on close friends. Under an athletic monarch like Henry VIII, policy was often decided in the equivalent of the men's locker room.

Since the system of absolute monarchy assigned policy decisions to one man, he was relentlessly targeted by those eager to influence them. Contestants required gangs to support them as they competed strenuously for royal favour in the ball room, on the tilt yard, in the council chamber, on the back-



'A prince must show himself' – Machiavelli's maxim enacted publicly by Louis XIV's appearance at a 'lit de justice' before the *Parlement* of Paris – the image of royal control overriding Louis' minority. (Right) Proposing and disposing – this allegorical painting by Le Brun of the Peace of Nijmegen between France and Holland underlines the monarch's role as the personal arbiter of peace and war.

machinery have overlooked him. He had little inclination for administrative matters, his real interests being hunting, feasting and entertaining. He was not an official but a broker, who distributed crown patronage to persuade local power groups to support royal policy. The king's relationship with such a man could be based only on co-operation, not on command: in no sense were orders autocratically transmitted down a bureaucratic line. The trick was to persuade groups with independent power that their interest overlapped with the monarch's. Some major governmental functions were entrusted to private entrepreneurs, who collected taxes and responded to the inducement of lending the crown its own revenues at interest. Thatcherism could have taught the Bourbons little about the efficacy of the profit motive.

Again, all this is as true of England as of France. Its monarchs were typical and not, as usually stated, unique in controlling the localities in alliance



with local élites. And Tudor and Stuart historians have recently demonstrated how many rows, apparently between monarch and Parliament, originated in court faction. Passionate parliamentary demands for Elizabeth I to marry are now traced to disgruntled Privy Coun- cillors. Nor did this end after 1688. The

court remained the centre of politics, where foreign policy was formulated, patronage distributed and loyalty rewarded. Ministers were made and unmade at court and it was royal power they wielded. There was no theoretical consensus that royal prerogatives should be delegated to politicians com-

manding a majority in Parliament. Nor did Hanoverian kings feel obliged thus to act in practice. Ministries were constructed before and not after the meeting of a new Parliament. There was no convention that the king should accept ministers which it favoured: as Namier asserted fifty years ago, it was the other way round. Ministers who enjoyed royal favour were entitled to the support of both Houses. Historiographical obsession with parliamentary parties and elections has obscured the awesome prerogatives retained by the first three Georges.

Nor did alleged 'absolutist' powers of legislation distinguish France from England. Louis XIV is commonly imagined to have made law on his own authority, while in England it was made by authority of Parliament. In fact in both France and England law-making, in the usual sense of the phrase, was a joint effort. The French monarch had the exclusive right of initiating law but the *parlements* were essential to its promulgation. In England the king's prerogative was to grant or withhold consent to laws passed by parliament. Nor has the precise content of Bourbon 'law-making' ever been examined. Most of it was codification of custom. In French usage it also embraced declaring war and issuing charters or letters patent — matters firmly embedded in the English monarch's prerogative. If those be law-making, English kings made it as well.

Absolute royal power was not despotic: it ended where subjects' rights began. The care with which jurists defined royal prerogatives proves that they did not amount to a monopoly of power: had they extended to everything this would have been unnecessary. Monarchs were ordained to protect the rights of their subjects, not destroy them. Rights were buttressed by the rule of law. They were not to be touched without due legal process and the law could be changed only with the consent of those whose rights were affected. In 1610 Thomas Hedley hailed the absolute authority of the English crown as the best guarantor of subjects' rights: only a powerful ruler had the strength to defend them. Bossuet defined an arbitrary or despotic prince as one disposing at whim of the life, liberty and property of his subjects, who were therefore slaves: despotism was incompatible with law and had no place in France. Yet many historians still impose on early modern monarchy a despotic model which was abhorrent to contemporaries.

To insist on the presence of consent in 'absolutist' states is to say something new about a concept usually defined in terms of its absence. In France taxes

could not legitimately be changed or increased without the consent of the bodies empowered to give it. In the absence of the Estates General this privilege devolved on the provincial Estates and *parlements*. When they proved unco-operative, royal ministers could either negotiate until consent was obtained or proceed without it. The first option involved patience and the second risk. Despotic monarchs invited revolt.

