

H-France Review Vol. 10 (April 2010), No. 60

Daryl Dee, *Expansion and Crisis in Louis XIV's France: Franche-Comté and Absolute Monarchy, 1674-1715*. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2009. xi + 244 pp. Maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-5046-303-4.

Review by Gail Bossenga, The College of William and Mary.

How to characterize royal “absolutism” under Louis XIV, if one even is willing to use the term, is a question that has preoccupied historians for quite some time. An older interpretation depicts Louis XIV as the founder of a rational, centralized, and bureaucratic state that ran rough-shod over the traditional privileges of local elites. By contrast, a revisionist position, now widely accepted, argues that the political system of Louis XIV was built upon the collaboration of the king with his privileged subjects who, far from suffering from the rise of absolute monarchy, were often amply rewarded for their cooperation. [1] In this excellent book, Darryl Dee uses the province of Franche-Comté as a case study to examine both positions and ends up persuasively crafting an interpretation that is more nuanced and complex than either one.

Dee accepts the revisionist thesis of collaboration to a degree, but he also strictly qualifies it. Cooperation between the monarch and the elite did exist at times, but this mutuality rested upon a prior “authoritarian foundation” that assumed the sovereignty of the king and the continued obedience of the privileged (p. 178). Furthermore, not all members of the privileged elite benefitted from the system crafted by the royal government. Although some clients of the monarchy were nicely rewarded for aiding the royal government, many local notables were fiscally exploited by wartime levies, and factional divisions within the elite mediated the effects of governmental largesse.

Although Dee argues that the Sun King was intent on developing his sovereignty, the monarch did not do so by laying the foundations of a rational bureaucratic system. Rather, Louis XIV's state worked because it effectively mobilized a highly personalized system of loyalties, controlled patronage from the center, and coopted traditional institutions for royal purposes. Its success can perhaps best be measured not by its grandeur, but by its sheer survival. Whereas the huge strains of war led to the civil disorder of the Fronde in the mid-seventeenth century, Louis XIV's state weathered the enormous demands of the king's wars. In 1713 the state was bankrupt, starving, and exhausted, but it remained, amazingly, intact.

Dee's case study of Franche-Comté is carefully chosen to trace how Louis XIV and his ministers crafted a state able to survive multiple crises. Although, as Dee observes, no case is “typical,” he also rightly argues that the goal of a case study is to illuminate the common, underlying political problems and dynamics at work in otherwise diverse settings (p. 199). By this criterion, his case study is a clear success.

Ruled in the seventeenth century by the Spanish Habsburgs, Franche-Comté was a largely independent province whose provincial estates, parlement, and urban oligarchies vied for regional political power and prestige. Besançon, the largest city in the province, was an imperial free city, a miniature republic whose town magistrates were elected and answered to no one but the Holy Roman emperor himself.

The viability of this assortment of local privileges was brutally called into question by the Thirty Years War. A frontier province, Franche-Comté was a major theater of the war and lost as much as three quarters of its population to fighting and plague. Conquered initially by the French in 1664, the province was returned in 1668 to the Habsburgs, who attempted a hurried and desperate program of centralization. The imperial government suspended meetings of the provincial estates, started to build a massive fortress, and imposed new taxes to pay for provincial defense. The reforms provoked deep resistance from the populace and privileged elite alike. When the French returned, the province paid the price for its internal fragmentation and lack of integration into a larger state that could defend it. Franche-Comté was annexed to France in 1678.

One of the major issues facing the region was how privilege would operate after its annexation to France. Dee provides a complex and satisfying analysis of the myriad ways that Franche-Comté's new sovereign utilized, or discarded, privilege to facilitate the integration of the province into the French kingdom. The privileges to which the Comtois had become accustomed under the Habsburgs were medieval "liberties" that protected local elites and territories from outside interference. Louis XIV signed a capitulation treaty that guaranteed provincial privileges, but it soon became apparent that the meaning of privilege would change under French rule.

When the Comtois invoked their privileges to obstruct royal goals, the French government either restructured or suppressed those prerogatives. The government definitively abolished the provincial estates, replaced the old republican *corps de ville* of Besançon with a new municipal government chosen by cooptation under the intendant's watchful supervision, and created a new bailliage court in Besançon whose jurisdiction would further dilute that of the reconstructed municipality. Using a precedent already created by the Habsburgs during their hasty, war-stimulated attempt at reform, the French government also reformed the distribution of direct taxation, so that the privileged elite footed part of the bill, although at a reduced rate. The intendant, rather than the now defunct provincial estates, oversaw the system of direct taxation. Thus, ten years after annexation, many of the most cherished privileges of the Comtois elite had been stripped away.

Nonetheless, absolute monarchy was not simply a program to eliminate privilege. Once privilege as a source of autonomy had been effectively tamed or eliminated, privilege as a reward for government service could be profitably employed. Louis XIV revived the old parlement, which was moved from Dole to Besançon, and used the transfer to create a group of magistrates who owed their political position and prestige to the French monarchy. He also made the post of mayor of the Besançon ennobling.

The creation of local clienteles who would promote royal interests was another step essential to successful state building. Sensing the opportunity presented by French annexation, the ambitious Claude Boisot got the ear of François-Michel, marquis de Louvois, Secretary of State at War, and helped him to fill the new parlement with pliable royal allies. Four members of the Boisot family, including Claude himself, were rewarded with positions in the new sovereign court. The dependability of the Boisot family eventually led the royal government to promote Claude's half-brother, Gabriel Boisot, to the critical position of first president of the parlement. In times of upheaval, Gabriel successfully steered his colleagues to adopt policies favored by the royal government and amassed a considerable fortune in the process.

