Der Absolutismus – ein Mythos?
Strukturwandel monarchischer Herrschaft
in West- und Mitteleuropa
(ca. 1550-1700)

herausgegeben
von

Ronald G. Asch und
Heinz Duchhardt

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Einleitung

Der "absolutistische Staat" trat jedenfalls nirgendwo mit einem stringenter und in sich schlüssigen Reformkonzept an, sondern erwuchs zu einem guten Teil aus Notlagen, aus Krisensituationen, aus besonderen Herausforderungen der Krone - was sich u.a. dann eben darin niederschlug, daß keineswegs alle traditionellen Bindungen der Krone über Bord geworfen wurden, die Stände vielerorts in Aktivität blieben, die Konsensbildung ihren Platz behielt, die Neuordnung des Rechtswesens und die Gesetzgebung eher bescheiden blieben usw. Henshalls provozierende Thesen hatten und haben eine Funktion: nämlich die, mehr als bisher nach den Grenzen, Beschränkungen und Kompromissen eines Herrschaftssystems zu fragen, das als Epochenbezeichnung ("Zeitalter des Absolutismus") trotz seiner erstaunlichen Akzeptanz in jüngerer Zeit in Frankreich eine Menge Probleme aufwirft. Dennoch fand Henshalls Vorschlag, den Absolutismusbegriff als Mythos zu entlarven und sich völlig von ihm zu befreien, auf der Konferenz noch keine Mehrheit; vielleicht auch deshalb, weil man sich bewußt war, daß auch Mythen die historische Realität prägen können und dies gerade für die Idee einer unbeschränkten monarchischen Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit galt, wie bereits betont worden ist. So wie in England die absolute Monarchie seit der Mitte des 17. Jahrhunderts zum Schreck- und Feindbild wurde, das den Umgang mit den eigenen Verfassungstraditionen bestimmte, so konnte in Frankreich eine entgegengesetzte politische Rhetorik zumindest die Person des Monarchen für lange Zeit der direkten Kritik entziehen, auch wenn sie keineswegs dazu in der Lage war, die Hindernisse, die finanzielle und administrative Probleme und die soziale Wirklichkeit in der Praxis der "absoluten" Herrschaft des Königs entgegenstellten, zu überwinden. Der Tenor des münsterschen Symposiums war daher trotz aller berechtigten Einwände an den dem Absolutismusbegriff von der Geschichtswissenschaft zugelegten Volumen seines heuristischen Wertes wegen an ihm festzuhalten, zumal ein alternativer Begriff, der in ähnlicher Weise Prozesse von Herrschaftsverdichtung und Fürstenbezogenheit widerspiegelte, nicht zur Verfügung stehe.

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EARLY MODERN ABSOLUTISM 1550-1700: POLITICAL REALITY OR PROPAGANDA?

By Nicholas Henshall

Between the 1820s and 1950s everyone knew what "absolutism" meant. It was the autocratic enemy of consultation, the despotic foe of rights, the bureaucratic usurper of society's natural elites. Perhaps above all, it was the coercive opposite of consensual England. The Whig interpretation of history, charting the growth of parliamentary government, presented most early modern rulers in these terms, since they had more power than eighteenth and nineteenth-century Whig historians thought appropriate. The conviction that England escaped this fate in 1688 was tied up with conceptions of national identity and interest. It became the national myth.

"Absolutism" still implies a total monopoly of power. Consultative institutions like Estates, with power in their own right, are conceptually incompatible with it. If they are found to exist, they are presented as marginalised rather than indispensable. Yet recent research reveals otherwise. Dormant Estates are no longer the keynote of the regime of the Bourbons. They recognised Estates as agencies of consultation, showing they were not autocratic. They respected them as guardians of liberties, showing they were not despotic.

And they employed them as agencies of administration, showing they were not bureaucratic. As the Bourbons are equated with "absolutism", the concept is in trouble. Yet the main response has been to force new research into the old "absolutist" framework: pleas for a moratorium on the term have been predictably ignored. Yet early modern monarchy requires a new paradigm based on consensus and partnership rather than confrontation and coercion. In this paper I shall examine recent shifts in historical perspective which have brought this about - and in the process dissolved many of the traditional contrasts between Britain and the Continent.

The first is a shift to comparative rather than national focus. Some of the parallels between England and the Continent have emerged incidentally, but others are the product of deliberate synthesis.¹

¹ Fritz Hartung and Roland Moussnier, Quelques problèmes concernant la monarchie absolue. In: Relazione del X Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche, IV: Storia moderna.
In 1807 The Edinburgh Review proclaimed: *All civilized Governments may be divided into free and arbitrary: or more accurately ... into the Government of England and the other European Governments*. The Whig myth of England’s uniqueness has survived as its history has been written separately from that of the “absolutist” Continent. Many historians now note a British multiple monarchy with a strong royal prerogative, dominant court and irregular meetings of English, Irish and (after 1603) Scottish Estates. All this looks less exceptional in the context of early modern Continental governments. Pigeon-holing the English state with the Dutch is part of the Whig myth: the latter was a republic for most of the period, the former only for the eleven years of the Interregnum. In 1660 all monarchical apparatus was restored, including a royal prerogative abhorrent to the Dutch, whose Estates General might refer a foreign issue to town councils. Certainly until 1688, England’s place is with the great European monarchies.

“Well-trodden territory can look different when viewed from a balloon rather than from the traditional national hill-top”. As one ascends, the pattern shifts unexpectedly. The attack on the Bohemian Estates after their defeat in 1620 made Bohemia a hereditary monarchy; officers of state were to be appointed by the King and not the Estates, who also lost their sole right to initiate legislation. This is usually greeted as the imposition of “absolutism” by the Habsburgs. In fact it gave them the same powers in Bohemia as English monarchs had enjoyed for centuries. Spain was regarded by early seventeenth-century Englishmen as the essence of despotism, with subjects’ liberties and properties at the mercy of the ruler’s whims. Yet the Spanish situation was comparable to their own. The crown’s prerogatives in Castile were more constrained by contractual obligations than in any monarchy outside Poland. Louis XIV was called an “absolute” monarch during his lifetime in both France and England, but the two peoples inferred the opposite by it. The French meant a monarch equipped with power to defend his subjects’ liberties and properties; by the late 17th century the English meant one armed with power to destroy them.

How did this happen? It certainly did not start with the Edinburgh Review. The man responsible for the claim that there was something specially English about parliaments was Fortescue. In the fifteenth century, when rulers all over Europe had established consultative assemblies, many of them with permanent officials, standing committees and corporate status denied to the English parliament, he announced that his monarch was unique in needing the consent of parliament to legislation and taxation, while the French King could help himself to his subjects’ property. Yet Commines and Bodin (despite the latter’s reputed taste for “absolutism”) made claims for France that were similar to those registered by Fortescue for England.

We now know that c. 1500 *dominium politicum et regale* was the norm, not the exception. It does not mean mixed monarchy. *Politicum* means mixed and *regale* royal government. Fortescue did not suggest that the King had one power which he shared with parliament. He had two, one shared with parliament and one his alone. *Rex in parliamento* taxed and legislated and *rex solus* wielded the royal prerogative. Fortescue was right about England’s monarchy but wrong about the others. His motives (scoring points off the French) were entirely tactical but the damage was done. His misleading division of monarchies into two categories passed into English political mythology.

