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0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

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General introduction

‘Absolute monarchy’, dynasticism and the standing army

By 1693, the *annus mirabilis* of French battlefield victories in the seventeenth century, the army of Louis XIV was the largest organised military force Europe had ever seen. That year troop numbers topped 400,000 men on paper, and even in reality the army stood at about 320,000 men. It would not be surpassed in size either in France or in any other part of the continent until the republic which supplanted the Bourbon monarchy mobilised the country for another bout of coalition warfare one hundred years later.

At the very core of this book are three basic questions: how did the regime of Louis XIV create and fashion an army of such vast size out of the ramshackle forces which the ministries of Richelieu and Mazarin, lasting from 1624 to 1661, had bequeathed to him? Why, over the next forty years, did the army take the shape that it did? And what can a study of the army tell us about the nature of French government in the second half of the seventeenth century? At first glance these questions might appear quite simple. But one cannot hope to answer them by reference merely to the institutional development of the army and the War Ministry, as most scholars have hitherto tried to do. When combined with a ‘statist’ outlook on the course of French history, this approach has distorted our picture of the army, and allowed its history in this period to be characterised as the onward march of a bureaucratic machine accompanied by the marginalising of the nobility.

Without question Louis XIV’s government implemented numerous procedural reforms to the army, which sometimes took several decades to refine and which were not always successful. And I will advance fresh ideas about the relative importance and consequences of some of these changes. But we must also recognise that the French army of the seventeenth century was moulded by a complex interaction of political, social, economic and cultural forces. Most importantly, the development of the army was shaped primarily not by an agenda of ‘modernisation’ and ‘rationalisation’ but by the private interests of thousands of members of the propertied elite, from the monarch down to the humble provincial nobility and urban bourgeois. Louis XIV himself used the army to advance his legitimate and illegitimate progeny, to build support for the ruling Bourbon line, and to disrupt the traditional patterns of patronage and clientage which had contributed so much to the instability of France between 1559 and 1661. In its very essence Louisquatorzian France was a dynastic state.

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General introduction*

Rinterpreting the development of the French army under Louis XIV requires a number of imaginative steps. First, there has to be a jettisoning of *étatiste* assumptions about the growth of the state and related sociological notions about ‘state-building’, which imply that rulers consciously thought in those terms. Second, historians must engage with the recent publications of several British and American scholars on high politics and on provincial France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It is inevitably difficult to place a study of a national institution which had the trappings of a separate corporate Order, and which (supposedly) contained no women within its ranks, in a wider historiographical context of research on class relations, provincial government and the court, but a serious effort must be made. This way we are likely to learn more about both the army and French society in general. Third, the army and the development of the state as a whole must be placed within a broader cultural understanding of human behaviour, personal and political conduct, and family relationships. This book is written with the firm conviction that explaining the development of the French army requires a historian to study more than just the army itself.

‘ABSOLUTISM’ AND ‘ABSOLUTE MONARCHY’

The basic consensus that has emerged among Anglo-Saxon historians of France rejects the traditional depiction of Louis XIV’s ‘personal rule’ as the expression of an authoritarian, bureaucratic and centralising regime. Instead, there is now broad agreement that the ‘success’ of Louis XIV’s reign after 1661 owed much to a conscious royal determination to be far more sensitive to the interests and aspirations of the social elites. Beyond this, however, serious disagreements remain. Hitherto the debate has been conducted by reference to the high politics at the royal court, or to the nature of power in the outlying provinces of the kingdom. Examining the army, a ‘national’ institution, will inevitably provide a different perspective.

The first blast of the revisionist trumpet came from Roger Mettam, in a 1967 Cambridge Ph.D. thesis inspired by the controversial Alfred Cobban, which justifiably rebelled against the idea that the high aristocracy was marginalised under Louis XIV, locked up in the great gilded cage of Versailles and allowed out only on carefully controlled excursions to lead the armies. Twenty years later, Mettam grafted onto his discovery that certain elements of the high aristocracy wielded significant authority and influence as provincial governors, the fact that the most socially exalted families of the realm also played a major and meaningful political role at court. His lasting contribution has been to force historians to take the upper echelons of French society under Louis XIV seriously.¹ Unfortunately, in the spirit of the 1960s, his

¹ R. Mettam, ‘The Role of the Higher Aristocracy in France under Louis XIV, with Special Reference to the “Faction of the Duke of Burgundy” and the Provincial Governors’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge, 1967); R. Mettam, *Government and Society in Louis XIV’s France* (London, 1977); R. Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford, 1988).

