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Hilary J. Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. xvi + 313 pp. Maps, figures, tables, bibliography, and index. \$57.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4234-6.

Review by Keith P. Luria, North Carolina State University.

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As Hilary Bernstein points out in her new study of early modern civic political culture, few people in sixteenth-century France theorized about cities and their significance in the kingdom's political structure. Writers, who devoted much thought to the changing nature of royal authority, the social and political roles of the estates, the expanding power of the judiciary, and the authority of the Church, gave little thought to cities and their importance. But kings thought about cities a good deal, for they were essential in maintaining order, prosperity, defense, and the proper functioning of government. And city leaders thought constantly about their relationships with kings, from whom they received the privileges by which they maintained oligarchical control of their municipalities.

Bernstein examines urban political culture and the relationship between kings and municipalities with the example of Poitiers, a provincial capital and stronghold of the Catholic League during the Wars of Religion. Poitiers was not a noted center of commercial activity. Instead, its importance derived from its ecclesiastical institutions, legal establishment, and university. Poitiers's leaders were acutely aware that they enjoyed the courts and university thanks to royal grants, and their city's prosperity depended on kingly favor in the future. Poitiers's civic myths celebrated the city's loyalty to French kings, dating it to the year 1200, when, according to a carefully burnished legend, a traitorous city clerk attempted to betray the town to the English. Having made his deal with the enemy, the clerk went to take the city's keys from the mayor's bedroom, but they were nowhere to be found. His co-conspirators were thrown into a panic by a vision of the Virgin Mary accompanied by Saint Hilaire, a former bishop of Poitiers. While the English started slaughtering each other, Poitiers's inhabitants went searching for the keys, which they eventually found in the hands of the Virgin's statue in the church of Notre-Dame-la Grande.

For the city's leaders the "Miracle of the Keys was a fundamental event in Poitiers's historical tradition: it established a firm and venerable relationship of loyalty between the town and the kings of France and invested it with divine approval" (p. 164). Ties to the French monarchy were cemented during the Hundred Years' War. Ignoring inconvenient facts such as the town's subjection to English rule during much of the conflict, the tradition celebrated the city's welcome of the Dauphin (future Charles VII) in the early fifteenth century. He made Poitiers his capital, convened the Parlement of Paris there, and received Joan of Arc in the city when she came to announce her vision. In return for its hospitality to the claimant of the French crown, Poitiers received important royal privileges including its university and royal courts. The *corps de ville* also received the right to constitute itself as a corporate body with seigneurial control over the city as fief. The privilege fostered the civic elite's sense of itself as a privileged and closed group. Elections to the city councils were co-optive and once admitted to the exclusive group, a councilor was a member for life with a "proprietary interest in government" (p. 23). The people had no public role.

But an equally powerful tradition countered the oligarchy's self-image. It held that city officials governed the city for the good of all inhabitants and had an obligation to consult with them in making decisions. This vision of the city government's authority grew out of the history of the medieval commune; it envisioned the community as a "moral whole" (p. 46), a united corps, and a single religious

body. As Bernstein shows, city officials usually realized that their decisions would have more force if they had popular support, and they did consult, albeit informally, with the people grouped into parish assemblies, guilds, and the militia. The desire for consensus (a legacy of the medieval communal movement and of the Church) was strong, both between the government and the people and among the city councilors themselves, whose competing interests could lead to conflict. But unanimity was understood as a moral good unlikely to be realized. Instead, the government operated by a process of majority decision making, which found justification in Roman law. And within the larger community, city leaders consulted with specific groups when their interests were at stake. But final decisions remained with the ruling elite. This practice, too, was understood to be a form of majority rule, here referring not to the greater number of voters but to the city's *maior et sanior pars*, in other words its best people or elite. Such a conception characterized decision making in local government from the largest urban centers down to the country's smallest village assemblies. A small group thus could claim to make decisions for the whole while avoiding charges of self-interest or corruption. It would be interesting to know to what extent Poitiers's university faculty and very active humanist circle contributed to the development of these political attitudes, but that issue remains apart from Bernstein's concerns.

The evolution of civic government and of urban political culture in the sixteenth century has frequently been understood as the triumph of the exclusive model of governance over the participatory model, which enjoyed its heyday in the late Middle Ages. It suffered under the growing absolutism of the French state, which fostered the control of royal officials over cities. The work of Bernard Chevalier has been particularly important in promoting this view of urban history.[1] According to Bernstein, Poitiers's experience challenges this received wisdom. To be sure, the makeup of the city's political elite followed the same trajectory as that Chevalier found elsewhere. Lawyers and judicial officials dominated city government at the expense of merchants and artisans. Indeed, in this town where commercial activity was relatively unimportant, the takeover occurred quite early, already by the late fifteenth century. But in Poitiers, these agents of the state did not sacrifice urban concerns and values to serve the monarchy. They took it as a point of pride to remain actively committed to city government and local interests. And despite the *corps de ville's* exclusivity, the city's political culture never rejected medieval notions of participation. One model of governance did not replace the other; they coexisted, though sometimes under considerable tension. Furthermore, powerful royalist sentiments were hardly the preserve of the ruling elite. Poitiers's people all valued the city's relationship with its rulers—that is what the Miracle of the Keys story taught them to do—and they continued to value it throughout the sixteenth century, until such time as the crown fell into the hands of a heretic king.

