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William Doyle, Ed., *Old Regime France 1648-1788*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 281 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, chronology and index. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-19-873129-9.

Review by Stephen Miller, University of Alabama at Birmingham.

This book is ideal for teaching undergraduates and an excellent reference for scholars seeking an account of old regime France based on the latest research. It is also stimulating reading for anyone interested in the subject. William Doyle brings together a team of scholars from France, England, Canada, and the United States, for as he maintains in the editor's preface, the writing of French history has become an international endeavor involving more historians outside of France than inside it. The volume is divided into five conceptual chapters covering the economy, society, culture, overseas empire, and the state, as well as three chapters narrating the reigns of Louis XIV, XV, and XVI. The strength of each chapter is to render the logic of society, culture, and politics during the old regime, a logic alien to modern societies, in a manner that undergraduates will find intelligible and absorbing. This is quite an accomplishment considering that old regime practices often perplex specialists themselves.

Doyle begins the work with a six-page introduction reviewing the one hundred and forty year period the book encompasses. He makes clear that the crown convinced the upper classes to collaborate in its drive to monopolize political authority in the second half of the seventeenth century by upholding the authority of officeholders and granting noblemen commanding positions within the armed forces. Thereafter, royal authority only came under sustained criticism when it suffered humiliating defeat in the Seven Years' War. Doyle makes the often overlooked, albeit commonsense, point that the old regime came apart when calls for reform emanating from the public and the monarchy's own attempts to restructure and fortify its institutions challenged entrenched privileges and prerogatives on which royal authority had been built.

Joël Félix's chapter on the economy summarizes the results of about twenty years of revisionist historiography, which has shown that the French economy performed well during the eighteenth century, posting growth rates equal or even superior to those of England. Agriculture expanded at a rate of about .6 percent and industry at 1.6 percent annually during the eighteenth century. France was the world's leading economic power with an economy three or four times the size of England's in the 1780s. While foreign trade and ports were the most dynamic areas of economic growth, the internal market for textiles made the expansion general and durable. Félix makes clear that economic expansion made the political and cultural movements of the latter part of the eighteenth century possible. For the first time, France contained an urban population with sufficient means and leisure to fuel a market for books, newspapers, and pamphlets. The one topic Félix does not treat (a topic too complex for this type of chapter) is the extent to which growth changed economic structures. Historians have long known that peasants introduced crops such as vines and maize, which brought forth higher returns per hectare. Historians are also aware that ground rent increased and that the number of looms multiplied in industrial regions such as Rouen, Lyon, and Nîmes. Less clear are the reasons for these developments. Were they the result of a growing population toiling to eek out a living or rather of genuine economic development? In other words, to what extent did the French economy share the revolutionary feature of

the contemporaneous English economy: rising levels of labor productivity? Historians must investigate all aspects of this question for our knowledge of French economic history to advance in the years to come.

Gail Bossenga's chapter deftly takes the reader through the thousands of status groups stratifying old regime society. The monarchy itself played a major role in creating status groups, as financial need led to the sale of public functions to wealthy subjects. It usually sold several of these offices at a time, thus drawing purchasers together into a group of people enjoying the same privileges and prerogatives. The most famous status group was comprised of the noble judges known as *parlementaires*, who had the right to hear appeals from inferior courts and thus establish legal precedent. Another status group included the thousands of lords who had the right to a portion of the peasantry's surplus and who held political power over villages. The monarchy even organized peasants into communities bearing collective responsibility for tax quotas, military conscripts, and roadwork. Bossenga makes clear that status and honor, not class, were the primary divisions in old regime society. Individuals were respected for their rank, not their wealth. The desire for honor even trumped wealth by diverting capital into offices and away from productive investment. The strongest evidence for this argument is the extreme variations in fortunes between members of groups. If forty percent of nobles were wealthy, another forty percent had to live frugally to maintain appearances, while twenty percent faced real poverty. The organizing principle of the regime meant that elites could not come together as a unified class. The universal ambition for honor led wealthy subjects to buy offices and tenaciously guard their exclusive prerogatives against the encroachment of other status groups. In this respect 1789 was truly revolutionary, for it abolished status groups and paved the way for modern social relations based on wealth. Needless to say, Bossenga's view does not command universal consent within the field. A host of historians has argued that, although financiers, judges of the sovereign courts, the upper clergy, nobles of the royal courts, and lords owning a great deal of land were unaware of their class affiliation and often engaged in petty disputes over precedence, they nonetheless benefited from class relations. They formed the core of a ruling elite that exercised political power over the peasant, artisan, and merchant population of the realm and appropriated the fruits of these common subjects' labor. [1]