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Absolute monarchy', dynasticism and the army*

thesis ridiculed those nobles who served in the army as anachronistic dinosaurs, and his later books gave the army little attention as a socio-political institution through which the wider society might support the Bourbon state. The most worrying aspect of his work, though, is the relentless argument that very little changed between the regimes of Richelieu and Mazarin, on the one hand, and that of Louis XIV on the other. Mettam takes his argument that Louis governed in a highly traditional manner too far, mistaking the king's style for the substance of power. Indeed, by ignoring vast reams of evidence, he comes perilously close to arguing that the Sun King did *not* establish a more powerful monarchy, and countless scholars have felt unable to accept his conclusions.² Something, surely, must have changed for the army to expand four-fold, for the navy to be created almost from scratch, for the king to defy Rome with the support of most of the church, and for the royal revenues to increase dramatically after 1661. In large part the drawbacks of Mettam's work can be attributed to an excessive concentration on high political manoeuvring, and inadequate exploration of the means and procedures by which royal orders were carried out in a variety of arenas. There is a singular failure to convey the depth of regulation in provincial government – and in the church and the armed forces – which was imposed by Louis XIV.

A concern with political power also dominates the work of Sharon Kettering, whose studies of patronage and clientage indicate the vertical ties which could bind people of differing social and economic circumstances (though such links existed largely within the nobility).³ Her books and articles have provided a fuller picture of the sociology of power in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century France, and have heavily modified the ideas of Roland Mousnier and others about the practice of clientage which pervaded the French state. She also naturally emphasised considerable political divergence within the elites which made a united front in the face of common threats hard to sustain. Yet Kettering's work is founded upon research into mainly one province – Provence – which continued to enjoy a degree of autonomy as a *pays d'états* and where several institutions provided arenas for political conflict. Moreover, though her work is first-rate for the first half of the seventeenth century, her treatment peters out after the death of Mazarin. Unfortunately this leaves her preliminary interpretations of Louis XIV's 'personal rule' open to serious question. In contrast to Mettam, Kettering seems to hold the belief, still shared by some historians, that the great nobility were a spent force after 1661, and she implies strongly that they had become dispensable in government by 1700. She argues that

² Mettam argues that the key to the reign was Louis's governing through a 'king's faction'. This issue will be considered in the Conclusion, pp. 341–9.

³ Most notably, see S. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1986); S. Kettering, 'The Decline of Great Noble Clientage during the Reign of Louis XIV', *Canadian Journal of History* 24 (1989), 157–77; S. Kettering, 'The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Noblewomen', *Historical Journal* 32 (1989), 817–41; S. Kettering, 'Brokerage at the Court of Louis XIV', *Historical Journal* 36 (1993), 69–87.

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General introduction*

they declined in importance as natural military figureheads and as patrons and clientage brokers in the army.⁴ Such an argument will be met head on later in this book.

Alongside these important works on the business of political power stands a debate anchored more firmly in social and economic relations. Highly acclaimed, but problematic in its own way, is William Beik's influential study of Languedoc between 1628 and 1685, which claimed that compromise, overt cooperation and reciprocity between crown and elites after 1661 led to domestic peace, regular and untroubled tax-collection and a strong bond of loyalty to the king.⁵ He also made the valid point, followed up by Jay Smith,⁶ that a change in the royal style, to stress the personal bonds between prince and subjects, did much to restore the confidence of the provincial elites in the crown.⁷ Unsurprisingly, given the province concerned, the high aristocracy emerge with little credit, as Gaston d'Orléans, the prince de Conti and, after 1664, the duc de Verneuil were either feckless or relatively inactive as governors. But this does give the impression that France was governed through a neat, single channel of influence, dominated by a 'royal faction' in Languedoc, with a monolithic centre of power in the king's council. This was far from the case with respect to many other provinces or 'national' aspects of government, such as the armed forces.⁸

Most questionable, however, is Beik's Marxist view of the state as a tool of the ruling classes, which functioned badly under Richelieu and Mazarin before matters greatly improved under Louis XIV: class solidarity, based on the relationship of members of society to the means of production, looms large in his argument. The state was only *relatively* autonomous of society, and the strong implication of Beik's work is that Louis XIV's France is best seen as a country where the landed elites controlled vast parts of the state in their own economic interest. However, first, one cannot see Languedoc as typical of France: it is unsurprising that the king tended to 'ally' with members of the institutional and landed elites in this province, because other groups present elsewhere, notably the various sorts of royal financial officials, were absent here. Second, Beik's exploitative elite in Languedoc were not, contrary to the impression he gives and the assumption he openly makes, representative of the whole propertied elite, nor by any means a majority of it, but consisted of several small groups of office-holders and members of the estates, operating in various provincial institutions. He casts the net of social support for 'absolutism' too narrowly, and does not examine the monarchy's desire to uphold the rights

