

Extract from Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'French Absolutism'.¹

The Culture of Absolutism

By the end of the religious wars, France was effectively in social crisis and economic ruin. The 1590s were marked by famine, popular revolt and epidemics, as agriculture was fatally disrupted and many cultivators were forced off the land. The royal state began to seem the only viable solution to anarchy; and opposition to monarchical authority among its principal rivals receded, even while the monarchy introduced reforms that, among other things, redistributed the tax burden by excluding some privileged exemptions. Yet the seventeenth century would again be plagued by civil war. With the end of the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the remnants of fragmented sovereignty reasserted themselves, aggravated not only by predatory bands of aristocratic soldiers returning from war but also by new dynasties of office-holders. In the time of the Fronde, the battles over jurisdiction, the burden of taxation, or access to state office and the profits of taxation, resurfaced in new forms. In a series of revolts from 1649 to 1652, there were successive waves of opposition to the king from the *parlement* of Paris defending its powers to limit the monarchy, from nobles asserting their autonomy, from popular forces resisting taxation, and finally from dynastic rivals.

The monarchy responded by consolidating central power. What followed is conventionally called the era of French 'absolutism': the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which had granted significant rights to Protestants; reform of the fiscal and military apparatus to fortify the central state and weaken the aristocracy; a comprehensive programme by the state to promote commercial and industrial development; attempts to unify the legal system and to create a national French culture, from royal patronage of the arts to the standardisation of the French language.

While the absolutist state survived the upheavals of the seventeenth century, the Fronde and peasant revolts, the grievances inseparable from the nature of that state - taxation, privileges and exemptions, administrative corruption, in a framework of regional and corporate fragmentation - continued to be the targets of social protest and proposals for reform. Absolutism would never overcome the fragmentation of the state; and the idea of a fragmented social order bound together by a single harmonising will, a network of corporate entities integrated into an organic, hierarchical totality by a single sovereign power, would continue to shape French political thought. It also encouraged a conception of society in which the totality of social relations, including economic transactions, was subsumed in the *political* community. This constellation would continue to dominate French social thought up to the Revolution and beyond.

The 'parcellisation' of political power in France, the survival of feudal prerogatives and privileges, their extension into new forms of patronage and proprietary offices, the persistence of

¹ Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 'French Absolutism' in *Liberty and Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso, 2012, pp. 169-171.

regional and corporate particularisms, whether viewed from the perspective of the monarchy or the 'people', were often confronted theoretically by the notion of a single unifying mind or will which would bind them together. Defenders of the monarchy - whether motivated by the needs of a quarrelsome and self-defeating feudal nobility, the grievances of the Third Estate, or the proprietary interests of the monarchy itself - proposed that feudal prerogatives and proprietary rights in political office and power be appropriated by the monarchy, to constitute, as Bodin formulated it, a single, supreme and indivisible sovereign power. In moderate 'constitutionalist' doctrine, the royal will was to be rendered more truly public, cleansed of particularistic accretions in the form of a corrupt and venal administration, and tempered or informed by representative institutions, but not limited by sharing sovereignty with them.

Even in more radical attacks on royal absolutism, the public will of the state was not generally opposed, as in England, by asserting private interests or individual rights against it. Nor was the common good redefined as a public interest essentially constituted by private interests, in order to counter the public claims of a crown encroaching upon private rights. Instead, the public character of the absolutist state itself was questioned, and the location of the public will was shifted. The principle of generality in a system of particularisms was transferred in theory to representative institutions, the officers of the 'people', 'intermediate bodies'. Even where the common good was conceived as emerging from a harmony of private interests, the state - more specifically, the monarchy - tended to appear as the necessary agent of harmony, the unifying will that would integrate corporate particularities and partial interests. The threats posed by the state itself, its own particularistic and proprietary character, the growth of a burdensome administrative apparatus conceived as private property, were opposed not so much by attempts to defend the 'private' sphere from encroachment by the 'public', as by proposals for transforming the 'private' state into a truly public thing.

Under the Bourbon monarchy, the by now familiar argument that a unifying will in the person of the monarch was an inescapable necessity to maintain social order in an irreducibly fragmented state was taken to new extremes. In 1681 Bishop Bossuet, tutor to the son and heir of Louis XIV, and pushed the argument beyond all previous limits with the publications of his *Discourse on Universal History*. A staunch supporter of the king and the Gallican Church against both Protestants and papacy, he presented his pioneering work in 'philosophical' history as a lesson to the young dauphin. At the centre of the first volume, which covers a 'universal' history from the beginning of the world to the reign of Charlemagne, was the history of ancient Rome and the rise of Christianity. Bossuet's account of the later periods, up to 1661, would be reproduced from his notes after his death. The intention of this massive work was to demonstrate that the history of the world was providentially ordained in the interest of a unified Catholic Church; and one of its principal conclusions was that a single, indivisible sovereign monarch, as a repository of that single, unified Church, was required to fulfil God's purpose.

In the following century, the 'Age of Enlightenment', the culture of French absolutism would take a very different form; but the absolutist state remained at the core of the Enlightenment.

However many national enlightenments there may have been, it was in France that the emblematic *philosophe* was born, a new kind of public intellectual whose mission to educate the modern reader was most vividly exemplified by the *Encyclopédie*, proposing to 'encompass not only the fields already covered by the academies, but each and every branch of human knowledge', and not only for the benefit of scholars but for the purpose of changing the 'common way of thinking'. This period is regarded as a distinctively cosmopolitan age in Europe and especially, perhaps, in France. Not unreasonably, the 'Enlightenment' is seen as a time when an 'Age of Discovery', three centuries of commercial and imperial expansion providing access to the material and cultural treasures of the world outside Europe, had driven European minds, and the 'republic of letters', beyond their narrow spatial boundaries. Encouraged by the intellectual legacy of humanism and a scientific revolution, this spatial expansion gave new life to universalistic visions of the world and human rights. Yet, for all their cosmopolitanism and inclusive ambitions, 'Enlightenment' reformers in France were still addressing specifically French questions about the proprietary state, patronage, taxation, and venal offices. ...