As Dee observes, the revisionist interpretation of absolutism as collaboration concentrates on the early period of Louis XIV's reign. Thus he is particularly interested in the latter stages of the monarchy when France faced enormously expensive and lengthy wars that required the mobilization of every possible resource. One innovation of this period was the introduction of venality into Franche-Comté. Did the creation of venal offices enhance the privileges of members of the elite, as some historians have

argued, or promote exploitation, as others have contended?^[2] Both outcomes were possible: venality, according to Dee, produced “a complicated balance sheet of winners and losers” (p. 111).

On the one hand, the introduction of venality into the parlement of Franche-Comté did help to secure the magistrates’ privileges. Bankers would not lend funds to the parlementaires to meet forced loans demanded by the monarchy until the royal government agreed to turn the offices of the magistrates into heritable property. Only by guaranteeing the magistrates’ privileges and rights of property in office could the government be sure that the magistrates would be able to raise money for the government on multiple occasions. The creation of a fourth chamber in the parlement, meanwhile, accelerated social mobility among wealthy, ambitious commoners and gave the Boisot family a chance to consolidate their influence at the expense of rivals.

On the other hand, the government’s creation of new venal offices was often a thinly-disguised form of blackmail. The monarchy created offices that threatened the authority of existing officeholders so that the latter would be forced to buy up the offices. Members of Besançon’s town council were so worried about the creation of new urban offices that they personally advanced money to buy up the posts and then had themselves named as preferred creditors of the town. Finally, in an attempt to stave off further creations of offices, provincial officials agreed to pay the royal government a fixed subsidy. The subsidy was a good deal both for the government, which acquired a predictable source of income, and for the elite, who were partially exempt from the taxes used to support the subsidy. This measure, the reverse of what most of France experienced, was only possible because the intendant already had such strong administrative control over direct taxation in the region.

How France, virtually bankrupt, survived the War of the Spanish Succession makes a fitting close to Dee’s story. Costs mounted so astronomically compared to revenues that in 1707-10 the Extraordinary Treasurer of War had no funds available to feed and house troops in winter quarters in Besançon. In 1709 the city only avoided being sacked by the troops, a scenario common during the Thirty Years War, because the intendant and the town councilors borrowed money on their own personal credit, as well as that of the town, to pay for supplies and wages. The city fathers were persuaded to act by a combination of civic duty and the intendant’s threat to unleash the troops if the city did not open up its public granaries. Thus, the French state survived at a critical moment, at least in Franche-Comté, because local officials and the intendant decided to dig deep into their own pockets to rescue it.

The relative calm in Besançon during this crisis was a testimony to the accomplishment of Louis XIV’s state building. By now, so many of the remaining privileges of the Comtois elite were bound up in the success of the French state that rebellion to secure autonomy scarcely seemed imaginable. Through the tireless work of the intendants, the revamping of old institutions and creation of new ones, the recruitment of loyal local clients, and a process of intimidation and negotiation, not to mention higher taxation, a new political order had been permanently laid.

Lucidly written, cogently argued, and masterfully researched in appropriate archives, Dee’s study is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the debate over the nature of absolute monarchy during the reign of Louis XIV. Naturally, his book inspires a number of questions about the fate of absolutism in the next century, some of which he himself raises. As Dee notes, “seventeenth and eighteenth-century historians of France appear to be holding two separate conversations about the early modern monarchy” (p. 10). The former tend to stress the personalized, limited nature of the state and its need for collaboration, while the latter are more prone to accept at least some degree of administrative centralization.^[3]

The questions arise, then, to what extent did the state created by Louis XIV persist during the eighteenth century? And if it did continue, at least in part, why did it not hold together, as it had in the early 1700s, but finally collapse in a momentous revolution? Were new forces at work, such as

bureaucratic development? Or were traditional institutions poorly managed? Did the competitive international climate change? With such interesting questions to tackle, perhaps the author might be persuaded to write a sequel that traces the evolution of the political system developed during Louis XIV's reign into the period of the last Bourbon kings.

NOTES

[1] Interpretations of the centralizing nature of absolute monarchy include, for example, Roland Mousnier, *Les institutions de France sous la monarchie absolue, 1598-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974); George Pagès, *La monarchie d'ancien régime en France de Henri IV à Louis XIV* (Paris: A. Colin, 1932); and John C. Rule, "Louis, Roi-Bureaucrate," in Rule, ed., *Louis XIV and the Craft of Kingship* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), pp. 3-101. For examples of the collaborative nature of absolutism see William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and James B Collins, *Classes, Estates, and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Two examples of the importance of clientage are Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[2] On the interconnected growth of privilege and the state through venality see David Bien, "Office, Corps, and a System of State Credit: The Uses of Privilege under the Ancien Régime," in Keith Michael Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 89-114, and William Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). On the exploitive effects of venality see John J. Hurt, *Louis XIV and the Parlements: The Assertion of Royal Authority* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[3] The interpretive power of the thesis of centralization can be traced to Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Doubleday, 1955). For examples of eighteenth-century administrative centralization, see Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Michel Antoine, *Le conseil du roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva: Droz, 1970). Although interpretations drawn from political culture dominate studies of the origins of the Revolution, Dee's statement that historians of the eighteenth century do not study the state (p. 9) seems to me untrue. There is simply no consensus on the nature of the state.

Gail Bossenga
The College of William and Mary
gmboss@wm.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.