⁴ Kettering, 'The Decline of Great Noble Clientage', 165–6; Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients*, pp. 10, 207–24: she allows for continued noble clientage within the royal army under Louis XIV, but devotes no attention to it (pp. 221–2).

⁵ W. Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France. State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁶ See below, p. 20.

⁷ Beik, *Absolutism and Society*, pp. 304–7. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Absolute monarchy', dynasticism and the army*

and privileges of the smaller property-holders.⁹ The rejection of Mousnier's crude model of vertical social solidarity based around the defence of privilege against the encroaching state does not have to entail belief in the fundamental pervasiveness of class-based social conflict. Nor should one set the social point of 'class division' at a high level on the basis of ideological conviction. Moreover, social conflict on the basis of economic relations requires a strong degree of consciousness among contemporaries that it exists. But humans have, and always have had, a mass of different interests and solidarities which guide them – family, personal ambition or lack of it, vocation, friendship and sense of obligation, gender, religion, language and 'nation'.¹⁰

A more subtle Marxist approach comes from David Parker, who, in a series of articles and books, has argued that much of the apparent 'centralisation' undertaken by the crown was in response to appeals from members of the elites, or stemmed from a royal desire to satisfy their interests. This position is most clearly articulated in his analysis of the development of the legal system in the seventeenth century. Parker sets his work within the context of a basic class struggle for the control of material resources, but his definition of class is based not simply upon economic circumstances: he leans heavily on Gramsci's notion of class 'hegemony', which also recognised political, legal, social, cultural and ideological dimensions to power relations.¹¹ There is a great deal to be said for this approach, though it is still open to challenge as overly schematic and takes insufficient account of the position of economically secure but politically impotent sections of society, who also had a stake in order and effective royal justice. Moreover, Parker tends to see competition for resources, which were generated and sustained by the populace, as an end in itself rather than a means to enhance a non-economic goal – the enhancement of family status. The other significant problem with such an approach, however, is this: the moment you concede that class is defined by more than just economic position it becomes, in an *ancien régime* setting in particular, very difficult to talk about *any* form of class solidarity – for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France was a tessellated society, divided by myriad factors. Could the state, in such circumstances, really be said to be serving the interests of a ruling class hegemony in the Marxist sense?

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 176. By contrast, Hilton Root, in his study of the crown and the peasantry in Burgundy, one of the other *pays d'états* along with Languedoc, shows how the crown defended the communal traditions and property rights of the peasantry from noble encroachments, albeit to secure easier governance of the province: *Peasants and King in Burgundy. Agrarian Foundations of French Absolutism* (London, 1987), pp. 3, 9–10, 17, 34–44.

¹⁰ In a subsequent work, Beik acknowledges that the 'middling sort' were important in towns, below the administrative elite, but he suggests an exaggerated opposition between the male elites, on one side, and women, children and servants, whatever their situation, on the other: see W. Beik, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France. The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 19–26. The term 'nation' in the early modern period tended to define people by their common language.

¹¹ D. Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France. The Road to Modernity?* (London, 1996); D. Parker, 'Sovereignty, Absolutism and the Function of the Law in Seventeenth-Century France', *Past and Present* 122 (1989), 36–74.

Cambridge University Press
 0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and
 Private Interest, 1661-1701
 Guy Rowlands
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