In some respects English monarchy was uniquely absolute. The statutes of the Reformation Parliament had vested ecclesiastical supremacy in the monarch alone. Elizabeth I could truly claim to be absolute in matters spiritual and temporal when she ripped rood crosses from parish churches and substituted royal coats of arms. This authority was not confined to paper: it is becoming clear that she imposed Protestantism on an unwilling population. We now know how dutifully English churchwardens took down, put up and took down again saints’ images in obedience to the whims of mid-Tudor monarchs. It says much for the strength of Tudor government and its grip on the localities. Yet it is the Catholic Continental monarchies, with a fraction of the Tudors’ power over their churches, who are credited with "confessional absolutism".

But England laid unique claim to the rule of law. This can be queried on the grounds that Continental rulers were as constrained by law as English ones. By the eighteenth century many French households possessed only one book, a copy of the *coutumes* or local code: *coutumes* were more popular than Bibles. It is usually argued that whatever the formal legal restraints against the monarch, on the Continent they were unenforceable. So they were in England, except by revolution. Tudors and Stuarts possessed an emergency prerogative, comparable

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to the Bourbons', which was hard to control. Those suspected by Elizabeth's Privy Council of sedition were routinely subjected to arbitrary imprisonment and torture. The inevitable verdicts of the great Tudor treason trials contrast suggestively with the failure of Louis XIV to secure a death sentence against Fouquet. Orrill and Burgess have argued convincingly that what was queried in the Ship Money case was not the King's right to his subjects' property in emergencies, but his judgement of what constituted an emergency. The common law was revealed as powerless to stop him exercising his prerogatives in inappropriate contexts. Hence the breakdown of the Jacobean consensus. The Stuarts played ducks and drakes with the judiciary, while in France judges had bought their offices and could not be removed. Nor could French local officials be dismissed, unlike English justices of the peace.

Nor is there a neat contrast between the Continent where monarchs made law on their own authority and "non-absolutist" states like England where it was made by King-in-Parliament. Law-making emerges from Frankish and Anglo-Saxon capitularies as one of the oldest prerogatives of kingship. But in some ways it was also a joint effort and appears to have remained so in the age of "absolutism". The allegedly "absolutist" Charles XI of Sweden stated in 1680 that royal legislative prerogatives gave law its force: they did not bestow sole right to determine its content. According to the time-honoured formula, law in England was enacted by the King's most excellent majesty with the assent of Lords and Commons. And the French crown's sole right of initiating legislation was matched by the English King's right of veto.

Bourbon "law-making" was loosely defined. Perusal of Isambert's *Recueil général* of the legislation of the French kings reveals the Paris scrutinising foreign treaties, royal wills, peerage grants, company charters and declarations of war - matters of state which few Tudor or Stuart parliaments regarded as "hands on". Monarchs in "absolutist" Sweden swore in their coronation oath to consult the Riksdag over major foreign policy decisions; parliaments in "non-absolutist" England tried on occasions to interfere in foreign policy, but no formal right to do so was ever acknowledged. It has been suggested that Elizabeth ruled largely through letters patent precisely because no parliament could touch them. Bourbon insistence in 1673 on the first and last word in such matters seems less "absolutist" once it is realised that English monarchs required the same.

The second shift results from recent interest in discourse rather than the traditional study of political theory. Political consciousness is now seen as defined by available discourses, articulated by clergy, lawyers and politicians rather than political philosophers. They represent a *mentalité* rather than a mode of theorising. Early modern discourse proposes three types of government - and they do not include the "absolutism" which allegedly divides England from the Continent.

Firstly, most rulers were seen as "absolute" in that they monopolised princely prerogatives of war and peace, patronage and appointments, and recognised no legitimate challenge to their decisions. The term predates the "age of absolutism". It is found in the fourteenth century as rulers of France, England and Spain began to claim the *imperium* and wear the arched crowns which put them on a par with the Holy Roman Emperor. It is repeatedly invoked in the enactments of the Castilian Cortes during the reign of Alfonso XI in 1348. Monarchy is absolute by definition: that is its point. It means rule of one - not power shared with imperial overlords or committee of nobles or feudal lords. Absolute power made the interests, capacities and decisions of one man the driving force of government. In the late Middle Ages Western European monarchs monopolised prerogatives which had formerly been duplicated by others. The crucial right of making war was confined to the crown; those who made war on the King were treated as traitors rather than as feudatories exercising their right of *diffidatio*. Henceforth forcing policies on the crown was rebellion; those who forced themselves into office were conspirators. The point of absolute power was not its capacity for coercion. As Bossuet insisted, it was that it could not be coerced.

Absolute power was compatible with participation from below. Monarchs legitimately monopolised only what were known as "matters of state": elsewhere

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11 Upton, Swedish Riksdag (above n. 9), p. 122.
they had to obtain consent. This distinction was once thought to apply only to England: but it can be argued that it was universal in Western and Central Europe. French and Spanish monarchs were called "absolute" when the Estates General and Cortes were meeting frequently. Careful listing of prerogatives in countless treatises suggests that they did not extend to everything. Absolute power ended where subjects' rights began - and implied no intent to trample on them. There was a sense of what a ruler could and could not do. This goes beyond the practical limitations of absolute power (distance, resources, unreliable officials and so on), which have received much attention of late. It extends to its legal and theoretical limitations, which have received less. Europe, and not merely England, embraced the rule of law: absolute power was also limited or constitutional power.16 As guardians of the law, rulers could not break it without undermining their own authority. Absolute power was not seen to threaten legal rights: it endowed rulers with the strength to protect them. By collapsing absolute and limited authority into one, as contemporaries did, English and Continental regimes become members of the same species - monarchy.

Secondly, some rulers were seen as "despotic" or "arbitrary" in that they pushed beyond recognised prerogatives and invaded the rights of their subjects. Invasion of property rights without consent was condemned even by allegedly "absolutist" thinkers like Bodin: force was unlawful. The ability to tax at will has long been seen as a key attribute of absolute monarchy. Whatever the practice, it becomes increasingly clear that no such prerogative existed in theory. The principle that rulers should consult subjects whose rights were at stake had penetrated deeply into Western European political culture. Monarchs and Estates might dispute but they spoke the same language. Despotism was regarded as a malfunction and never equated with the constitution, though it was commonly identified with the Turkish and Russian regimes. Though rights and privileges could be irksome to rulers they did not usually suppress them, even when they had the chance. Estates survived the failure of revolts in Naples in 1585 and Aragon in 1591, though Philip II could readily have curbed their powers. The doctrine that despotic acts were unconstitutional was not invented by rebellious French parlements in the eighteenth century: it was enunciated by Bossuet, official theorist of Louis XIV.17

Rights and privileges embodied a discourse of ancient custom, contracts and charters: their sanction was the past. Friedrich Karl of Württemberg was thus unusual when in 1692, in words anticipating Joseph II, he dismissed the old constitution as past history (alte Historie) irrelevant to new circumstances.18 Rights were individual as well as corporate and they could extend to freedom of expression. Many sixteenth and seventeenth-century monarchs allowed diversity of opinion on political affairs: some, like the Spanish Habsburgs, encouraged it. Louis XIV made no attempt to silence the critical group which gathered round the Duke of Burgundy. In contrast, Victor Amadeus II of Savoy imposed the most authoritarian denial of intellectual freedom to the west of Russia. The temperament of individual kings seems responsible rather than any "absolutist" system.

