H-France Review Vol. 4 (September 2004), No. 88

Mark Potter, *Corps and Clienteles: Public Finance and Political Change in France, 1688-1715*. Aldershot, Hampshire, and Burlington, Vert.: Ashgate, 2003. x + 217 pp. Figures, tables, bibliography, appendices, and index. $79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-754-63726-3.

Review by Jonathan Dewald, State University of New York at Buffalo.

Specters of exceptionalism haunt the study of old regime France. Why, as Tocqueville already asked in the mid-nineteenth century, did revolution erupt in France rather than elsewhere? Why did France not develop a stable parliamentary government like England's, and why did the country fail to match its neighbor's pace of economic development? Such questions remain basic to French historical studies, but over the past twenty years or so much fine research has redefined them. French economic development, it turns out, was not so lethargic as was once thought; and despite the appearance of absolutism, French kings consulted and negotiated with their society's elites, ensuring that at least the functions of parliamentary government were carried out, even if most of the forms were lacking. Mark Potter's new book continues this line of inquiry and reflection. With a great deal of inventive research, he explores the French fiscal system during the later reign of Louis XIV, seeking to understand the relations that it established between the government and provincial ruling groups.

Potter centers his investigation on the concept of "intermediation." With a long history of evading and occasionally jailing its creditors, the French monarchy had difficulty raising the funds it needed to support its international ambitions. It therefore exploited the superior credit of the nation's privileged rich, demanding loans and one-time payments from nobles, office-holders, and local institutions, on the assumption that these groups would in turn borrow from others. Earlier governments had dabbled with such arrangements, but Louis XIV systematized them in the years after Colbert's death, and they remained important through 1789. The result, Potter argues, was a system that fell midway between the brutal absolutism of Louis XIII and the constitutionalism that underlay state finance in England and the Netherlands. France remained an absolute monarchy, but its government, too, could tap into the wealth of the nation's social elites, allowing it to keep up in a competitive international environment.

In a nicely controlled comparison, Potter offers two case studies showing how the system worked in practice. In the *généralité* of Rouen, there were no provincial estates, and the crown's demands landed mainly on venal office-holders; in Burgundy, the provincial estates served as an effective agent of the crown's fiscality, shielding local elites from exploitation. Both examples, he argues, support the view (developed by William Beik, James Collins, and others[1]) that Louis XIV's government sought compromise with provincial elites, cementing their legal and financial interests, and, in return, receiving their obedience and some of their cash. Far from modernizing the nation, as much theory has argued, absolutism and wartime finance strengthened privilege, pushing France backward toward proprietary government rather than forward toward bureaucracy. If the king was to exploit the good credit of magistrates and others, he had to solidify that credit by securing the magistrates' ownership of their offices. Louis XIII had threatened to end venal office-holding altogether; Louis XIV made it an instrument of fiscal policy. But if the crown negotiated with elites throughout France, Potter demonstrates, provincial differences still mattered considerably. Provincial representative institutions offered elites immense advantages, since they were especially effective in raising money. In return for this efficacy, the crown allowed them to control how the money was raised; the Estates of Burgundy pushed tax burdens onto their unprivileged fellow-citizens and ensured that lucrative tax-farming contracts remained in the hands of well-connected locals. In provinces that had no estates, elites were far more vulnerable, though the population as a whole may actually have been better off. Magistrates of the sovereign courts and other officials had to raise substantial amounts for the crown, and the banking profits that the system generated went mainly to Parisian financiers, who were both nearby and well connected.

All of this represents a fine contribution to our understanding of how early modern government actually worked. The contribution is the more valuable in that Potter does not seek to minimize the system's costs, inefficiencies, and injustices. Louis XIV (he shows) left his successor with enormous debts and limited means for dealing with them. In 1720-21 the Law System brought the inevitable, thinly-disguised government bankruptcy, destroying many groups' trust in the monarchy, and the policy of trading privilege for financial support made genuine reform almost impossible.

But the book is less successful at situating these case studies within a larger picture of French society and government, partly because Potter makes such large claims for his evidence. His Louis XIV is an ally of the nation's privileged groups, presiding benignly over a "relative shift in political power toward corps that was necessary in order to create out of them effective intermediaries" (p. 190); "Louis XIV's strategies to meet the financial costs of warfare in many ways brought the two camps closer together within their underlying interdependent political and economic relationships" (p. 192). At best, these seem serious overstatements, even when applied only to the limited domain of state finance. Potter has not attempted to calculate the actual burden that "intermediation" represented for venal office-holders; John Hurt has recently done so for members of the *parlements*, showing that the burden was very heavy indeed, and made worse by its unpredictability.[2] Louis's new taxes receive only brief notice, although some of them (notably the *capitation*) undermined the very distinction between privileged and non-privileged orders; there is no mention of the numerous other measures that threatened elite property rights, as when the government reclaimed alienated domain lands and regulated private forests. Comparable questions arise about the relationship between war and political modernization. Potter writes: "Warfare under Louis XIV did not propel the rise of 'modern' structures in the Weberian sense; on the contrary, 'patrimonial' elements of the state were strengthened" (p. 51). Again, this represents a dramatic leap from one corner of the fiscal system to a panoramic overview of French government as a whole. A different conclusion would emerge if attention were directed to the bureaucratic systems established to manage French warmaking, or to the apparatus of economic regulation put in place by Colbert, or even to the government's efforts to gather and analyze fiscal information.

At the same time, Potter's work has the immense virtue of reminding us what a peculiar system French venality of office actually was, and how deeply it affected the country's development.[3] No other major state had anything comparable; Charles I briefly tried selling offices in England, but the practice never took hold. In contrast, by the 1680s venality touched every non-clerical position of power in French society, from small-town market officials to the king's chief advisors. Immense amounts of capital flowed through the system, creating social relations that simply did not exist elsewhere. If only by virtue of the borrowing that it required, venality attached French elites to the state and to one another, but it also created vulnerabilities and resentments that had no analogues in other countries. It gave a peculiar tone even to the nation's ethical life, as contemporaries wrestled with the presence of money in every judicial and political transaction. As Potter shows, both the crown and office-holders themselves managed in some ways to turn the system to their own advantage, but they could do so only within the limits that the system itself established.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, William Beik, A*bsolutism and Society in Seventeenth-century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[2] John J. Hurt, *Louis XIV and the Parlements: The Assertion of Royal Authority* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[3] See also William Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

Jonathan Dewald
SUNY at Buffalo
jdewald@buffalo.edu

H-France Review Vol. 4 (September 2004), No. 88

ISSN 1553-9172