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Nick Childs, *A Political Academy in Paris 1724-1731: The Entresol and Its Members. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000. xi + 289 pp. Appendices, bibliography, and index. \$94.88 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7294-0736-5.

Review by Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

With the growth of interest in eighteenth-century French intellectual sociability, it was only a matter of time before the Entresol found its historian. Indeed, the Entresol was so prominent a meeting ground for such early Enlightenment luminaries as Montesquieu, the marquis d'Argenson, and the abbé de Saint-Pierre, that one might well wonder why—although hardly unknown to specialists—it has not been systematically investigated until now. [1] A large part of the answer lies in a severe lack of sources. Almost everything we know about the internal operations of the Entresol comes from brief accounts in the journal and memoirs of the marquis d'Argenson. Any scholar who sought to do more than knit together the tantalizing scraps of information provided by d'Argenson was faced with the arduous task of triangulating from other scattered evidence.

Fortunately, Nick Childs has been willing to undertake this task. In the face of a critical shortage of direct sources, the author was forced to proceed prosopographically, that is, through a study of the careers of the twenty-five members of the Entresol who attended on a more or less regular basis and those of the occasional visitors, most notably the Viscount Bolingbroke. Culled largely from their biographies, Part one of this study is devoted to the history of the Entresol as an institution. Part two examines its intellectual contribution.

Part one, the larger section, is undoubtedly the more significant. The author shows how the Entresol was formed—probably in 1723—when the abbé Alary, a protégé of the future Cardinal de Fleury, convened an occasional political discussion group in the entresol of his apartment on the Place Louis-le-Grand, better known as the Place Vendôme. By 1724 the group began to meet periodically in Alary's chambers and acquired a fairly consistent membership, which grew over its short life. Seated in comfortable armchairs, sipping drinks, and provided with an array of foreign and domestic newspapers, participants debated contemporary news and read aloud and elicited comment upon their latest political writings. Although there was some hope that the Entresol would become a royal academy, the association never acquired a royal charter. [2] This unofficial status hardly meant that the Entresol escaped close surveillance by the government. By the early 1720s, largely because of rising contestation over Jansenism, the Regency's partial relaxation of restrictions on public debate was coming to an end—a tightening evident in the re-enforced strictures on the press issued in 1723.

Why then did Fleury, Louis XV's principal minister as of 1726, tolerate and for a time protect the Entresol? The author provides no definitive answer, but an important clue lies in the background of its personnel. Although the robe associations of several participants, most notably Montesquieu, made them politically suspect in the wake of the parlements' battles with the ministry over Jansenism and John Law, more members of the Entresol came from the sword nobility or had other military backgrounds, which made them appear politically safer, especially those members from established families with long government experience such as d'Argenson. Moreover, the majority of members with

*parlementaire* backgrounds had already moved or were about to pass into the royal administration, a trajectory that normally meant a permanent switch of political allegiance. To be sure, Entresol members had ties to different aristocratic lobbies—notably, those of Orléans and Condé. But such ties did not negate the decidedly pro-ministerial political complexion of the Entresol, which meant that it was not likely to become a nucleus of political opposition under Alary's direction and Fleury's close scrutiny.

Did the Entresol have any positive function in Fleury's eyes? Here again, we are left with conjectures, but not without some useful information. The author surmises that, although the Entresol did discuss domestic political issues, its primary domain was foreign affairs. This focus suggests that Fleury may have viewed it as a successor to the *académie politique*, the defunct school for diplomats instituted under Louis XIV by his foreign minister, Colbert de Torcy, who also attended the Entresol. The Entresol lacked the pedagogical function of the *académie politique*, but most of its members were active functionaries of the state—not professional men of letters—which suggests that Fleury regarded the group as a think-tank for his diplomatic initiatives. In fact, the Entresol was consulted about some diplomatic matters, for example, in 1727 on the political prospects of the new Russian czar, Peter II.