Thirdly, some rulers were seen as veering towards "republican" arrangements in allowing encroachment on princely prerogatives by councils, committees or Estates. People complained when the monarch did not govern by himself: Louis XIV's boast was that he did. Contrary to the usual belief, nobles preferred strong rulers to weak ones. Provincial power groups wanting effective royal support in local contests needed undivided command at the centre of power in order to head off appeals to jurisdictional rivals. As ministers and officials frequently contested each other's spheres of responsibility, firm regal arbitration was all the more vital.19 The later years of Philip IV of Spain were castigated by many observers as republican in that the King was incapable of imposing his decisions on the government.20 But royal minorities or incompetence could reverse this attitude. In early seventeenth-century Brandenburg the Estates made good their claim to vet foreign policy and in 1648 the Paris parlement tried to. Significantly, later seventeenth-century Brandenburg and France are famous for spectacular displays of "absolutism": arguably their monarchs were merely retrieving normal royal or princely power. What preceded "absolutist" regimes is often illuminating. If we start the Danish clock in 1661, we behold a strong monarch aggressively seizing new powers and apparently launching on "absolutism". If we start it in 1648, we encounter a weak, elective monarchy with a council of magnates imposed upon it. There is nothing intrinsically "absolutist" about a king wanting to choose his own servants and bequeath the crown to his heirs. The stress on absolute power was, at least partly, a rhetoric of recovery.

There were thus three type of legitimate government (monarchy) and two perversions of it (despotism and republicanism). Monarchy degenerated into despotism when it monopolised the powers it was supposed to share and veered

16 Burne, Lordship (above n. 14), p. 158.
20 Thompson, Castile (above n. 3), p. 88.
towards republicanism when it shared the powers it was supposed to monopolise. The vital distinction was between absolute and despotic monarchies, which took opposite views of the rights of their subjects - not between absolute and limited monarchies, which were two aspects of the same thing. Early modern political discourse employed a rhetoric of harmony which combined apparently opposites. It was the ruler’s duty to maintain a balanced constitution. French and English governments thus operated in both prerogative and consultative modes. This is why contemporaries puzzlingly referred to the same rulers as absolute and limited. These were not then regarded as mutually exclusive, since they referred to different areas of governmental activity with different rules. In England Burgess has called this the duplex theory of government. Bacon described it as a *two-fold power in the king:* … *his absolute power, whereby he may levy forces against any nation and his limited power, which is declared and expressed in the laws.* An English MP declared in 1610:

*This kingdom enjoyeth the blessings and benefits of an absolute monarchy and of a free estate … Therefore let no man think liberty and sovereignty incompatible, that how much is given to the one is taken from the other … the one can hardly long subsist without the other.*

This is also why Sommerville’s reinvention of a contest between “absolutist” and “limited” theories of government in early seventeenth-century England is a non-starter. Absolute and limited power were seen as symbiotic and complementary.

Not all commentators agreed then. Nor do they now. In 1559 John Aylmer expressed relief that Elizabeth, a woman, could not alone determine matters of war and peace. Some historians still assert that she invented the distinction between commonwealth matters, which parliament could vet, and matters of state, which they could not. Since the theory of this dichotomy dated at least from Fortescue, and the practice was necessitated by the rarity of parliaments, we may conclude that they (and Aylmer) are wrong. Elton defines the Tudor royal prerogative as subject to law, which is misleading. It was within the law in the sense of having its boundaries defined by law; but it was outside it in the sense of not operating through it but through the King’s unchallengeable will. In that respect it was comparable with the prerogative of the Bourbons, which was beyond legal challenge. Sommerville goes to the opposite extreme when he compares the claim of James I for a prerogative *à b o v e* the law with that of the Bourbons. He accurately represents James, who was in a despotic muddle, but misrepresents the Bourbons, who repudiated all theory of despotism.

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22. Bossuet could scarcely be clearer. Royal authority is *absolu par rapport à la contrainte:* n’y ayant aucune puissance capable de forcer le souverain, qui en sens est indépendant de toute autorité humaine. Mais il n’ensuit pas de là que le gouvernement soit arbitraire, parce … qu’il y a des lois dans les empires contre lesquelles tout ce qui se fait est nul de droit.

The duplex consensus of early Stuart England was pushed by Charles I beyond its limits, along his father’s lines and in defiance of Bossuet. Clearly, therefore, the relationship between Bourbon and Stuart regimes cannot be clarified by labelling both of them “absolutism”. After the Civil War some attempt was made to recouple absolute and limited monarchy, but by the end of the century they were regarded as incompatible. This was illogical, since an absolute monarchy which was not despotic was in some sense limited. But the development owed little to logic and most to propaganda - a linguistic response to the dynastic, religious and commercial challenge of Louis XIV in the 1680s and 90s. Locke and Bossuet give definitions of despotism so identical that it seems they have been conferring. But there is a crucial difference. Bossuet separates *absolute* from *despotic* power, while Locke equates them. Sanctioned by his authority, *absolute* acquired the despotic connotations it has retained. It was by definition no longer possible for absolute governments to be simultaneously limited. By the eighteenth century the English had forgotten the word’s original non-despotic meaning. In 1756 David Hume was puzzled by frequent Tudor and Stuart references to their monarchy as *absolute.* Had not England’s monarchy been limited for centuries by law and Parliament? He wondered briefly in a footnote whether the meaning of the word had changed but did not pursue the speculation.

Soon this reached France. Bossuet fought to maintain the distinction between absolute power, defender of subjects’ rights, and despotic or arbitrary power, their oppressor. He exposed the attempt to discredit absolute monarchy: *Pour rendre ce terme odieux … plusieurs affectent de confondre le gouvernement absolu et le gouvernement arbitraire. Mais il n’y a rien de plus distingué.*


Any discourse contains an element of self-interest: it embraces tactics as well as high-minded principle. The European elite had a common culture: it was desirable to claim the legitimation of classical political norms. The familiar description of England as a mixed monarchy, endlessly repeated throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was based on the traditional idea of a mixed constitution which could be found in Aristotle and other authors of ancient Greece and Rome, as for example in Cicero’s De Re Publica (although this particular work was not rediscovered until 1819). Variegated content was allocated to the mixture. Some favoured clergy, lords and commons and others executive, legislature and judiciary. Clearly the facts were fitted to the model, not the model to the facts. Yet historians solemnly reiterate it as though it were based on the findings of modern political science. For most of the period absolute was complimentary and despotic abusive. Classification was coloured by dynastic, national or religious antipathy. Bossuet praised Louis XIV as absolute, while the Huguenot Jurieu denigrated him as despotic. According to English Whig politicians of the 1680s, Louis XIV was a Catholic despot while Leopold I, a good ally, was seen as politically correct and, as it were, an honorary Protestant.27

"Absolutism" is a stranger to this discourse. It represents a governmental norm and it has despotic connotations. In pre-Enlightened discourse it cannot do both.

Thirdly, there has been a shift to studying international rather than national states. Focus on British rather than English perspectives has revealed parallels with Continental multiple monarchies.28 Most observations about English uniqueness are irrelevant on the British scale. The rise of national consciousness and nation states continues to obsess historians, but they now also stress the domination of early modern Europe by international imperial dynasties. There is thus more reluctance to equate "absolutism" with the rise of the nation state and suspicion of blanket description as "absolutist" of empires embracing different forms of constitutional law.