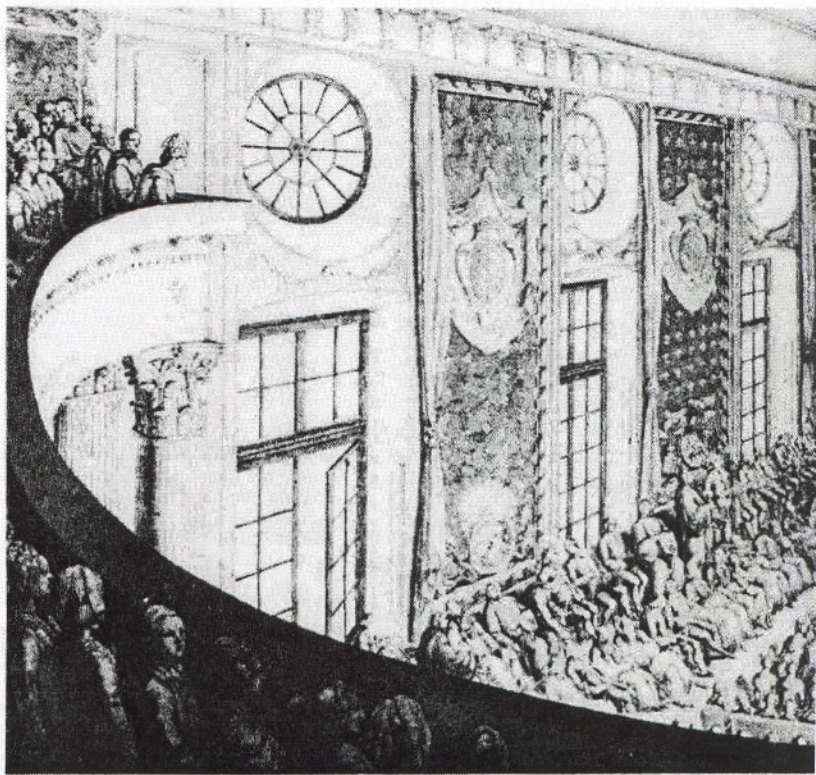
Until the middle of the eighteenth century, despotism was blundered into rather than planned. But the rise of the Enlightenment made coercion a respectable option. It was sanitised in the name of the higher law of Reason. Where the organs of consultation were dominated by selfish or reactionary interest groups, as they usually were, an Enlightened minister like Turgot now coolly ignored them. The uniqueness of the Enlightened Despots has not been stressed: they are vaguely presented as the culmination of autocratic 'absolutism'. Far from it. They flouted the consensual conventions which their 'absolutist' predecessors had respected.

In 1749 Controller General Machault proposed the Twentieth. It was a revolutionary tax. Clergy and nobles were not to be exempted and, far from restricted to wartime emergencies, it was to be permanent. The *parlement* of Paris stalled and, after appropriate expressions of concern for



Nihil obstat, the French cleric Bossuet, whose pronouncements on the independence of all royal authority gave theoretical underpinning to Louis XIV's absolutism.

Contrary to popular belief, Estates in Enlightenment Europe continued to exercise considerable influence as necessary organs of consent for absolute rulers — even provincial ones such as those of Burgundy (seen below).



the pockets of the lower orders, agreed. The clergy threatened to abandon their churches and refused. The Twentieth was consequently paid by the laity, noble and commoner, and not by the clergy. Forty years later the new tax package of Louis XVI's Enlightened minister Brienne met a different fate. Its sabotage by the *parlements* provoked the ministry to abolish their legislative powers and remodel their membership. The result was a ruling class strike and the collapse of the absolute monarchy.

The Habsburgs also responded variously to the consultative imperative. Reacting to the same pressures as Machault, in 1748, Maria Theresa despatched Haugwitz to the provincial Estates to secure agreement to the termination of tax exemption for the nobility. In a progress reminiscent of a Middle Eastern tour by an American Secretary of State, he patiently presented his government's case to sceptical audiences in Carinthia, Carniola, Styria and Tirol. The outcome was the introduction of a new tax deal with the agreement of most of the Habsburg territories. Thirty years later Joseph II had benefited from the oversimplified nostrums of the Enlightenment. He informed his opponents that he did not need their consent for doing good: reform procedures were despotic. Estates' consultative powers were abolished, together with subjects' corporate privileges. The programme was

even more sweeping than Louis XVI's and the result was the same. He died in 1790 as revolt engulfed his dominions.