General introduction

The most convincing variant on the ‘cooperation and compromise’ view of Louis XIV’s regime comes from James Collins, whose study of Brittany between 1532 and 1675 provides a vital corrective to the more sweeping and polemical of Beik’s claims. He plays up the continued importance of a ‘Society of Orders’, which makes class too blunt an instrument of analysis for early modern France, and by reference to the 1695 *Capitation* tax rolls he demonstrates that most nobles were not part of an economic ruling class, nor did they occupy an equivalent political position. Yet, as Collins reveals, the range of people with an interest in upholding order in society stretched from bishops and peers down to small shopkeepers, artisan masters, and, in the countryside, to ploughmen, all of whom had a stake in stability and the propertied world but who were not part of any ruling elite. This applied also to their families, and even to many of their employees and dependants. Most critically, Collins shows that even a common identity of interest within the better-off sections of society was thwarted by the differing nature of their property and their relationship to the fiscalism imposed on the province. Most obviously, the state and the nobility were competitors for the extraction of the agricultural surplus produced by the peasantry: the one demanded land taxes, while the others sought to maximise their income from renting out land and, to a lesser extent, from enforcing feudal dues. Only the minority of noble families active in the major provincial institutions benefited from royal permission to share in the revenues generated for the king in Brittany. The dominant ‘class’ across France was composed of a small elite *within* the *seigneurs*, not the nobility as a whole.¹²

For James Collins, and to a significant extent for me, the issues of the distribution of political power, obedience and the nature of sovereignty lie at the heart of questions about ‘absolute monarchy’. In a refutation of Marxist standpoints, Collins has already stressed the need to focus on this point:

Absolutism was not a system of government nor was it a simple process of state-building: absolutism was the belief that the king had absolute authority to make *positive* law. The monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was ‘absolutist’ only in the sense that it constantly sought to rule France by means of promulgated laws, thus placing political discourse in the area of unimpeded royal authority.¹³

Using the justification of indivisible sovereign power, Louis XIV’s aggressive intervention in the kingdom’s customary traditions was manifested in other ways as well: legal status and privileges were held to derive their legitimacy solely from the king, a message rammed home in the *recherche de noblesse* of the late 1660s.¹⁴ In the army, Louis was particularly anxious to reassert the king’s right to appoint whomsoever he wished to positions of command, whether a humble *sous-lieutenant* in an infantry regiment, or the general-in-chief of an entire field force. He was also concerned

¹² J. Collins, *Classes, Estates and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge, 1994). ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ On the *recherches*, see J. Wood, *The Nobility of the Election of Bayeux, 1463–1666. Continuity through Change* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 20–42.

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Absolute monarchy', dynasticism and the army*

with re-establishing order through the issuing of regulations, exhortations to obedience and rewards for service, and through the supply of adequate funding for his forces. This was part and parcel of the 'absolutist' agenda of controlling taxation, promulgating legislation, and declaring and waging war without encountering any serious hindrance or opposition from other institutions or individuals in the realm.

There is much to commend this analysis, but we must, of course, take into account several factors which qualify the 'absolutist' picture. First, as argued throughout this book, Louis had to compromise at many levels with government officials and military officers to achieve anything. Second, a great deal of what is nowadays considered to be the 'state', and on which Louis had to rely, was, in the late seventeenth century, still in private hands. This was especially the case with royal finances. Because so many of the upper elites invested in tax-farmers and other financiers, the crown therefore depended upon the high aristocracy to provide much of the backing for the state's activities.¹⁵ Third, one must acknowledge that, however exalted the claims made by Louis XIV and his propagandists, both Mettam and Collins are almost certainly correct that his regime after 1675 faced passive resistance and disobedience from elite and *canaille* alike, notably deliberate evasion of regulations, fraud and smuggling when it suited them.

But much of the tranquillity of the country stemmed from a shift in *mentalités*. After 1661 the French were living in a very different political culture where overt defiance of authority, especially of the king, was rapidly becoming unacceptable. It was an environment in which 'absolute monarchy' could appear to flourish because actual opposition was anathema to most members of the elite.¹⁶ At the very heart of the change in moral values was the belief that people – especially nobles serving in the army – should subjugate themselves to the supreme authority, and that the *grands* should bow to the will of the king in all matters. Louis XIV was fortunate in that the ethos of non-resistance, 'politesse' and 'honnêteté' was beginning, in the decade or so after the Frondes (1648–53), to gain a grip on the imaginations of the upper echelons of French society. To appreciate the change in cultural attitudes one needs to be aware of the emergence in the first half of the seventeenth century of a powerful strain of conduct literature which sought to prescribe a reformed ideal of the nobleman.¹⁷ Complementing the printed word and the theatrical play,

¹⁵ On the financial system, see the brilliant work by Daniel Dessert: *Argent, pouvoir et société au Grand Siècle* (Paris, 1984).

¹⁶ Contrast this with the previous hundred years: A. Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte. La noblesse française et la gestation de l'Etat moderne, 1559–1661* (Paris, 1989), esp. pp. 391–9 on the post-1661 era.