Early modern states were dynastic agglomerations, acquired without regard to ethnicity or geography, divided by law and language, bound together only by loyalty to the ruler’s family, court and, especially after 1650, religion. The sea was no barrier to dynasticism: it bonded territory rather than dividing it, as in the Swedish Empire and the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway. But consensus was hard to create when the central territory containing the dynastic capital encroached on the liberties or diverged from the religion of subordinate provinces, often with only a viceregal court or none at all. Hence revolts in the Netherlands (1566), Bohemia (1618), Scotland (1639) and Catalonia (1640).

Fourthly, revisionist historians have stressed contingencies rather than structures. This has weakened the concept of "absolutism" as a type of society. Impatience with oversimplified economic and sociological underpinnings has revived l’histoire événementielle, with its emphasis on short-term contingency as the main explanatory tool. Emphasis is laid on the autonomy of the political and constitutional sphere and the extent to which it generated a momentum of its own.

Hereditary monarchy is by definition unpredictable. Chance factors like royal capacity and personality give varying trajectories in different states. High-political studies of court faction have demonstrated the influences on, and importance of, key decisions by those in power. Political manoeuvring at the Tudor court made policy, and therefore the progress of the Reformation, a matter of chance.29 Domestic harmony was fragile, since it depended on the ability of individual hereditary monarchs to hold together fragmented polities with few resources and less force. Women or children on the throne, or a disputed succession, weakened monarchy vis-à-vis other groups. And it is often forgotten that monarchs were expected to rule until they dropped. Infirmitry and senility were therefore normal hazards of royal government. Historians note variations in official acceptance of the inevitable. Though royal icon-makers painted over Elizabeth I’s wrinkles, Louis XIV’s official image was allowed discreetly to age.30

"Absolutism" cannot now be treated as a linear development, with one monarch systematically building on the policies of his predecessor. The truth was more cyclical and haphazard. Monarchs like Louis XIV can be seen as recovering their prerogatives after challenge (the Fronde) during royal minority or incompetence (Mazarin). It was unnecessary to establish them by force: rulers who were capable and of age were expected to wield them. Instead of viewing "absolutism" as an aggressive drive for new powers, it can be presented as a strategy of recovery from the natural shocks that crowns were heir to - as a determination to monopolise rulers’ own legitimate powers, not everyone else’s.

28 Black, Convergence (above n. 1).
30 Peter Burke, The Fabrication of Louis XIV. London 1993, pp. 107-123 and 197.
Many early modern historians have recently emphasised continuity rather than change. "Absolutism", by definition a departure from medieval forms of government, has therefore been queried. England, in contrast, has always been recognised as one state where there was an important survival - of the medieval partnership of crown on the one hand and Estates and local elites on the other, together with the class and regional liberties which they defended. It now has to share this distinction with Continental claimants to an equally long record of cooperation. The conventional idea was that the new "absolutist" state was hostile to established elites and the corporate bodies which they dominated. This is now doubtful.\footnote{Dietrich Gerhardt (ed.), Ständische Vertretungen in Europa im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert. Göttingen 1974; John Russell Major, Representative Government in Early Modern France. New Haven, CT 1980; Francis Carsten, Princes and Parliaments in Germany. Oxford 1959.}

As well as crossing national boundaries, the big picture must transcend the usual research periods: early modern historians are now aware of the danger of detaching their period from its medieval predecessor. "Absolutism" as a break with previous modes of government fitted neatly on to a historical agenda dominated by concepts of change, crisis and revolution. But it can be argued that, in spite of unprecedented warfare, economic dislocation and religious dissonance, the political and social fundamentals of late medieval government did not change. The early modern age makes more sense if approached from the earlier rather than the later period. The "absolutist" rulers of the late seventeenth century can then be viewed as repairing crown-elite consensus after their authority had been successively ravaged by Reformation, Religious Wars, Thirty Years War and "General Crisis". Their problems and solutions were similar to those of early sixteenth-century "new monarchs", who inherited the debris of civil wars in England, Scotland, France, Castile and Aragon. Henry of Navarre can be presented as a post-Reformist War conciliator in much the same mould as Henry Tudor after the Wars of the Roses. But in England we talk of Henry VII's agenda for recovery, while the French prefer Henry IV's "absolutism".

There is no sharp break between medieval feudalism and the more flexible structures which succeeded it. For much of the early modern period the monarch's manipulation of succession to fiefs and marriage of heirs was a key management technique. Late medieval feudalism was past its zenith as a military system but continuity between feudal bond and clientage is obvious, while feudal lordship was vital to Sicilian "absolutism". The early modern period, as well as accepting land ownership in the modern sense, was saturated in the medieval concept of property as a complex of rights. This was the foundation throughout Western and Central Europe of the seigneuries to which local justice was delegated. Equally, medieval dynasticism remained the principal motive

national and international politics. Early modern rebellion still required a member of the royal family to bestow credibility and most wars were fought in pursuit of dynastic territorial claims. Conversely, much of the resistance encountered by absolute monarchs is explained by the inability of dynasticism to offer the focus for unity and loyalty supplied by nationalism in the nineteenth century.\footnote{Tommaso Astaria, The Continuity of Feudal Power: The Caracciola Di Brienza in Spanish Naples. Cambridge 1991; Jeremy Black, Absolutism. In: John W. Yolton et al. (eds.), The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment. Oxford 1991, 11-13, p. 11.}

Early modern Europe was "a museum of late-medieval corporate liberties". The old view of the matter is that "absolutism" was about cutting through the tangle of laws, privileges and jurisdictions, "the Ständestaat gave way to an absolute state in the sense that the legal authority of the prince was released from the restraints which natural law, rivaling jurisdictions, old-standing customs and the special liberties of the ruling groups had imposed upon him".\footnote{Hans Rosenberg, Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy. Cambridge, MA 1958, p. 11.} Early modern rulers before 1700 would not have recognised this brochure for liberatet monarchy. Whatever Bodin and Hobbes might write, the subjects' duty was not owed exclusively to the state but also to a multiplicity of local and provincial, civil and ecclesiastical authorities.\footnote{Mettam, Power and Faction (above n. 13), p. 49, Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson, Political Innovation and Conceptual Change. Cambridge 1989, pp. 122f.}

The dualist balance of power between ruler and Estates was also preserved. News of it tipping towards rulers betrays the tug-of-war mind-set of the nineteenth century. Early modern monarchs did not normally consider parliaments a limit to their power: they extended it. They performed administrative and judicial tasks for which rulers lacked the manpower and they gave the consent of the community to royal policies which affected it.\footnote{Rudolf Viehauer, Germany in the Age of Absolutism. Cambridge 1988, pp. 88f.} Without them, the options were despotism or inaction. Research is thus discovering teeming forms of representative life where it had formerly been pronounced extinct. The years after 1648 saw the final blossoming of German corporate society. The Estates were excluded from the high politics in which some had dallied during the turmoil of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but the princes guaranteed the local power base of their members and consulted them on matters relating to it.\footnote{Volker R. T.C. W. Evans and Trevor V. Thomas (eds.), Crown, Church and Estates: Central European Politics in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. London 1991, 1-23, pp. 4f.} This is scarcely an "absolutist" state of affairs: Tudor and Stuart Parliaments had
no more right to intervene in high policy than German Estates. The Ständestaat was therefore not replaced by "absolutism": it continued.

