

H-France Review Vol. 10 (July 2010), No. 102

William Beik, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvii + 401 pp. Maps, figures, notes, appendices, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl) and \$29.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN978-0-521-70956-9.

Review by Michael Breen, Reed College.

William Beik is best known for his path-breaking study of absolutism in Languedoc under Louis XIV and an important book on the political culture of urban protests in seventeenth-century France, but in *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* he presents us with a sweeping overview of early modern French history that relegates politics and the state to a mere five-page synopsis in an appendix.^[1] This may seem rather surprising from a scholar whose work has been so crucial in transforming our understanding of the Sun King's reign and the workings of the so-called "absolute monarchy." Having helped articulate the now-dominant revisionist paradigm of absolutism as a form of "social collaboration" between the monarchy and traditional elites, rather than the latter's subjugation by the former, Beik's decision to skirt the ongoing debates about the subject might, at first glance, seem problematic.^[2] Ultimately, however, pushing political and institutional issues to the margins enables Beik to focus on the wide and disparate range of actors—men and women, rural peasants and urban workers, bourgeois notables and noble aristocrats, clergy and military—who collectively made the history of early modern France. The result is an impressive, magisterial synthesis that simultaneously serves as an apology for, and a model of, a classic approach to social history that long defined the field, but has waned somewhat in recent years.

Aimed squarely at advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate students, as well as those looking for a thorough and reliable introduction to the past several decades of scholarship, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France*, provides a thoughtful, well-written, and consistently engaging synthesis of a prodigious amount of scholarship on a vast array of topics. After an opening chapter that crisply surveys France's piecemeal expansion from 1400 to 1789 and introduces the kingdom's considerable cultural, geographic, and economic diversity, Beik proceeds to sketch a detailed picture of French society, admirably balancing overarching patterns with local particularities. At the core of his portrait are France's 30,000 villages, where eighty to ninety percent of the population lived, and the thousands of *seigneuries* that structured daily life for the vast majority of the population. "All of French society," Beik reminds us, "was fundamentally built upon the life and work of people in the countryside" (p. 15). While village organization and rural life differed markedly from region to region owing to differences in climate, custom, and agriculture, he notes, the countryside was inescapable. Even urban dwellers relied on it for food and income, and invested much of their surplus wealth there. Similarly, despite their diverse sizes and structures, *seigneuries* provided the basic framework for rural economic and social organization. Originally a form of personal rule, *seigneuries* over time became managed more as forms of property with an eye towards market production and increased productivity. In spite of this more capitalist turn, or perhaps because of it, the land remained the indispensable source wealth, status, basic necessities, and tax revenues all the way down to the revolution.

The next three chapters each examine a particular social group—the peasantry, the nobility, and city dwellers—in greater detail. Chapter two provides a fascinating discussion of different forms of land

usage and agricultural practices, many of which will be familiar to those versed in the pioneering work of *annaliste* historians but which should give students an almost tactile sense of the ways French peasants struggled to earn a living from the land. Beik also provides vivid descriptions of the complexities of early modern property law, taxation, and rural communities and families, repeatedly stressing the subtle yet significant changes taking place beneath the surface of apparent stability in the countryside. Similar patterns of broad diversity, apparent stability, and subtle change inform Beik's discussion of the nobility as well. Drawing on a number of local studies, Beik explains the profound gaps separating the court aristocracy from the majority of provincial nobles who enjoyed incomes of less than 4,000 *livres* per year, and who were often a presence in most peasant villages. While nobles generally shared three main characteristics—lordship over seigneurial estates, military service, and service to a lord (especially the king)—Beik observes that the early modern period witnessed a great deal of demographic turnover among the nobility as well as major cultural changes, as the chivalric warrior noble was replaced by courtier aristocrats and legal/administrative “robe” nobles. Chapter four focuses on urban dwellers who inhabited the commercial, administrative, religious, and economic centers that dotted the landscape. Beik does an excellent job of capturing the realities of life in these small, walled enclaves with their narrow streets, proud town governments and diverse populations of merchants, professionals, artisans, and a sizeable number of working poor. He also crisply surveys recent findings about the important role of women and their work in urban economies, as well as the rise of sea-faring ports, which became dynamic centers of long-distance trade in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Chapters five through seven examine the impact of the kingdom's primary national institutions—the monarchy, the Catholic Church, and the army—on early modern society and culture. In the first, Beik concentrates on the transformative effects of venality and the expansion of the royal fiscal system. Drawing on the work of Roland Mousnier, David Bien, François Bayard, and others, Beik explains how “exploiting the opportunities provided by the expansion of the monarchical state” (p. 135) fostered the creation of a “new robe-ministerial elite” (p. 152) that was less a “rising bourgeoisie” of precocious bureaucrats and fiscal rationalists, as historians once believed, than a new branch of the second estate that shared many of the traditional nobility's values. The Church, meanwhile, thoroughly penetrated social and cultural life at all levels throughout the period. As with the nobility, Beik highlights the profound differences among the clergy, who ranged from poor priests without a church of their own to wealthy and powerful bishops and abbots drawn from elite families. The pervasiveness of religion in French culture and society, meanwhile, serves as the context for a lengthy discussion of the shortcomings of the French Church in the sixteenth century and the subsequent spread of Calvinism. Thanks to the work of Natalie Davis, Denis Crouzet, Barbara Diefendorf, Philip Benedict, and a number of other scholars, the complex and often violent interactions between Catholics and Protestants during the Wars of Religion and into the seventeenth century are well-known, and Beik synthesizes this research clearly and efficiently. The same is true for his treatment of the seventeenth century's revived and reinvigorated Catholicism. Chapter seven weaves together recent scholarship on the military to show how profoundly the experiences of early modern French men and women were shaped by war and the monarchy's increasing efforts to find resources to support its growing armies. As in earlier chapters, Beik shows how military expansion served as an avenue for social advancement, even as it came under increased royal control, while at the same time imposing heavy new costs on much of the rest of French society.