We are better informed about why the Entresol was banned in 1731 than why it was formed in the first place. The blow-up over enforcement of the anti-Jansenist papal bull *Unigenitus* in the early 1730s highlighted the Jansenist proclivities of at least one member of the Entresol, thereby making the association appear as a potential political liability that could be easily sacrificed. More importantly, certain foreign ambassadors complained that offensive opinions had been ventilated indiscreetly and publicly by Entresol members, which embarrassed the ministry. Although d'Argenson tried to keep the Entresol covertly alive for a short time after orders were issued that it be shut down, the government, particularly the foreign minister Chauvelin, saw to it that the Entresol followed the *académie politique* into extinction.

Did the Entresol leave behind a legacy? This is a tricky matter because the paucity of sources, the differences of interests and political orientation of the membership, and the brief terms of some of its more prolific associates make it difficult to ascribe to the Entresol an intellectual or political heritage beyond the contributions of those individual associates. To be sure, all members were monarchists of one sort or the other, and a fair number saw the need for and proposed serious reforms in the wake of the Sun King's near bankruptcy of the state. But beyond this vague program, it is hard to elicit a common set of reforms or principle promoted by the group and still harder to find much difference between the views of the Entresol and those of many other highly-placed government officials at the time. It is thus not altogether clear why the author embarked in part two on his rather banal survey of the political opinions of some Entresol members, including opinions expressed long after the Entresol expired. As Childs acknowledges, the Entresol as such exerted little influence over the later course of French political thought.

There can be no doubt that this book provides a welcome overview of the Entresol's history, which should be of interest to all scholars working on early eighteenth-century political ideology. Yet for all its patient gathering and sifting of information, this account is marred by errors of fact that a more careful editing could have eliminated. In the mid-eighteenth century, the prospect of an Orléanist succession was not, as the author claims, diminished by the birth of the future Louis XVI in 1754, but by that of his elder brother, Louis-Joseph, in 1751. D'Argenson was dismissed as foreign minister not in 1746, as the author states, but in 1747. Although they did not enjoy the honors granted to the sword nobility, robe nobles during the early eighteenth century were not scarce at Versailles—indeed, they were present in increasing numbers. It is not true that all Entresol members "looked back to what they assumed to be the political heritage left by the Germanic invaders of the decaying Roman Empire" (p. 191)—certainly, d'Argenson and Saint-Pierre did not.

A drawback of this book more important than these scattered errors is the author's failure to pose and

answer pointed questions about the Entresol as a locus of French political debate in the early eighteenth century. It is remarkable that, following so many publications on the growth of public opinion in this age, Childs says virtually nothing about what the Entresol represented in this domain. Similarly, he passes up the opportunity to examine the similarities and differences between the exclusively male-dominated Entresol and other sexually-mixed contemporary centers of political and cultural sociability—for example, the salon of Madame Lambert—that some of his characters such as Saint-Pierre also attended. One clue to this failure is Childs' apparent lack of familiarity with much secondary literature in this general field.<sup>[3]</sup> Rather than take up the issues posed by these works, Childs provides unnecessary descriptions of the machinery of the French state (the parlements, the intendants) that has been much better and more fully described elsewhere. In short, if this book tells us everything we are likely to know about the Entresol's operations, it leaves to other historians the task of evaluating the Entresol's historical significance.

#### NOTES

[1] Eric Briggs did write a dissertation on the Entresol in the 1930s, but it was unfortunately never published. See his "The Political Academies of France in the Early 18th Century," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1931).

[2] As Childs shows, the Entresol was referred to as a "club," but only after its demise.

[3] Among other examples, Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); Harold A. Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). See also my "The Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Public Opinion, and the Reconstitution of the French Monarchy," *Journal of Modern History*, 55 (1983), 618-43, and "The Abbé Dubos and the Historical Defense of Monarchy in Early Eighteenth-Century France," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 267 (1989), 77-102.

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