

H-France Forum

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Jon Elster, *France Before 1789: The Unraveling of an Absolutist Regime*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. ix + 263 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$39.95 (hb). ISBN: 9780691149813.

Review by William Doyle, University of Bristol

“Strictly speaking,” says Jon Elster on the very first page of his preface, “the title of the present volume is a bit misleading.” For anyone seeking a general analysis of why and how the absolutist regime fell or “unraveled,” it certainly is. For his book began, he explains, as an intended background chapter in a different work comparing the making of the French constitution of 1791 with the American of 1787. That project has now expanded into a three-volume study, of which the others have yet to appear. To fully understand the structure of what has now grown into the first volume, therefore, we shall have to wait for its successors, and at several points the author refers us ahead to them in a tantalizing (and not very helpful) way. Explicitly inspired by Tocqueville, Elster sets out to analyse the structure and functioning of power in the ancien régime, but in the light of the social sciences which are his own field, and particularly political psychology. There are pages of quite abstract conceptualization about human behaviour which in the eyes of many an empirical historian will often seem like long-winded expressions of the obvious. But the historical material is drawn from very wide reading in both primary and secondary sources, and the interpretation, we are told, was refined in a two-day workshop with leading historians and social scientists at the Collège de France.

Yet in the end there are very few fresh insights into how the ancien régime worked. The analyses, whether of institutions or the behaviour of their participants, are largely structural and static. The chapters are mostly descriptive, and tend to just stop, without synoptic conclusions. Although at one point the ancien régime is defined as lasting from around 1660 to the Revolution, much evidence is drawn on from years, sometimes centuries, before that. Rightly or wrongly, this approach leaves the impression that substantially little changed over time. And this reflects an interpretation of the old order which goes back to the Revolution that destroyed it: that it was sclerotic and hidebound, unreformable except by a benevolent cataclysm. Nor was this only the view of self-justifying revolutionaries and their sympathisers, then and later. A version was also taken up by those who deplored the cataclysm, and believed that it neither need nor ought ever to have happened. If only the crown had been more resolute, the argument goes, preservative change could have come about without violence, and revolution avoided. This is the traditional *thèse royale*, and it seems no coincidence that Elster’s footnotes are loaded with references from historians such as Marcel Marion, Roland Mousnier and Michel Antoine, idolisers all of absolute monarchy and contemptuous of any opponents as little better than rebels. This approach features heroes and villains, and Elster shares the same ones. Louis XV and XVI (monarchs, after all!) are not in general blamed for what happened, apart from being too weak; but other individuals are. The prime suspect is Necker, to whom a whole section is devoted, lining up his critics, both contemporary and retrospective, and dismissing his most convincing

defender, Robert Harris, in a single non-committal sentence. And the traditional institutional villains are the parlements, presented as corporate bodies of selfish, purblind and venal judges who blocked all attempts at reform in order to protect their own interests. Little allowance is made for the possible sincerity of magistrates when they clashed with the crown, or for the commitment of these professional jurists to the rule of law, not to mention the constant lack of solidarity among them. And although in the introductory chapter the author briefly recognizes that royal authority could actually derive strength from the ability of subjects to resist, the point receives little later elaboration, and he endorses the traditional conclusion of the *thèse royale* that the fundamental mistake of the absolute monarchy was to abandon the reforms of Maupeou and Terray, which had smashed institutional resistance, and restore the old parlements.

But was not the real mistake to have attacked them in the first place, thus destroying public confidence in time-honoured constitutional arrangements which worked, in their cumbersome way? That confidence could never be fully restored after 1774. Either way, however, the early 1770s do look like the time when the regime began to “unravel”—if that is the right word. It was first used by Dale Van Kley in 1984. Elster seems not to have come across him; his works are certainly not in the bibliography. He has picked up the very questionable idea of monarchical desacralization, which Van Kley launched, but unlike its originator he attributes it in a far more traditional way to the Enlightenment rather than Van Kley’s Jansenism. Religion, indeed, plays very little part in Elster’s analysis, apart from a discussion of the material interests of the clergy. But then so does unraveling itself, if that refers to the process by which the old order came apart. There is little sense that anything had evolved or developed over time, much less unraveled. When he mentions the *cahiers*, or grievance books as he calls them, that vast body of evidence which nobody studying revolutionary origins neglects, he follows Tocqueville in seeing the *cahiers* of the Third Estate as facilitating outbursts of anger against the constraints of timeless economic and social structures, a call for change. Yet a close reading of them suggests on the contrary that they were above all a call and an opportunity to *stop* change, whether in the form of tax rises, various manifestations of administrative despotism, meddling with grain and bread prices, opening industry to British competition, the depredations of the new breed of *feudistes*, and innumerable petty local innovations. In other words, the old order saw far more innovation and movement than a static analysis of its institutions reveals—although much to the dissatisfaction and resentment of most of those who experienced it.

The problem for the absolutist regime, meanwhile, was that it could not keep up with the pace and scale of change. In an age of inflation, and international competition burgeoning on a scale not even faced by Louis XIV, the need to find new revenues grew ever more urgent. This is where the institutional constraints described by Elster come into focus. Over the centuries, the monarchy had used its notionally absolute power to box itself in with so many obstacles and privileges conceded or sold in former times for immediate advances that it could no longer extract sufficient means to pay for its ongoing ambitions. Hence the best insight in the book, that ‘the *impotence of omnipotence* may be the central paradox of the *ancien régime*’ (p. 231). I was reminded of Harry Truman’s prediction that when incoming President Eisenhower issued orders from the Oval Office, nothing would happen.

Some of the limitations of Elster’s analysis come from the sources he has chosen—or not chosen. He offers good quotations from well-known original texts, although his translations into English

are spectacularly wooden. Nor are printed primary sources separately listed in the bibliography. And there are some striking omissions from his secondary sources. The works of Van Kley are one. George V. Taylor and Robert D. Harris, both major contributors to the literature on revolutionary origins, are also mostly absent, apart from single articles. Similarly, it is surprising that an author so keen, in the context of his wider three-volume project, to analyse earlier representative institutions, has only used one of Russell Major's lesser treatments of their operation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Elster has certainly consulted Joseph Droz's unjustly forgotten *Histoire du règne de Louis XVI*. He believes it influenced Tocqueville. But that must have been before publication, since Droz's posthumous work only appeared two years after *L'Ancien Régime*, and only just before Tocqueville's own death.

This rugged, angular book is not therefore the new go-to volume on the ending of the ancien régime. It is not a work for beginners, and yet it offers little to refresh the understanding of those who know the field. But since it is part of a much bigger project, we shall have to wait to assess its true significance until we can see how it complements its two forthcoming companion volumes.

Review by William Doyle
University of Bristol
William.Doyle@bristol.ac.uk

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