Most of the supporting cast for the new "absolutist" drama turn out to have old scripts. It has been suggested that the distinctive feature of early modern "absolutism" was that local elites were subordinated to the crown.37 But they always had been. The independent power groups of the Middle Ages are a romantic myth. Persuading elites with local authority to govern according to the wishes of the centre, or at least recognise a common interest, was the oldest preoccupation of monarchs. No rulers before the late eighteenth century could deploy or rely on trained bureaucrats in the localities. They secured control by exploiting local power, ambition and rivalry rather than by-passing them. In every European state local administration remained the business of established landed and urban elites. By 1700, in Brandenburg-Prussia as much as England, they wielded judicial and fiscal powers at the grass roots.38 Shortage of trained personnel made Continental monarchs just as dependent on them as their English counterparts: their superior local grip is therefore speculative. It was not only Stuart justices of the peace who could go on strike, as the Duke of Alba discovered when he imposed the "tenten penny" tax. The local authorities never collected it.39 This universal decentralization further dissolves the contrast between "absolutist" Continent on the one hand and England and the Dutch Republic on the other. If nobles were not the natural opponents of monarchy, there was no need for monarchs to be against nobles. Local lords were rarely the victims of absolute monarchy: they were its beneficiaries.

The cliché that absolute rulers challenged the role of the nobility in central government is finally refuted in the most comprehensive study of the European nobility yet published.40 The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the arrival of new administrative agencies staffed by trained professionals from a non-noble background; but like the "new men" before them they soon became noble, since royal service was everywhere the surest ladder to nobility. And they were not alone. The old elite was quick to spot the opportunities offered by the expanding state. The allegedly new "absolutist" service nobility is disappearing in its heartland, Russia, where it turns out to be the old nobility. With the significant exception of Denmark after 1660, where a new aristocracy was created from scratch, absolute monarchs did not replace the existing elite with a service nobility. Instead, the existing elite itself became a service nobility. In the process it was to some extent professionalized and underwent structural change, in that social status came to depend on government office rather than inherited noble title.41 This was arguably more original than the old device of using "new men". Exemplified by the noblesse de robe and by the tables of rank of late seventeenth-century Europe, it integrated new recruits smoothly into old elites. If Starkey is right that the reform of 1540 established a Privy Council of working office-holders, then once more Tudor England comes into line with the Continent. In practice this meant that great territorial magnates were excluded, at least from central councils which they could not regularly attend. Of Elizabeth I’s Privy Council in 1597 six members were nobles, but four were her own creation and none were territorial magnates.42 Though the Habsburgs allowed magnates to retain key administrative office, in the West their exclusion from high councils was normal and not novel. The exception was during the Wars of Religion and weak monarchies of 1550-1650. Though Louis XIV gave magnates top court, military, diplomatic and ecclesiastical posts, he excluded them from his councils.43 Beyond its military commitment, an enlarged role for government in this period is speculative. There was more regulation of what had previously been left to chance, market forces or individual whim - an impulse which has been attributed to the Renaissance quest for a rational order. It possibly drew what had been formerly regional matters into a national framework; and it probably intervened in areas of its subjects’ lives previously free from control, as Polizeiordnungen extended from religious and economic activity to health, safety and moral welfare. But this perspective can be distorted. Government personnel were increased, but not for this purpose. To implement the new ambitions there was nothing but the old agencies.44

There has been much recent emphasis on the targeted projects, narrow tax base and feeble grip of most absolute monarchs.45 This misses their indubitably novel achievement in fielding armies of unprecedented size. It also accepts the new "absolutist" agenda and merely presents it as undelivered. The continued activity of Estates, survival of provincial liberties and compromises

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37 Miller, Potential for Absolutism (above n. 1), pp. 188f.
39 Helmut Koenigsberger, Epilogue: Central and Western Europe. In: Evans/Thomas, Crown, Church and Estates (above n. 36), 300-310, p. 304.
43 Mettam, Power and Faction (above n. 13), pp. 81-91.
with powerful groups should be attributed not to the incompleteness of "absolutism" but to its non-existence.

Interest has also shifted from bureaucratic to social perspectives. A new awareness of absolute monarchy as a social product, reflecting and sustaining a hierarchical society rather than imposed on it, has tended to align the Continent with England.\textsuperscript{46} Personal and social relationships predominated over bureaucratic values. Institutional structures were not monolithic, as in the traditional model, but dominated by competing factions within them acknowledging rival loyalties to kin and patrons outside. Only recently have we been reminded that, far from Estates and princes inevitably conflicting, most German Estates had a court party.\textsuperscript{47} Traditional historiography rested "absolutism" on well-advertised support systems fortifying it against society - standing armies and bureaucracies. Yet "absolutist" armies were not an autonomous force outside society: they existed within it. In Prussia they mirrored the social relations of the countryside as peasant conscripts and junker officers transferred the self-landlord nexus to their regiments. Before the levée en masse of 1792, "absolutist" armies fought for the aristocratic landowners who led them and not, as often implied, for some premonition of nineteenth-century nation state.\textsuperscript{48} Similarly, "bureaucracy" operated in an elite society dominated by concepts of loyalty and honour: though professional in some respects, it secured compliance only when reinforced by clientage. Intendants were medieval bailis writ large, helpless without the support of local power groups. The crown's vital agencies were not the formal institutions of government but the partnerships formed with other interests, as it reinforced their authority and recycled tax revenues to them. Rulers relied for provincial control on clientage networks, linking court and local elites. They also exploited the church, the only institution which had an organisation in every parish. Hence the importance for state formation of religious consensus. It is odd that the discovery of this dependence is regarded as a weakness or limitation of what is called "absolutism". It was the key to its operation.

Many features of early modern government reflect the texture of its society. Anthropological work on Africa and Polynesia has shown the inappropriateness of the language of modern parliamentarization to traditional societies. An examination of the rituals, rhetoric and symbolic exchanges of the Cortes of Portugal emphasizes a harmony and balance of interests. Much of what historians have seen as symptoms of Estates' futility and marginalisation - long debates, empty verbiage, fruitless manoeuvrings - is simply the way people reached consensus in early modern society.\textsuperscript{49}

Both English and Continental monarchies forged more links with communities than is suggested by "absolutism". Marxists remain unperturbed: since it represents a class conspiracy to fleece the peasantry, crown-elite dialogue is to be expected.\textsuperscript{50} To them "absolutism" represents the domination of big landowners. This is an unhelpful definition. Seventeenth-century Poland was dominated by big landowners, yet few historians would call it an absolute monarchy. There is no observable correlation in the German states between the extent of royal power and the development of Gutsherrschaft.\textsuperscript{51} Nor did rulers support only elites. Far from being imposed from outside, state power was inseparable from the social order at every level and enmeshed in a complex web of social values and relationships. It was the product of a two-way process, only faintly captured by historians' emphasis on obedience.

Small German princes were bound almost individually to every peasant household in their state: their power was drawn into the villages on a subtle give-and-take basis. The 1609 deal in the County of Hohenlohe between peasants and prince effectively obliged him to adjust his fiscal demands to the ups and downs of their economy.\textsuperscript{52} Even historians of Russia now stress grassroots participation rather than state domination of society.\textsuperscript{53} Louis XIV's ministers consistently strengthened peasant communities by invigorating the village assemblies which represented them and the collective rights and properties which united them. In Burgundy the crown tried to insist on the participation of all heads of households.\textsuperscript{54} As a result, eighteenth-century French peasants were more formidable opponents of their seigneurs than were the English. In what has been called a Family-State compact, a French father's power over his wife and children was strengthened by royal edict, justified by the same discourse of absolute power and upheld in civil rather than church courts.\textsuperscript{55} In the same way male heads of


\textsuperscript{47} Press, System of Estates (above n. 36), pp. 10f.