The next three chapters delve more fully into the constant tensions between tradition and innovation that marked early modern France. The first of these provides an overview of the many bonds that tied society together, starting with the family and moving outward to communal and occupational networks such as neighborhoods, militia companies, guilds, *compagnonnages*, and confraternities. Beik also devotes considerable space to traditions of protest and revolt, drawing considerably on his earlier research into this topic. Cultural history—in the anthropologically-informed sense of customs, practices, and rituals—while addressed throughout the book, receives its most concentrated treatment in a chapter on

“Traditional attitudes and identities.” Popular culture, religious rites, festivals, and notions of honor are all discussed, as are the changing values of the nobility and *grandée* families. Beik notes that although high-ranking elites were becoming more educated and developing more refined senses of taste and etiquette, they continued to share beliefs in the importance of violence and retribution with the popular classes. Chapter ten explores the social and cultural impacts of education in greater detail, tracing the ways the spread of literacy and humanist-based learning transformed the culture of civic elites, royal officials, and Jansenist critics of the monarchy.

The final two chapters return to the upper crust of early modern French society. The first addresses the evolution of the royal household and courtly society from the Renaissance court of François I through the court of the Sun King, with a brief epilogue on the eighteenth century courts of his successors. Although the court served useful functions in gathering royal advisers near the king’s person and helping to “civilize” the rough-and-tumble warrior aristocrats of an earlier age, Beik nevertheless concludes that it was a “wasteful, extravagant, and socially reactionary” institution (p. 338) that only served to widen the gap between the privileged few who benefited from the wealth and status to be gained there, and the vast majority of the population who funded this “hybrid combination of aristocratic support and governmental rule” (p. 340). The last chapter, on “Aristocracy’s Last Bloom and the Forces of Change” concentrates on the growth of a consumer economy and the rise of fashion and a new urban culture of salons, coffee houses, booksellers, and cultural institutions in the eighteenth century, most notably in Paris. The “last splendid flowering of the old regime’s aristocratic society,” Beik argues, should not be viewed in the context of the impending Revolution, but rather as prosperous contemporaries saw it, “as a vibrant, comfortable existence far removed from social strife” (p. 343).