As Bernstein shows, however, a political culture that stressed benevolent elite control, consensus, and absolute loyalty to the king did not always work as smoothly in practice as it did in its idealized models. For example, François I sought to promote the city's prosperity through a project to make the Clain river navigable. The royal government would not finance the work but would aid the city government in doing so by authorizing new local taxes. The plan found support among a group of city councilors, but the project encountered a good deal of opposition from those institutions (e.g. religious houses) and individuals (e.g. millers) whose riverside properties would have to be condemned. Many of Poitiers's inhabitants did not want to pay the taxes. Even some members of the *corps de ville* opposed the plan because they felt that civic officials had overstepped the normal bounds of their authority. Despite the king's support, the river project accomplished little. "The public good, as defined by the city council, [had] failed to inspire either general confidence in its decisions or compliance with orders" (p. 122). The project's history makes clear the city government's need to consult with Poitiers's people, but it also suggests the limitations on the authority of both kings and councils. Henri II's policies also met opposition in the town, but it came from the elite not the populace. In 1547, the king issued an ordinance that excluded judicial officers from positions in municipal government. He wanted these officials to focus their energies on their court duties, and he wanted men with experience in financial matters (i.e. merchants) in charge of cities. Poitiers's merchants eagerly supported enforcement of the

ordinance as a means of regaining places on city councils lost to men of the law. They made use of language drawn from the communal tradition to appeal for support in parish assemblies by criticizing the exclusivity of the *corps de ville* and its self-interested motives in policy making. But Henri II's wishes and the merchants' ambitions ran up against the reality of a situation in which judicial officials were both useful for the proper functioning of local government and well established within in it. Eventually the policy collapsed. For Bernstein, the wrangling over the 1547 ordinance shows that the language of popular participation was still alive in Poitiers. But, as she points out, the merchants were by no means interested in changing the political system. As a result of their activism, some merchants gained entry into the *corps de ville*, but the elite's control of city government remained unchallenged.

The greatest test of the relationship between the crown and the city came during the Wars of Religion, especially during the heyday of the Catholic League in the reigns of Henri III and Henri IV. Some historians of the League have described the movement as the resurgence, or perhaps the last hurrah, of medieval communalism. In opposing Henri III and his successor, Leaguers sought greater autonomy for their towns from royal authority and a renewed role in local politics for those groups royal officials had excluded from city government.<sup>[2]</sup> But these views draw heavily on the experience of Paris. Historians of provincial cities have been less convinced of the League's social radicalism and emphasize instead its reliance on existing patterns of social status and authority.<sup>[3]</sup> In Bernstein's view, Poitiers fits the provincial, not the Parisian, pattern. While under League control, the town did not reject "the institutions and cultural assumptions of the monarchy." Leaguers did not seek "greater autonomy in swearing the Sacred Union" (p. 216). Despite Henri III's growing unpopularity in Poitiers and its refusal to grant him entry in May 1589, the city hesitated to join the League openly until after the king's death and the ascension of the Protestant Henri IV. Leaguers in Poitiers did not oppose royal authority; they defied a Huguenot king.

Furthermore, League leaders did not represent disenfranchised social groups. They came from the same part of urban society as their opponents. And they did not propose a new political system. The civic elite continued to govern and follow traditional patterns of political consultation with the populace, though now represented more through the urban militia than through parish assemblies. Indeed, the League's Union Council, which ran the city in tandem with the city councils, was in certain respects more, not less, socially and politically conservative than the *corps de ville*. Nobles came to dominate it, and it continued the reflex action of following central authority now represented by national League leader the duc de Mayenne, who was seen as the stand in for a legitimate king. Thus, rather than describing the League period as a break with sixteenth-century political developments, Bernstein stresses the continuities, especially the ongoing dominance of the city's elite, its reliance on central authority, and the city government's recognition of a need to consult with the populace.

The basic pattern persisted under Henri IV who saw ties to urban elites as key to maintaining order in the kingdom. But the new king changed the understanding of loyalty and the manner in which it was demonstrated. Unlike his predecessors, he was unimpressed by appeals based on the city's long historical tradition of loyalty going back to the Miracle of the Keys. Citing this tradition had allowed both the municipality and kings room to maneuver in their past dealings. Henri IV preferred the what-have-you-done-for-me-lately approach. Loyalty had to be shown consistently and without hesitation. There was far less room for negotiation, as the city learned when it resisted paying the *pancarte* tax in 1601. The king threatened to show up with troops and remove the city's privileges; Poitiers quickly learned its lesson.

Bernstein's meticulous examination of city council records and her attention to the rhetoric in which politics was conducted makes her study of Poitiers an important contribution to the growing list of works on early-modern cities. Her description of the provincial town does not fit the neater paradigms of early-modern urban history. The heritage of the medieval commune remained alive. Local authorities

recognized an obligation to consult the people, and the people could block the city government, such as the Clain river project, when they were not consulted. However Poitiers was in no way home to republican or proto-democratic political practices, even during the period of Catholic League control. The city depended on kings for its privileges and political identity; its inhabitants were thoroughly royalist; and an oligarchical elite controlled local government. The growth of central state power did not eliminate the traditional “values and customs of urban governance” (p. 274). The two modes of politics existed in tension across the century, but the tension was creative. It allowed for negotiations among otherwise competing groups and individuals in the city. The negotiations took place in a political language, couched in an idiom of loyalty, shared by all. If this view might lead us to underestimate the degree of social and political conflict in the city, it does help explain the continuities of political practices and language across the century, and it makes Hilary Bernstein’s book a valuable contribution toward understanding urban politics in early-modern France.

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#### NOTES

[1] Bernard Chevalier, *Les bonnes villes de France du XIVe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982).

[2] See Denis Richet, *La France moderne: L’esprit des institutions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973) and Robert Descimon, *Qui étaient les Seize? Étude sociale de deux cent vingt-cinq cadres laïcs de la ligue radicale parisienne* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1983).

[3] For example, Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Robert Harding, “Revolution and Reform in the Holy League: Angers, Rennes, Nantes,” *Journal of Modern History*, 53 (1981): 397-416; and Penny Roberts, *A City in Conflict: Troyes during the French Wars of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).]

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