The discovery of a consultative component in 'absolutism' exposes another myth – the obsessive defence of rights and privileges in the face of every appeal. The truth was too undramatic to be noticed. Most reforms of law and property rights (including taxation) were achieved not in defiance of representative bodies but with their agreement. In a monarchical system, they limited royal power by restricting the activities which it could encompass by itself. But this was a limitation only if it is assumed that monarchs wanted authority that was unlimited. Most respected law and the rights it defended, and did not. In a positive sense representative Estates legitimised the entry of a king's authority into areas of immunity which his prerogative could not reach. Nineteenth-century Whigs regarded them as a check on royal power. In fact they existed to extend it.

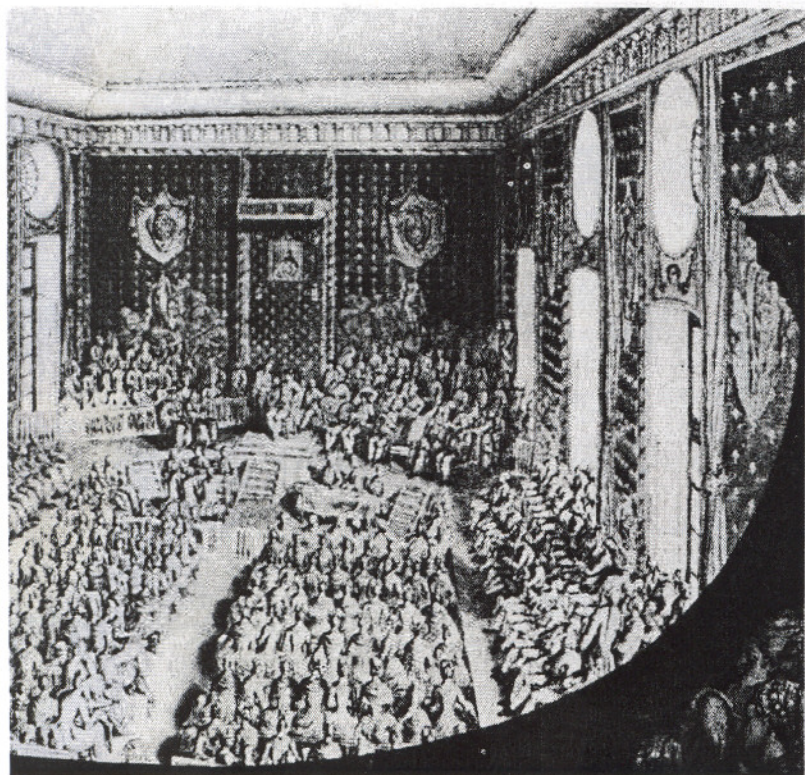
This corrects another myth – that absolute monarchs preferred organs of consent which were weak or non-existent. A reduced role for representative bodies has always been a central feature of 'absolutism'. Yet Isabella of Castile was repeatedly described as an absolute monarch even though she regularly consulted a powerful representative assembly, the *cortes*. The explanation for this paradox is that a vital distinction has not been made. Abso-

lute power jealously excluded representative bodies from areas traditionally subject to the royal prerogative. It could not exclude them from issues touching subjects' rights without incurring the charge of despotism. If we forget the monopoly of power usually identified with 'absolutism', absolute monarchy becomes compatible with other sources of authority, corporate and representative. The status of consultative assemblies within the context of absolute monarchies can be reassessed. Instead of locating them on the fringe we can recognise their centrality.