A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France is excellent throughout. Beik does a very nice job of blending different types of evidence—quantitative, visual, and literary—with anecdote and analysis to produce a well-written volume that students and non-specialists will find to be a highly approachable and informative introduction to the subject. Specialists, meanwhile, will appreciate how Beik brings together a vast swath of both classic studies and the most recent scholarship into a single volume. Like any work of this scope, the book has its limitations, some of which the author addresses candidly in the preface. As noted earlier, issues concerning state formation and the problem of absolutism are often relegated to the background and receive limited treatment. There is also little on the colonies and their influences on French culture and society, a thoroughly understandable decision, though one that might be lamented given the recent spate of interesting work on the subject. [3] Beik is also candid about his intention to offer “one coherent, descriptive interpretation which readers can grasp and use,” arguing that “the best way to understand a society is to acquire one consistent view of it and then to criticize that view by exploring alternatives, rather than approaching each issue as a heated debate” (p. xv). This approach is, of course, debatable in its own right, but Beik’s decision, in my view, is a prudent one that ultimately contributes greatly to the book’s readability and will make it more effective for use in a classroom setting. Well-chosen, up-to-date bibliographies at the end of each chapter provide useful jumping off points for readers who want to explore historical debates in greater depth. Finally, as might be expected in a work that covers such a vast subject in such considerable detail, some errors, mostly minor, have crept into the text. The victor of Rocroi, for instance, was Louis II de Bourbon, not his father, Henri II (p. 91). *Chambres des Enquêtes* were indeed staffed primarily with junior judges, but their main function was to consider appeals of civil suits that had been tried according to written procedure, not to “[carry] out inquests into circumstances of crimes” (p. 138), especially since their criminal jurisdiction was limited to cases that did not carry physical punishments. [4] The date of the Edict of Nantes and the title of the 1685 Edict of Fontainebleau that revoked it are both also misstated (pp. 368 & 370). In a similar vein, Beik’s statement that litigation was considered an expensive and unneighborly act that was used as a bargaining strategy or a last resort (p. 273), has been called into question by several recent studies. [5] Many of these works, it should be stressed, were published after *A Social and Cultural History* went to press, and Beik can hardly be criticized for recapitulating what has long been

the standard view on the subject. Rather they serve to highlight how the field surveyed so effectively in this book continues to change in rapid and often surprising ways.

Two issues do merit further mention. As Beik notes in the preface, “The concept of social history is vast and undefined. There is no such thing as a master narrative that puts all the parts in their places” (p. xiv) While Beik is surely correct that there are “many possible stories” historians can put together depending on the interpretive and analytical choices they make, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* does, at times, suffer from the absence of a clear, overarching thesis or narrative. Beik’s analysis takes place primarily at the level of individual chapters, making them easier to excerpt for classroom use, but limiting the book’s overall force and coherence. Similarly, while Beik repeatedly calls attention to transformations taking place amidst the seeming stability of early modern French culture and society, the book’s topical organization tends to mask these developments and will make it challenging to use in courses with a predominately chronological set-up. In such instances, it might work best in conjunction with a more straightforward narrative history such as James Collins’ *The State in Early Modern France* or Robin Briggs’s *Early Modern France, 1560-1715*. [6]

Taken on its own terms, however, *A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France* does what it sets out to do admirably. It serves as a reminder of the richness and fascinating complexity of early modern French society, the disparate groups of people who inhabited it, and the lessons to be learned from studying their history. Students, interested non-specialists, and even specialists of early modern French history will learn a great deal from reading this admirably rich, well-written and thoughtful synthesis.

NOTES

[1] William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); idem, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France, The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] William Beik, “The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration” *Past and Present*, 188 (Aug. 2005): 195-224.

[3] Some recent works in this area include Gilles Havard & Cécile Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique Française*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2003); James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Leslie Choquette, *Frenchmen into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Peter N. Moogk, *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada—A Cultural History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000); and Philip P. Boucher, *France and the American Tropics to 1700: Tropics of Discontent?* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

[4] Roland Mousnier, *Les institutions de la France sous l'ancien régime*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), p. 299.

[5] Among the recent works that have shown that use of law courts was a ubiquitous, at times almost banal, feature of early modern life, and relatively inexpensive at that, are Julie Hardwick, *Family Business: Litigation and the Politics of Daily Life in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jeremy Hayhoe, *Enlightened Feudalism: Seigneurial Justice and Village Society in Eighteenth-Century Northern Burgundy* (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008); Zoë A. Schneider, *The King’s Bench: Bailiwick Magistrates and Local Governance in Normandy, 1670-1740* (Rochester N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2008); Fabrice Maclair, *La Justice au village: Justice seigneuriale et société rurale dans le duché-pairie de La Vallière (1667-1790)*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008); and Hervé

Piant, *Une justice ordinaire: Justice civile et criminelle dans la prévôté de Vaucouleurs sous l'ancien régime*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

[6] James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Robin Briggs, *Early Modern France, 1560-1715*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Michael P. Breen
Reed College
breenm@reed.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172