¹⁷ The issue of 'politesse', 'honnêteté', the 'honnête homme' and courtesy has been tackled by a number of cultural historians and *littérateurs*. The best works are: M. Magendie, *La politesse mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté, en France, au XVIIe siècle, de 1600 à 1660* (Paris, 1925); and, on England, where courtesy and civility were becoming slightly more abstract concepts, see A. Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility. Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1998). Original works of literature which stand out are: N. Faret, *L'honnête homme, ou l'art de plaire à la court,*

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General introduction*

the appearance of several dozen academies for the education and refinement of the young nobility served to instil these new codes of conduct in the wealthier members of this Order.¹⁸

The changes in French society which resulted over the course of the *Grand Siècle* had ramifications for both high politics and the behaviour of the regimental officers of the French army, but it took time for the new messages to filter through. In 1643, at the time of the accession of the four-year-old Louis XIV, France was, in the words of a recent thesis, ‘a society that still subscribed to a warrior aristocratic culture that stressed individual autonomy and independence’.¹⁹ For well over a decade, voices had been calling for a reformed ethical order, and there were already signs that the values they promoted were beginning to permeate noble society during the reign of Louis XIII. However, the high aristocracy and ordinary nobles alike found themselves increasingly forced to reflect on the idea of honour and on the nature of their conduct. The concept of heroism came under scrutiny in the 1650s owing to the Grand Condé’s rebellion and the unacceptable rabble-rousing of the duc de Beaufort, ‘le roi des Halles’. Because civility was already being encouraged in society, the treason of Condé – the hero of Rocroi and Lens – and his subsequent massacre of notables in Paris, was consequently all the more shocking. It became no longer good enough to prize one’s moral independence and to pursue personal ‘gloire’ in the king’s service, not even if one were a prince of the blood. Such attitudes had unleashed the forces of irrationality and had led to armed treason against the crown, a course of action which was decidedly neither heroic nor ‘honnête’.

Self-discipline, restraint, politeness, constancy and dedication to the king emerged as the cornerstones of a reformed ethical order to which one had to subscribe. In the words of David Parker, ‘the heroic assertion of the will so vividly portrayed in the great tragedies of Corneille slowly gave way to a noble stoicism which could be portrayed as a form of virtue’.²⁰ These ideas were all pushed forcefully by Louis XIV in a revived royal court from the mid-1650s;²¹ and it was in large part a desire to emulate the ‘bon ton’ of courtiers that encouraged the spread of

ed. M. Magendie (Paris, 1925), originally published 1630, 1631, 1633, 1636, 1639, 1640, 1656, 1658, 1660, 1664, 1681; J. de Callières, *La fortune des gens de qualité, et des gentils-hommes particuliers* (Paris, 1658, and further editions); A. de Courtin, *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes hommes* (Paris, 1670, and further editions); J. Trotti de La Chétardie, *Instructions pour un jeune seigneur, ou, l'idée d'un galant homme*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1683, and further editions).

¹⁸ On the academies and noble education, see chapter 6, pp. 178–86.

¹⁹ J. Inglis-Jones, ‘The Grand Condé in Exile: Power Politics in France, Spain and the Spanish Netherlands’ (D. Phil. dissertation, Oxford, 1994), p. 40.

²⁰ M. Bannister, ‘Crescit ut aspicitur: Condé and the Reinterpretation of Heroism, 1650–1662’, in K. Cameron and E. Woodrough, eds., *Ethics and Politics in Seventeenth-Century France. Essays in Honour of Derek A. Watts* (Exeter, 1996), pp. 119–28; Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France*, pp. 144–9, an excellent section on the shift in attitudes.

²¹ Saint-Maurice, vol. I, p. 197: Saint-Maurice to Carlo Emanuele II, 1 June 1668. See also the acclaimed work by Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 111, 238–9.

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'Absolute monarchy', dynasticism and the army*

notions of civility and 'honnêteté' among the wider elites.²² With the assistance of conduct literature specifically on military officership, which has never received serious attention from historians, the new ethos spread gradually into the army, though the pace of behavioural reform was slow. How these changes affected matters will be considered in chapter 8,²³ but here it is worth remarking that impetuous and apparently irrational armed behaviour lost a great deal of its earlier respectability, reflected in the greater caution urged on shock troops, such as grenadiers, during combat after 1661. The last time nobles en masse put personal 'gloire' above collective duty to the monarchy and the rest of the army came in 1672 at the crossing of the Rhine, where the deaths of a number of youthful *grands* such as Longueville earned the noble *jeunesse* the grave displeasure of the king. And by 1688 influence over subordinate nobles within the state and the quality of one's personal service to the monarch, conducted with probity and obedience, now counted far more than the possession of large, semi-private, military entourages.

