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John J. Hurt, *Louis XIV and the Parlements: The Assertion of Royal Authority*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002. xv + 240 pp. notes, bibliography, and index. £45.00 (cl). ISBN 0-7190-6235-7.

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

John Hurt's remarkable book combines detailed narrative with a wide-ranging argument. As narrative, the book traces the French monarchy's dealings with one of its most distinctive institutions, the *parlements*. By the mid-seventeenth century their members constituted the core of the French ruling elite, and eventually they would play a role in bringing the monarchy to a halt. But Hurt considers only a limited slice of their history, the personal reign of Louis XIV and the regency that followed his death in 1715, with only brief glances back to the sixteenth century and forward into the eighteenth. Read in this way, the book is a close and carefully-documented examination of sixty-odd years of French political history, as seen from one of several possible angles. But the book is also a reflection on the nature of old regime French politics itself, and in this sense its implications are much broader. Hurt argues that basic differences divided monarchs from magistrates and that the crown asserted its needs—for cash and for the swift implementation of legislation—with little regard to the *parlements'* opinions. In other words, he argues for restoring the term absolutism as an appropriate description of French politics during the period.

This has not been a popular position in recent years. Since the 1980s, historians have increasingly emphasized cooperation between French kings and the elites over whom they ruled. Kings and their leading administrators, it is now commonly agreed, believed in aristocratic social values and sought to preserve nobles' and magistrates' preeminence within society. In any case, effective royal government needed the expertise and local influence that only these elites could supply; often their credit-worthiness was needed as well, since the government might otherwise have trouble raising money from suspicious lenders. Given this combination of respect and need, kings could not use brute force in dealing with elites. Conversely, historians have also become more alert to the fundamentally royalist political values held by nobles and magistrates. Though they might complain about royal decisions and advance particular interests, French elites had long believed in strong kingship and had no desire to stir ordinary people to resistance; they knew that it might easily turn against themselves. As a result, for many historians absolutism has become "absolutism," a term to be used only with skeptical caution because of its tendency to obscure realities of early modern government.

This scholarly consensus has been especially strong because it derives from diverse theoretical and ideological perspectives. At least since the 1950s, a strand of Marxist-influenced historical writing has noted the usefulness of governmental centralization to ruling groups of all kinds. From this vantage point, though with different degrees of nuance and care, Boris Porchnev, Guy Bois, and William Beik have all argued that strong government provided landowners with a secure source of revenues. Rather than squeeze rents from an impoverished peasantry, they could count on the state's fiscal system to do the job for them, in turn benefiting from state salaries, pensions, and even (as Beik showed with particular care) the workings of the fiscal system itself. These historians have generally been critical of the "centralized feudalism" that thus emerged, but more positive assessments of the old regime have led

other historians to surprisingly similar positions. Historians who have stressed old regime government's capacity for useful legislation and for adaptation to new conditions have also come to stress the monarchy's lawful and consultative nature. Though France never acquired a British-style parliament, its kings still saw themselves as bound by fundamental laws, and they found a variety of ways to govern in response to national opinion—as expressed, notably, by the *parlements*, which had traditionally enjoyed the right to debate, modify, and delay laws proposed by the king.

Hurt's reexamination of how kings and *parlements* got along thus touches on basic questions about the old regime's character and fate. In a variety of domains, he shows, kings and *parlements* had radically different interests, which no amount of consultation could reconcile. Rather than functioning in partnership with the central government, *parlements* really did delay royal legislation, often with a frivolity that royal administrators found intolerable; both Colbert and Philippe d'Orléans began their careers eager to find common ground with the magistrates, but eventually gave up and turned to confrontation. In keeping with the old regime's larger character, these disputes almost always mixed financial interests with constitutional principles, on both sides. If magistrates delayed approving and enforcing royal edicts, this was partly because government legislation actually injured them, cutting into the value of offices, unsettling property rights, and establishing new taxes. Conversely, the crown had real needs, especially for war finance, that parliamentary delays threatened. As a result, though Louis XIV's government had no initial plans to restrict the magistrates' role in the governmental process, it was quickly drawn into severe measures. In 1667 it curtailed the magistrates' right to object to new laws; when mere legislation failed to produce obedience, the government took more brutal steps, exiling individual magistrates and whole courts. The lesson was learned, and the magistrates ceased after 1675 to be a political force. During the 1660s, Hurt notes, Colbert still sought detailed reports on magistrates' opinions, as a basis for effective negotiations with them; thereafter, he dismissed such information as irrelevant to government policy.

Hurt is especially insightful about what this capitulation meant for the magistrates' financial interests and social position. He shows that Louis XIV's personal reign brought the magistrates a series of burdensome taxes (typically disguised as pre-payments for increased salaries) and other threats to the value of office-holding. These impositions seriously diminished magistrates' incomes and eventually cut into families' capital as well. The period thus inaugurated a crisis of the venal office-holding system itself, one of the principal building-blocks of old regime society. French kings had begun selling official positions in the mid-sixteenth century, and office prices had risen spectacularly for the next century, making offices in the *parlements* about as costly as substantial landed estates. After 1661, this trend was reversed. Office values declined by about half, and further decline came during the Regency, before limited price increases resumed in the mid-eighteenth century. Louis XIV had in this respect reshaped the French elite, weakening one of its principal components both financially and politically.

These findings rest on extensive and carefully-examined documentation, and the book will stand as a definitive summary of both government policies and their effects on the judges. Hurt is equally careful in delimiting the implications of what he has found: only further research and reflection, he emphasizes, will determine whether the example of the *parlements* can be applied to other elements of seventeenth-century government. It is a mark of the book's interest and depth, though, that one wishes Hurt had supplied us somewhat more guidance in this work of extrapolation. An important result of historians' rethinking of absolutism has been an appreciation of the diversity of interests within the French elite. As William Beik established, measures that damaged the *parlements* might prove beneficial to other sovereign courts, notably those dealing with financial matters; and a web of hidden investments, familial connections, and friendships linked even long-suffering *parlementaires* to the state's financial machinery. Understanding absolutism's impact on elites will require sorting out what these extended family groups won and lost, in addition to tracing what happened to specific institutions and social categories. Attaching the later eighteenth century to this history also poses difficult questions. The magistrates emerged from the Regency in a bedraggled condition, but after 1723 they proved ready enough to take

on the government whenever its hold weakened; and they brought to the task a coherent constitutionalist ideology as well as a great deal of self-confidence. Many eighteenth-century magistrates apparently earned little in legal fees, perhaps a sign of the *parlements'* dilapidation, but (as François Bluche suggested many years ago) this partly reflected their vision of the institution as a mainly political forum and their readiness to leave serious legal work to a handful of zealous colleagues. Absolutist assertions of royal power had clearly damaged the magistracy, but the long-term effects are more difficult to assess, given this record of resiliency.

Still, questions like these extend well beyond the investigation that Hurt has undertaken. This is a model historical study, a carefully argued, abundantly documented examination of a basic question. Hurt's answer--that with regard at least to the *parlements*, Louis XIV's government should indeed be viewed as absolutist--is altogether compelling.

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