\textsuperscript{52} Thomas Robisbeaux, Rural Society and the Search for Order in Early Modern Germany. Cambridge 1989, pp. 260f.


\textsuperscript{55} Sarah Hanley, Engendering the Family: Family Formation and State Building in Early
households were recognised as the spiritual and fiscal bedrock of the Tudor and Stuart state.

Thus reinforced, local people were responsible for much of the regulation attributed to "absolutism". Religious, moral, sexual, social and economic behaviour, as well as education and welfare, was superintended as never before. But, except in small German states, the agent of conformity was not central government: it was the urban and village communities themselves. The most disciplined society was not the creation of an absolute monarchy but of the Dutch Republic, where the authority of town councils was clearly defined and formidable. There neighbourhood watches managed to produce lower crime figures in large towns than in the countryside. To promote public decency and deter disorder, Amsterdam introduced the world's first system of public street lighting in 1670, by means of 1800 lanterns affixed to walls or posts - a feat at that date beyond the great monarchies of England and France. But even there by 1700 the rise of a consumer market had made theft the commonest crime before the courts and alarmed those with property to lose. Furthermore, godly religious reformers required sins to be upgraded as crimes. As communities became less tolerant the state expanded its judicial role, but arguably more in response to popular demand than on its own initiative. The impetus for the European witch-hunt apparently came from the localities rather than the centre, whereas absolute governments were formerly assumed to have promoted it to extend their own power. It now seems that they were keener to restrict it.37

This is no "zero sum" model, in which more authority for the crown meant less for everyone else. Though absolute monarchs monopolised power at the top, they compensated by supporting elite groups and reinforcing collective and patriarchal power structures. To attribute the extension of government to royal policy misses its response to pressure from below. Increase in government personnel is usually attributed to comparable growth in its business. In fact the state's internal and external expansion was driven partly by need for resources to dispense as patronage to the growing political nation, which is identified as a feature of the developing English state from the late Middle Ages and a barrier against "absolutism". Its discovery in Germany and France has implications for that concept.38

For more than a decade courtly rather than bureaucratic perspectives have engaged historians. Tudor and Stuart England has been ranged with the hitherto "absolutist" Continent by the discovery of the continued importance of royal courts in both.39 Nineteenth-century historians assumed their political role was terminated by the rise of the bureaucratic state. Elias has now transformed Versailles' etiquette and ceremonial from bizarre curiosity to mechanism for elite management.40 Whatever the formal prerogatives of royalty, monarchs had to make good their right to be obeyed. In all states the court was the social and political centre, the central switchboard which earthed local power groups to the monarch via national networks of patronage and brokerage. Throughout the period the higher nobility, which everywhere dominated the provinces, retained its grip on court office. This was especially true of multiple monarchies. Leopold I used the court in Vienna to bind his heterogeneous territories together and integrate their political elites. Its failure to absorb the Hungarian nobility left a dangerous emphasis on the Vienna-Prague axis. Brandenburg-Prussia is the exception, with little apparent reliance on court or clientage - though it is possible that Prussian historians failed to see what they were not looking for.

The courtly staging of monarchy contributed to an elite consensus which the coercive connotations of "absolutism" fail to capture. It was less rule by command than by manipulation and socialisation. Courtesy and etiquette were royal devices for subduing anarchic aristocrats.41 The court presented the monarch as simultaneously distant and accessible: it was princely pedastal and point of contact. Distance reinforced the emphasis on absolute power and accessibility bonded the partnership with the elite. Swept up in a theatrical performance of stylised activities, nobles watched themselves in mirrors, with architecture the backdrop, etiquette the stage directions, servants the stage hands, royalty the cast and courtiers the extras. Since the court revolved round the person of the monarch, court historians clash with those who stress the development of the impersonal state.42 Throughout the early modern period nobles everywhere perceived service as personal loyalty to the ruler43 and royal rites of passage stressed by their similarity to aristocratic ceremonial the
monarch's personal bond with the nobles. Henry VIII's funeral order has recently been viewed as a presentation of the ruler as leader of the feudal hierarchy. Elizabeth I revived the Garter and Henry III of France created the Saint Esprit to symbolise the importance of crown-noble co-operation. Though French court society did not survive the vicious antagonisms of the Wars of Religion, orders of chivalry could also bridge national boundaries and the chasm of creed. When Henry III received the Garter in 1585, at the height of religious animosity, Catholic French and Protestant English knights walked in procession through Paris. Since the court personalised sovereignty and integrated it into high society, rulers had to be present. In the 1580s Philip II's withdrawal from court and reduction in its ceremonial wrought havoc. A high profile was not essential: distance lent enchantment. But absent monarchs were non-starters.

By 1550 Western and Central European courts had emerged ahead of all noble rivals as the source of power and promotion. Local influence remained crucial to elite ambition, but ability to maintain, reinforce and extend it depended on parallel influence at court. Its expansion is reflected in the growth of new "capital" cities where once-itinerant royal courts settled. Nobles were obliged to spend more time there and repeated absence from home narrowed opportunities for attendance by a well-born retinue. It was replaced by a skeleton staff of domestic rather than military significance. Lawsuits replaced private armies. By 1700 the entourages of both French and English magnates had disappeared. The earl of Derby was typical. In 1561 he ran a household of 120; by 1700 his descendant was down to 38. Yet the residential habits of the English nobility were long supposed to have presented a satisfying contrast to their French counterparts, absentee, court-bound and doomed.

Court faction now looks less trivial than it did, though much of the evidence remains intractable (for France there are no records of council debates and investigation of royal-ministerial correspondence has scarcely begun). Courts functioned as cockpit for interest groups competing for royal favour in the masque, in the council chamber, on the stairs and in bed. The exclusion of important factions precipitated political crisis. The difficulties of rulers like Olivares, Richelieu and Charles I can be attributed partly to their failure to enmesh major elements of the aristocracy in the courtly web. Shifts in royal favour at court required the construction of new clientele systems in the provinces. The fall of Montmorency in 1632 recast the political geography of France. Revisionists now recast constitutional conflicts, in England as much as in France, as court feuds. Much opposition from Elizabeth I's Parliaments originated in court faction. Less considered is the reason why Louis XIV encountered little institutionalised opposition - probably because, unlike his successors, he had court faction under control.

Historians have also emphasised the court's function as the centre of royal image-making. This further weakens its reputation as a weapon of royal coercion. Colbert's petite académie has been analysed in terms of eighteenth-century propaganda techniques, personality cults and media events. Historians have until recently swallowed at face value extravagant estimates of royal power designed to overawe contemporaries. The arts did not reflect the reality of royal authority: they created the illusion of it. The novelty was not absolute power but its media coverage.

The layout of royal courts has also provided insights. The proximity of Louis XIV's council chamber to his bed chamber is a logical juxtaposition for an absolute monarch. In seventeenth-century Vienna, administration and court were dominated by the same aristocratic elite. Setting the Privy Council firmly in the context of the Tudor court has narrowed the gap between courtiers and politicians/administrators in England as well. Like the Sun King, Henry VIII and Elizabeth lived over the shop.