Interpretation of rights to life, liberty and property varied. Property was the most obsessively defended. It must be seen in the context of a society based on kinship and lineage and drenched in conceptions of honour. A gentleman's self-respect was founded on the deference paid by law and custom to his possessions. Freedom of expression was respected in 'absolutist' states as much as in republics – and sometimes more so. The Spanish Habsburgs and French Bourbons frequently encouraged public discussion of politics, while in 1746 the Venetian Senate banned it. In the early part of the period the press was severely censored by most governments, irrespective of whether they have been considered 'absolutist' or 'limited'. France enjoyed freedom of the press in practice by the later eighteenth century, especially when Malesherbes was censor from the 1750s. Austria, Prussia and Russia abolished or curtailed censorship by royal decree. Simultaneously the Genevan republic was busy condemning Rousseau. In 1762 it ordered his books to be burned and the author to be arrested if he set foot in the city.

Rights were enshrined in law and guarded by Estates and parliaments. There has been little comparative investigation of their powers and composition, though work is now beginning. Modern research is discovering teeming forms of representative life where it had been pronounced extinct. All European states retained a rich variety, national, provincial or local. Consultation was not unique to England: a national parliament was and that made it more noticeable.

The vanishing act performed by representative bodies is a common theme of 'absolutism'. Yet all is not as it seems. The *cortes* of Castile is written off as a moribund institution which the crown gladly put down. It met for the last time in 1664. Yet it had been more active in preceding decades than ever before. Royal management and bribery were prerequisites: chief minister Olivares



sat as a deputy. In the *cortes* the crown had centralised the mechanisms of consent, but it had to apply to the cities represented if its requests went beyond the assembly's competence. The decision was therefore taken to return to direct negotiation with the cities. If this is 'absolutism' in action, it is an odd performance. Consultation was not terminated: it continued at a lower level. Authority was not centralised but devolved. And the *cortes* was destroyed, not by the power of the crown, but by the power of the cities.

So how was the myth of 'absolutism' created? It began with Fortescue in the fifteenth century. He launched the attractive and indestructible notion that parliaments were uniquely English. It was inaccurate history but serviceable propaganda against the French national enemy. So was the deliberate blurring by English political theory, during the wars against Louis XIV, of the distinction between absolute and despotic power. The French protested in vain against a wilful attempt to discredit their system of government. The equation of French absolute monarchy with lawless despotism became official in England. Three centuries later many historians are unwilling or unable to unscramble the two concepts.

Most conceptual 'isms' were coined in the early nineteenth century in a vein of pejorative mockery – nationalism, socialism, communism, capitalism, conservatism and liberalism. The excesses and instability of the revolutionary period produced a backlash after 1815. Politics were polarised. On the side of newly labelled 'liberalism' were the adherents of freedom of the press, a parliamentary constitution and an emasculated clergy. On the other were the devotees of divine right, hereditary monarchy and the alliance of throne and altar. In central Europe a blanket of censorship was imposed and secret police proliferated. Representative Estates were abolished, civil liberties truncated and associations banned. In Austria permission had to be obtained for a dance employing an orchestra of more than two instruments. In France newspapers were confined to reporting 'facts' and weather forecasts. If there was no early modern confrontation between 'absolutist' and 'liberal' forces, there was now.

In 1823 Ferdinand VII of Spain overthrew the liberal constitution which he had been forced to grant. The result was revolt. The ministers of the restored Louis XVIII of France sent an army to rescue him. French Liberals were aghast. In their eyes the Spanish revolution was 1789 re-enacted. Amid

uproar in the Chamber of Deputies, government supporters protested against their treatment by the Liberals and disowned the oppressive regime which they were accused of wishing to impose on Spain. The word they used to describe it was *absolutisme*.

They had been groping for the word and presumably had not discovered it: if it was used before it had not passed into common parlance. Now it did. It represented a deliberate travesty of the conservative position: no constitution, no parliament, no rights. That is why it is hard to define 'absolutism' without caricaturing it. It was coined to identify contemporary tyranny and not as a tool of historical analysis. But it stuck, and it was projected back on to the *ancien régime*. Henceforth its pastel subtleties were viewed in the strident primary colours of the age of Metternich and Charles X. The crude confrontations of Ferdinand VII's realm were substituted for the sophisticated balances of Louis XIV's. Absolute and shared power which had operated side by side now became opposed types of government, as overheated historical imaginations sought to make sense of early modern states in the light their own exhilarating polarities. But real absolutism did not end in 1789. It began.

