

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Matthew Vester's review of Giora Sternberg, *Status Interaction during the Reign of Louis XIV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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The original review may be found on the H-France Review web site at:
<http://www.h-france.net/vol15reviews/vol15no128vester.pdf>.

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Thanks for the interesting review of Professor Sternberg's suggestive book, which I am looking forward to reading. I wonder, however, for I do not see any mention of it in the review, if the author has taken into account the relative power of these symbolic considerations when push comes to shove. For example, Louis XIV went to great lengths to force both Philip IV and Alexander VII to make humiliating apologies to him, and when push came to shove, they made them. Yet these apologies were totally dismissed or forgotten with the passage of time, and could only be enforced if the superior party had retained the power to enforce it. Ditto, the efforts of the imperious Louis XIV to legitimize his legitimate children that so infuriated Saint-Simon. If so, it would appear as if such quibbles were primarily ego trips not unlike competitions for professor of the year awards in modern academia.

11 October 2015

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I thank H-France and Professor Vester in particular for the detailed and thoughtful review of my book, *Status Interaction during the Reign of Louis XIV*. In response to the subsequent comment on the review, the obvious answer would be to refer Professor Sonnino and other readers to the book itself, which offers my full take on the issue in question. In the meantime, however, I thought it might be useful to provide a few points in direct response:

1. Certainly, 'when push comes to shove' few things remain standing (as the antiquities of Palmyra have recently reminded us). But is the ability to withstand brute force the best measure for historical or historiographical significance? I would have thought that the insistence of the physically stronger party to enforce its superiority symbolically (or undo its opponent's past shows of force) was an indication that brute power was not sufficient in itself.
2. Instead, I would wholeheartedly embrace Professor Vester's conviction that status interaction was 'a crucial element of social and cultural reality'. Indeed, the book uses the court of Louis XIV to illuminate a much wider 'Early Modern Mode of Behaviour and Interaction' (to cite the title of the

concluding section that most explicitly addresses the issue in question). My current research in contexts far removed – socially as well as geographically – from the world of Versailles has only served to reinforce this conviction, which I believe deserves much wider historiographical recognition and treatment.

3. Even those who judge a phenomenon solely by its macro-political ramifications should not be quick to dismiss status interaction. Those involved in making and enforcing high policy were enmeshed in it as much as the others. Whether or not one perceives the distinction between an armchair and a back-chair as ‘quibble’, the fact remains that a busy ruler like Louis XIV devoted long sessions to its resolution (as Chapter Two shows). And his very ability to deploy force in wartime was compromised when his generals would not communicate due to disagreements over epistolary forms of address (as it happens, I am currently completing an article on this matter, raised briefly in Chapter Six).
4. Brute force did not in fact come to play in many, if not most, scenarios. This is actually proven by one of the examples cited in the comment. Louis XIV already had plans for his bastards by the 1670s. Yet rather than force the matter then, at the height of his power, he opted, ‘like a common courtier’ (p. 125), for gradual elevation via symbolic and other means. As the book shows throughout, the ‘imperious’ Louis XIV agonized for decades along this series of status interactions, without which the ultimate decision to promote his legitimated sons to the line of succession would have been inconceivable.
5. The other example cited in the comment calls into question the accompanying claim that such symbolic considerations were ‘totally dismissed or forgotten with the passage of time’. The humiliation of Alexander VII in the 1660s – for which Professor Sonnino’s *Louis XIV’s View of the Papacy* (Berkeley, 1966) remains an authority – also served as the setting for other status interactions. These, as I recently argued, continued to reverberate until the final years of the ancien régime^[1]. A key reason for this was the increasing dependence of policy-makers on the written medium as a memory tool, which, in turn, resulted in the unforeseen consequence that the record itself became a partisan stake. These and other aspects of the ‘power of writing’ (always relative, like most, if not all, forms of power) will be addressed in my next book.

Notes

[1] Giora Sternberg, ‘Manipulating Information in the Ancien Régime: Ceremonial Records, Aristocratic Strategies, and the Limits of the State Perspective’, *The Journal of Modern History* 85 (2013), 239–79, esp. 261ff.

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