Political consent rather than military coercion has been emphasised by recent historians of state formation. The birth of professional history in the nineteenth century coincided with the rise of nationalism. Nationalist historians promoted national identity and sought the origins of the nation state, monopolist of power within a defined territorial area. They located it in the novel monopoly of authority seized by the absolute monarchies of early modern Europe, who deployed bureaucracies and standing armies to flatter other sources of power and enforce the will of the monarch as law. Their regimes were transmuted into "absolutism" - the Machtstaat, imposing a monopoly of legitimate violence and creating stability by force. "The Prussian army is undoubtedly the most real and effective bond of national unity", intoned Treitschke. Thus in Berlin an influential school of historians, responding to the creation of the German Empire by armed might, produced a historical myth to legitimise it - the military state.
The "military revolution" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries massively expanded troop numbers: hence standing armies and centralised bureaucracies to support them. These in turn provided the administrative and coercive capacity to end royal reliance on representative Estates and local nobilities. Agencies with power in their own right and therefore wills of their own were sidelined as consultative bodies and replaced as administrative organs by mechanisms owing their power only to the ruler and therefore under his thumb. The womb of the modern state was war and its midwife was force. 70

Recent research has queried this account of state formation. It has been argued above that royal control of the provinces depended less on bureaucratic mechanisms and standing armies than on partnership with local notables - less on destroying alternative sources of authority than on employing them. At least within the elite, whatever the rhetoric of authority, its reality was reciprocal and therefore consensual. From 1550 post-Reformation religious divisions within elites spelled crisis for monarchs. After 1650 religious cohesion was widely restored, in the case of Bourbons and Habsburgs by the elimination or marginalisation of Protestantism. 71 With it came stability, arguably not by force but by traditional co-operation between ruler and elite. This alliance ensured an end to peasant disorder. Before 1650 it was dangerous; after that date it was contained. Aristocratic revolt itself fizzled out, except in Eastern Europe where it was exacerbated by ethnic and xenophobic hatreds.

Political rather than military historians now advance a consensus rather than a force model of early modern government. The Tudors demilitarized "overmighty subjects" by means of their court, not by a standing army which they lacked. A "military-fiscal state" was established in late seventeenth-century England in co-operation with the propertied in parliament: the landed elite commanded the new standing army. In both cases consensus came first, then expansion of royal armies. Some historians now place decisive military change on the Continent after 1650, when religious accord was restored in many European states. There too noble co-operation arguably promoted the state's military power, rather than the other way round. Whatever their traditional constitutional classification, in all states support for war was the result of bargains and dialogues with subjects. 72 The most recent study of Louis XIV stresses his traditional skills of elite management rather than institutional innovation based on bureaucracy and standing armies. 73 Rulers now seem to have attempted the same consensual techniques as England. Her greater military-fiscal success must therefore be located elsewhere - probably in her near-unique national parliament able to overcome regionalism and bind the whole realm. As in Sweden, the Estates became an accomplice of state policy. Political structures determined war capabilities rather than war the political structures.

Compared with the Enlightened Despots of the eighteenth century, remarkably few rulers between 1550 and 1700 tried to hack through the tangle of law and custom in order to impose uniformity on multiple monarchies. They were sensitive to local identities and regional differences. Successful integration was achieved not by naked conquest but through the coalescence and continuity of local interests in a wider framework. The triumph of Habsburg German culture has been attributed to the voluntary acclamation of nobles, burghers and professionals who perceived it as conferring admission to the ruling elite. 74

It now looks doubtful that war promoted the growth of state bureaucracy. In Spain it led by the middle of the seventeenth century to the privatisation of existing state structures. Initially there was no correlation between army size and growth of fiscal-bureaucratic mechanisms: governments merely shifted the organisation on to private entrepreneurs and the cost on to local populations around garrisons. Armies generated their own expansion, since only huge numbers could extract the contributions required to pay for themselves. In 1626 Wallenstein informed Ferdinand II that he could maintain a self-financing army of 50,000 but not 20,000. Barely more than one tenth of the forces of Gustavus Adolphus were with him on the battlefield of Lützen in 1632. The rest were in garrisons holding down the territories that were making "contributions". 75 Later seventeenth-century attempts in France and Brandenburg-Prussia to assert more direct control were a new departure, not a development of previous policy. And though Louvois tried to impose state control and funding on Louis XIV's army, incessant warfare made it more rather than less dependent on private contractors. The causal link between war and bureaucratic centralisation is broken most spectacularly by the Dutch Republic. During the Eighty Years' War its unique extractive capacity enabled it to mobilise financial and military resources on an

unrivalled scale. Yet it is arguable that bureaucracy and centralisation barely advanced.76

Did the need for effective armed forces and fiscal imperatives sideline Estates or make them essential? The model "absolutist" is the ruler stimulated by war to suppress Estates and nobles, abolish tax exemptions and collect the proceeds by means of an efficient state bureaucracy, while imposing his will through force of arms. But it is hard to cite a ruler who actually did all these things, apart from Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy and the Great Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia. A state which did many of them was Britain, whose people were the most heavily taxed in Europe. There, especially after 1688, taxes trebled in thirty years (while in France they were static), they were levied nationally and at uniform rates, tax farming was abandoned and revenues were collected by a growing body of government officials (the notorious excisemen, whose powers Blackstone considered a threat to the liberties of a free people). According to Brewer, the English excise service more closely resembled Weber's idea of bureaucracy than any government agency in early modern Europe. After 1688 Britain had a large standing army and navy, spending on which constituted about 70% of government expenditure. By the War of Spanish Succession the ratio of troops to population was one in thirty-six - the same as in Prussia and Sweden and greater than in Austria, France and Spain. Britain's army, unlike Prussia's which was dismissed at harvest time and granted long peacetime leaves of absence, served throughout the year. It was used more frequently than on the Continent to suppress riot and enforce excise collection.77 If this be an anti-militarist, limited monarchy, what is an "absolutist" army supposed to look like?

Finally, much nineteenth-century historiography is now revealed as propaganda. It aimed less to investigate early modern dynastic states than to equip modern nation states with a pedigree.78 "Absolutists" are now seen as pragmatists solving problems rather than innovators implementing blueprints. Theory therefore followed the facts, and at a greater distance than usually admitted - two centuries later.

The concept of "absolutism" sprang mainly from a radically new discourse invented by the French Revolution, which ignored ancient customs and defined the ancien régime by condemning it. To swallow that definition is to accept the propaganda of revolutionaries as historical reality. Nineteenth-century historians followed them by updating and over-simplifying the ancien régime in terms of their own liberal and nationalist agendas. Louis XIV's intendants were viewed as baroque versions of the prefects of the Third Republic.79 Early modern consultation, displaced from "national" to local level, disappeared in the perceptions of nineteenth-century nationalists. They expected parliaments to represent national units and decide policy. Because most early modern Estates did neither, they were side-lined as victims of "absolutism" - not by early modern monarchs but by modern historians.