By the 1850s 'absolutism' had established itself in the history books as firmly as in the palaces of central and southern Europe. It soon fused conveniently with another nineteenth-century experience – the rise of nation states with huge armies and modern bureaucracies. Liberals rightly regarded them as the pillars of the absolutism they confronted and they were prominent among nineteenth-century historians. Present preoccupations again defined perspectives on the past. Standing armies and bureaucratic devices, as they existed in the 1860s and 1870s, were now detected in the France of Louis XIV. They too became part of 'absolutism'.

'Absolutist' historiography was not launched on an entirely negative platform. Nationalists decided that early modern monarchs had confronted the separatist forces obstructing the rise of the nation state. Thus later nineteenth-century historians downgraded the provincial organs of consent – not because early modern people found them inadequate but because they bored over-excited nationalists. The vital requirement was to provide suitable pedigrees for the new national units. Simultaneously the historical discipline was established in the European

Family favourites; Goya's painting of Manuel Godoy, whose rise to power as Spain's chief minister in the years before the Napoleonic invasions depended on the ear of the king, Charles IV, and more specifically the bed of his queen.



universities, with national history dominating the agenda. The main themes of the early modern period were defined and 'absolutism' was among them.

The concept perpetuates a nineteenth-century attempt to label as despots the absolute monarchs of the early modern period. Both English and French *ancien régimes* operated in a consultative and a prerogative mode, respectively limited and absolute. But the nineteenth century experienced absolute and limited monarchy only as alternative systems of government. This perspective was fatal for understanding a period when kings could not function legitimately without both modes of operation. To suit their national mythologies historians spotlight the absolute mode in France and the limited mode in England. Sophisticated early modern regimes were reduced to a single *modus operandi* and hence to the confrontational caricatures which have survived.

Myths are based on a pinch of truth. In the last days of the *ancien régime* French kings did act despotically, in search of short cuts to desirable reforms for which no consent was forthcoming. But no Frenchmen equated despotism with their constitution. Until quite late in 1789 the old constitution was what most wanted. Despotism was seen as its negation. The concept of 'absolutism' erects into an organised system what was almost unanimously recognised as a malfunction.

The absolute monarchies of the early modern period bore little resemblance to absolutist nineteenth-century states: they were less autocratic, less despotic and less bureaucratic. With these insights historians have recently tried to qualify the original concept of *ancien régime* 'absolutism'; but it is rarely clear which definition, hard or soft, is being deployed. The result is a historiographical muddle.

The 'absolutist' scenario is beyond repair: no amount of cutting or re-writing can save it. To retain the title of 'absolutism' while removing most of the content is a hopelessly confusing half-measure. There seems little point in further extending its run. When impresarios shred the scripts and sack the cast, they commonly take off the play. With the loss of its autocrats and its bureaucrats, its theory and its practice, 'absolutism' should heed the age-old advice. Kindly leave the stage.

Nicholas Henshaw is Head of History at Stockport Grammar School and author of The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy to be published by Longman in the autumn.



'The tyrants of Europe' – the kings of Poland, Prussia, Austria, Spain and England characterised as 'enemies of liberty' (with the Pope) in this French Revolution tract. The realities of their rule were, however, rather less black and white.

FOR FURTHER READING:

R. Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Blackwell, 1988); S. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford University Press, 1985); F. Bluche, *Louis XIV* (Blackwell, 1990); D. Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism* (Arnold, 1983); D. Starkey, *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (Longman, 1987); J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832*

(Cambridge, 1985); J. Miller (ed.), *Absolutism in Seventeenth Century Europe* (Macmillan, 1990); P. Campbell, *The Ancien Régime in France* (Blackwell, 1988); J. Black, *Eighteenth-Century Europe 1700-1789* (Macmillan, 1990); D. Beales, *The Austrian Enlightenment and its Aftermath* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991); M. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500* (Longman, 1992).

The gold coronation medal of George I of England, 1714. The Hanoverian dynasty came into being by Act of Parliament, but the extent to which this restrained its *modus operandi* as an *ancien régime* is questionable.