THE DYNASTIC STATE

So far historians have continued to discuss the *ancien régime* in terms of the ability of the state to enforce its will on society, and the willingness of society to accept impositions and interference from above. The enforcement and reception of political authority is an important aspect of historical enquiry, and one which legitimately continues to attract attention. The main protagonists in seventeenth-century France did not, however, view matters exclusively in this way – theirs was a world dominated by dynasticism rather more than by concern about 'absolute monarchy'. Yet, this all-pervasive concern has been absent from most work published in the last two hundred years. Family history has been relegated to the sidelines, in biographies or in case studies of a particular noble house, when it should have been placed centre-stage.

Fundamentally, the early modern French state possessed interests of its own which related both to the means of production, distribution and exchange, and to international geopolitical forces.²⁴ To see it standing above society would be too crude, for it was itself an agent and player, although the king's authority was principally exercised on his behalf by members of the propertied elites. But the state had the potential and desire, which it occasionally realised, to be autonomous of the 'dominant classes' in society, and it behaved in such a way because private interest was present at the very apex of public power. Peter Campbell's definition of France

²² On social emulation, see G. Rowlands, 'The Ethos of Blood and Changing Values? *Robe, Épée* and the French Armies, 1661 to 1715', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 19 (1997), 95–108.

²³ See pp. 232–8.

²⁴ See T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, 1979), esp. pp. 24–33, 51–64.

Cambridge University Press

0521641241 - The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661-1701

Guy Rowlands

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General introduction*

in the years *c.* 1600–1760 as a ‘baroque state’ is perhaps the most helpful characterisation by any scholar thus far:

This state was a socio-political entity, whose structures were interwoven with society, which it tried to rise above but with which it inevitably had to compromise. It endowed itself with grandiose schemes, indulged in flamboyant display, but retained most of those *trompe-l'oeil* features that promised more than they could deliver.²⁵

In my view, Campbell is absolutely right, though such a depiction privileges appearance and spectacle over the promotion of private interest, which was the dominant characteristic of the state in this era.

The first three Bourbon monarchs, in essence, saw themselves not as participants in class struggle, but as engaged in the domestic sphere upon the reimposition of order, the protection of property rights (even if circumstances forced them into transgressions of this principle) and the upholding of particular family interests. Certainly rulers would have recognised that this agenda tended to maintain the socio-economic status quo, and both Henri IV and Louis XIV acted in a manner to convince the nobility that the state was the arena for their activity.²⁶ But such conservatism was tempered by other considerations, foremost among which was the wealth and status of the kingdom as a whole on the international chequerboard.²⁷ The *end goal* in all this was to strengthen the hold of the Bourbon dynasty on the realm and enhance its prestige on the international stage. The monarchy had interests of its own which might well diverge from those of the social elites, and it did not shrink when truly necessary from trying to uphold them, no matter what obstruction was thrown up.²⁸

The justification for this came in shifting contemporary (as opposed to modern) notions of what the state actually was and what role the prince played. As Herbert Rowen so clearly demonstrated, there was a tension at the heart of notions surrounding kingship: did the ruler own the state and rights to wield power, or was kingship an office held in trust, to be exercised for the benefit of the people? By looking at practice as well as theory, Rowen showed how the kings of France from the fifteenth century came to see the throne as endowing them with the possession of inalienable rights granted by necessity and by Providence. Aspects of French allodial custom were being elevated to the status of constitutional thought, and the power of the prince was further reinforced by the theories of indivisible sovereignty put

²⁵ P. Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Régime France 1720–1745* (London, 1996), p. 4.

²⁶ Louis XIII undoubtedly felt the same but his reign, and the minority of his son, temporarily convinced many nobles they were being frozen out of the state.

²⁷ It is hard not to believe that Colbert and Louis XIV realised an aggressive mercantilist policy would disturb the social and economic status quo in France, but comfort could be taken from the ways of Providence which shaped and guided a ‘Great Chain of Being’.

²⁸ Had Beik decided to take his study beyond 1685 and into the Nine Years War and the War of the Spanish Succession, he would have been confronted with this unavoidable truth: see, e.g., SHAT A¹ 3780, no. 380: Louvois to Bâville, 18 Nov. 1690.