Recovery of the old order requires the deletion from our vocabulary of a series of early nineteenth-century "isms", which still obscure the differences between early modern consciousness and our own. Coinedy by political activists to identify contemporary and not historical forces, "liberalism", "socialism", "communism", "nationalism" and "absolutism" met the needs of political and social polemic in the 1820s and 1830s.80 The first use of the word "absolutism" which the present author can find occurred in 1823 in French debates over conflict between liberals and repressive monarch in Spain.81

"Absolute authority" is different from "absolutism". The first is one kind of authority co-existing with others; the second is a confrontational agenda. "Absolutism" meant despotism - the sort currently on view in post-Napoleonic Europe. In the 1820s "absolutism" and "limited monarchy" were adversarial alternatives. They were then projected back on to the old regime, when a ruler was obliged to operate as both absolute and limited. Nineteenth-century discourse spotlight absolute mode in France and limited in England: hence the myth of French tyranny and English liberty. Whig historians preferred to stress the elements of the English constitution that promoted liberty rather than authority: they have always underplayed royal prerogatives. Even Elton talked much about King-in-Parliament but little about King-out-of-Parliament, who ran most government policy until the nineteenth century. To this day the British constitution preserves the most powerful royal prerogative in the modern world. That is why declaration of war remains beyond the reach of the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

Brandenburg-Prussia was the greatest victim of the nineteenth century's rewriting of history for its own purposes. It was presented as a laboratory specimen of "absolutism". In the Kaiserschach historians stressed its lack of court and patronage mechanisms and reliance on bureaucracy and standing army. This uniqueness may owe less to historical reality than to their obsession with Hegel, Weber and the Acta Borussica. Their historiography created a Prussian myth.

77 Tallett, War and Society (above n. 17), pp. 188-193; Brewer, Sinews (above n. 1), pp. 29-91.
80 Clark, Language of Liberty (above n. 4), pp. 142-145.
81 Henshall, Myth (above n. 1), pp. 208f.
monarchs who lacked the tools to take over their administrative functions, they were an enabling device. And empowered to give the consent of community or corporation to government acts which affected their rights, they extended royal authority into areas of immunity beyond the scope of princely prerogatives. The obsession of the nineteenth century with Estates as a check on regal power is inappropriate. They existed to legitimate its expansion.

English revisionist historians stress co-operation rather than conflict between monarchs and assemblies: in France, also, bargaining and compromise were keynotes. In 1661 Colbert asked the Estates of Burgundy for 1,500,000 livres in tax, having thought of a figure and doubled it. They offered 500,000. As in modern arbitration they split the difference and 1,050,000 was agreed. The only way to ensure a smooth passage for royal tax proposals was to ensure that the Estates' leaders were Colbert's clients. In Tudor England historians call this "parliamentary management". It is unclear why they call it "absolutism" in France.

The beauty of "isms" is that everything can be made to fit them. Once a generalisation like "absolutism" is wedged in historical skulls, it explains everything. Selection is the key. The partnership of the Saxon Estates with their princes was as peaceful as that of the Württemberg Estates with their despot was stormy: the Württemberg saga is more famous. Exaggeration of their previous importance lends the disappearance of seventeenth-century Estates a convincingly cataclysmic ambiance. The Brandenburg Diet did not meet after 1652, nor the French Estates General after 1614. It is less well known that they seldom met before. "Absolutist" historiography always wins both ways. The compliant Estates of Languedoc are pronounced a despot's rubber stamp, as they never refused Louis XIV's demands. The rowdy Estates of Provence are seen as robustly defending themselves against tyranny. Hence two infallible signs of "absolutism" - agreement and conflict.

In nineteenth-century eyes another "absolutist" stratagem was Roman law. But it was states like France, Spain and the Reich where Roman law was influential which failed to develop a full-blown theory of indivisible sovereignty before 1789. Roman constitutional law was far more favourable to local privileges and immunities than the common law of England. Justinian's *quod principi placuit legis habet vigorem* is commonly translated: *What has pleased the prince has the force of law*. This perpetuates in the English-speaking world the convention of Roman law as a mandate for the arbitrary whim of Continental rulers. But Justinian's real purpose was to explain that, along with custom, senate resolutions and magistrates' edicts, the Emperor's pronouncements had
legal force because the people had conferred on him their own sovereignty. Protestant polemical discourse, which had always equated Roman law and Roman Catholicism as twin engines of despotism, triumphed in the nineteenth century and gave a permanently tyrannical tinge to states with Roman legal systems.\(^{65}\)

Equally misleading was the eagerness of twentieth-century historians, especially in countries with command economies, to see "absolutism" as the pioneer of the interventionist state. Colbert and the Great Elector were allegedly attempting to construct a new economic order. Yet since the Dutch Republic was a pioneer of their methods (as of their standing armies), there is arguably little "absolutist" about them. While the well-ordered *Polizei staat* and *Polizeiordnungen* are presented by Gagliardo as promoting princely autocracy, for Raeff they stimulated corporate participation.\(^{66}\)

Nineteenth-century historians viewed "absolutism" and "despotism" as interchangeable terms, conferring a monopoly of power on the ruler and denying his subjects rights and participation. The Oxford English Dictionary still defines "absolutism" as despotism. Not until the 1950s did Mousnier sever "absolutism" from its despotic associations, reflecting Post-War research into the survival of Estates and the partnership of rulers and elites, with rights and liberties as limits on royal power.\(^{67}\) These negate all the features of "absolutism" as defined in the nineteenth century - autocracy, bureaucracy and despotism. This in turn negates the contrast with England.

England was different from the other European states. They were all different from each other. But the similarities, certainly in the Tudor and Stuart periods, were greater than the contrasts. Is it not time an English absolute monarchy, in the closet for so long, was finally "outed"?\(^{68}\)

Like "Renaissance" and "Enlightenment", "absolutism" now means whatever historians want it to mean. But, unlike them, "absolutism" was not a contemporary term. Early modern historians surely have no obligation to continue to wrestle with the meaning of a word which would have gone unrecognised by early modern people. "Absolutism" as a system of government existed only in the nineteenth century - when in the 1850s, for example, all Habsburg representative bodies, central, provincial and local, were abolished by Franz Joseph. Let us relegate "absolutism" to the age of Metternich for which it was minted. Its original definition clearly corresponded to the early modern concept of despotism; but despotism was regarded by early modern people as a malfunction, while "absolutism" defined governmental norms. It now approximates to the reality of early modern government, but only because its original content has been jettisoned. It is confusing to describe a consensual partnership between monarch and community with a word employed until the 1970s to suggest the opposite.

Rabb claimed in 1975 that stability was restored to early modern Europe after the "General Crisis" by "the conclusive establishment of the structure that is recognisable as the modern state, organised around an impersonal, centralised and unifying system of government, resting on law, bureaucracy and force" - in short, on the basis of "absolutism". Hardly a syllable of this survives recent research. Monarchy is nothing if not personal. A society in which men owed allegiance to families and individuals rather than an impersonal institutions was incapable of bureaucracy. Louis XIV's France was not centralised, it was not under direct state control and its laws were not unified. Harmony was established by consensus, not by force. Rabb now appears to have been right about the fact of stability and wrong about everything else. That is how swiftly the picture has changed in the twenty years since he wrote. That is how far quite recent views of "absolutism" are out of step with the scholarship of the last two decades.

The concept, as Hexter said of the Tudor middle class, has the rigour of an elastic band. It conflates regimes with widely differing representative arrangements. Austria, where Estates continued, is equated with Savoy, where they vanished. This in turn is identified with Russia, where they never existed. "Absolutism" is an impressive excuse for sloppy thinking - which is why it will probably continue to be popular.

\(^{65}\) Clark, Language of Liberty (above n. 4), pp. 64-77.
\(^{67}\) Hartung/Mousnier, Quelques problèmes (above n. 1), pp. 7f.