David Bell's chapter on culture makes sense of the wide-ranging lived experiences and intellectual influences comprising the age of Enlightenment. From the middle of the seventeenth century onward France became divided into two separate cultural worlds, as nobles, bourgeois and clerics found less and less fulfillment in village festivals, processions, and repeating popular adages. By the middle of the eighteenth century, many French took for granted that human beings, not supernatural intervention, were responsible for transforming society. Literate consumers fueled a market for books, newspapers, plays, and exhibitions, while intellectual production escaped the control of the royal court and administration. This gave rise to public opinion, which Bell defines as "the considered judgment of those people who had sufficient income, education and leisure to read the newspapers, visit the cafés and salons (and academies and the theatre), and engage in rational discussion of what they saw, heard and read" (p. 93). Bell shows that the realization of this liberal ideal coincided with other cultural trends, which would limit women's liberty. Under the influence of Rousseau, the educated classes began to associate the public role some women played in the royal court and salons with the decadence and corruption of the monarchy. Many felt that women were partly responsible for a society in which men had to seek the appearance of a lofty rank and suppress their natural righteousness. They believed in regenerating France by reviving the civic mindedness of the ancient republics, which implied that men would engage in politics while women would attend to the home.

Julian Swann's analysis of the state and political culture of the old regime demonstrates the points of contact between the absolutist state and civil society. Louis XIV brought stability by giving restless magnates sinecures, gifts, ranks, and titles within the royal court, while keeping them out of the royal council where policy was formed. Drawing on an influential article written by William Doyle in 1970, Swann holds that division within the royal court spilled over into the royal council and then outside of

the council into the magistracy.[2] Disgruntled factions within the royal court were often responsible for fomenting opposition to royal policy among magistrates of the Parlement of Paris. Swann also provides a useful description of the fiscal system. The monarchy obtained its revenue from receivers and farmers of taxes who administered the fiscal system as a private business, advancing funds to the royal treasury for the right to collect taxes for their private profit. It also obtained revenue from the sale of offices, which not only generated revenue at the time of sale but also provided the monarchy with servants willing to invest more capital in their offices in order to protect their portion of state authority. A third source of revenue was the self-governing *pays d'états* on the kingdom's periphery. Leaders of the three orders of these provinces granted the monarchy revenue for the right to tax their provinces themselves. They taxed common subjects and treated the upper classes as delicately as possible. Those in charge of the *pays d'états* also raised loans for the king. Such loans were a boon for local investors but an added burden for common subjects.

Doyle, Swann, and Munro Price wrote the final three chapters on the reigns of Louis XIV, XV, and XVI, respectively. They argue that disgruntled factions of the royal court sought support outside of Versailles, and especially within the Parlement of Paris, and thus created opposition to royal policies. Doyle's chapter on Louis XIV confirms his mastery of the art of narrative history.[3] It demonstrates how resolute rule unified the court around the sovereign and thwarted challenges to royal authority. Swann holds that, in contrast to Louis XIV, Louis XV continually changed the direction of policy and never accorded ministers the support necessary to make court intrigues ineffective. A prime example was the introduction of the twentieth tax under the finance minister Machault in 1749. Swann argues that Louis XV was in a position to extend the tax to the clergy, breach the fiscal immunities of the first estate, and take a giant step toward fiscal equality. Instead, Louis XV succumbed to bishops' remonstrances and the devout party at court, and the moment of reform was lost. Price points out how the introduction of a new volatile variable—a queen whom Louis XVI actually loved and heeded in matters of state—made the royal court even less manageable. He shows that royal ministers' plans to erect provincial assemblies as alternative sources of legitimacy to the outmoded Parlements failed as Louis XVI was unable to unite the royal court and support one minister's policies to their logical conclusion.

This analysis provokes a question: were royal personalities products of social conditions, or were they capable of actually shaping society? Doyle notes that in the middle of the seventeenth century, after years of internecine struggle and menacing popular rebellions, nobles wished for a strong monarch capable of ensuring the standing of the *grandeues* and enforcing the authority of officeholders. One has the sense that the period created Louis XIV as much as he created the period. Similarly, as Doyle notes in the conclusion, the persistence of entrenched corporate bodies and noble privileges during a century that witnessed the development of public opinion and economic and population expansion rendered the task of governing extremely complicated. It makes sense that Louis XVI found it difficult to pursue a single line of policy and so retreated from intractable political obstacles into the intimate space he shared with Marie-Antoinette.

NOTES

[1] Works showing that the absolutist state upheld a ruling class gravitating around a nucleus of powerful nobles include Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N.L.B., 1974); David Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism* (London: E. Arnold, 1983); Pierre Goubert and Daniel Roche, *Les français et l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: A. Colin, 1984); Daniel Dessert, *Argent, pouvoir, et société au Grand Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1984); William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); George C. Comminel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London and New York: Verso, 1987); James B. Collins, *The Fiscal Limits of Absolutism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988);

Robert Descimon and Christian Jouhaud, *La France du premier XVIIIe siècle: 1594-1661* (Paris: Belin, 1996).

[2] William Doyle, "The Parlements of France and the Breakdown of the Old Regime, 1774-1788," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 6 (1970), 415-58.

[3] Doyle's *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1999) and *Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) are among the best works of synthesis on eighteenth-century France.

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