

The Ancien Regime: A History of France, 1610-1774

Review Number:

10

Publish date:

Friday, 1 November, 1996

Author:

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

ISBN:

9780631211969

Date of Publication:

1996

Price:

£26.99

Pages:

608pp.

Publisher:

Blackwell

Publisher url:

<http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0631211969.html>

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Laurence Brockliss

This book is an English translation by Mark Greengrass of a work first published in French in 1991 and is the companion volume to the author's earlier *The Royal French State 1460-1610* (original French edn. 1987). Together the two books comprise the second and third volumes of Blackwell's five volume *History of France* which covers the period 987 to 1992.

The Royal French State was an innovative and provocative account of French history from the accession of Louis XI to the assassination of Henri IV. Above all, it was notable for introducing historians of early modern Europe to the concept of the 'long seventeenth century'. For thirty years, thanks to the influence of Braudel's *Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (original French edn. 1949), historians had been accustomed to see the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries as a period of steady demographic and economic growth followed in turn by a century of stagnation before growth was resumed again in the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, this was a view that Le Roy Ladurie had helped to consolidate himself in his pioneering account of *The Peasants of Languedoc* (original French edn. 1966). The Royal French State offered a significant refinement of the traditional model. Far from there being a lengthy period of growth beginning in the late fifteenth century and petering out between 1590 and 1660 in different parts of Europe, the so-called 'long sixteenth century', the demographic and economic upsurge, in France at least, was limited to the century 1450 to 1550, and the era of stagnation was extended from one century to two. If the early part of the seventeenth century witnessed renewed growth in France, then this reflected the negative economic consequences of the Wars of Religion. It was a case of recuperation, not genuine growth at all.

The volume under review contains no such surprises for the reader. Eschewing controversy, Le Roy Ladurie is content to present a detailed, balanced and engaging account of the political and administrative history of Ancien-Regime France, based on recent French and Anglo-American research. Essentially, the book is an old-fashioned narrative history, built around the lives and activities of the Bourbon kings and their leading ministers. Although economic, social and cultural history is continually introduced into the narrative, they are never allowed to disturb a 'top-down' approach which gives as much weight to foreign policy as state-building. The long seventeenth century hardly makes any appearance at all. Indeed, the image retained is of slow, albeit unbalanced economic growth, throughout the supposedly stagnant era prior to the eighteenth-century. Even the notoriously bad years in the latter part of the reign of Louis XIV are evaluated in a more positive light: if agriculture in the 1690s and 1700s was depressed, the Nimes textile industry and the Levant trade were booming. This, then, is a very unAnnaliste work by a founding-father of the School, who many years ago began to distance himself from its economically deterministic approach in *Montailou* and has now even abandoned its structuralist imperative, refashioning himself as a historian whose loyalties would seem to lie with the Academie as much as the *Colleqe de France*. The work is an obvious riposte to the most important Annaliste account of Bourbon France, Pierre Goubert's and Daniel Roche's hitherto untranslated two-volume *Les Francais et l'Ancien Regime* (1984).

Le Roy Ladurie's transmutation into a historian *à la Lavis* is evident above all by *The Ancien Regime's* generosity of tone. This is not just a 'top-down' account of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France but a work that repeatedly goes out of its way to present the kings and their ministers in the best possible light. Richelieu, Mazarin and Colbert may all have had their fingers very deeply in the till, but they were still the promoters of internal peace and prosperity: *raison d'etat*, centralization and absolutism were means to a good end. Similarly, Louis XIV may have loved war too much, but he was no Napoleon, out to dominate Europe. His foreign-policy ambitions, like those of Richelieu and Mazarin, were always limited; the aim was to strengthen the eastern frontier to prevent a second Year of Corbie, not annex large swathes of the Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire. Even the Regent Orleans and Louis XV are rescued from their detractors. Both may have led scandalous private lives but they wanted to keep France at peace with other European powers and could see the need to balance the books and reconnect state and people after the tension of the latter part of Louis XIV's reign. If Louis XV ended up execrated by the time he died, he was a victim of his own good intentions and nascent public opinion. Suitably repentant of his sexual misdeeds he refused to attend confession and take communion; in consequence, he could not touch for the king's evil and helped to 'desacralize' the French monarchy. Wisely refusing to capitalize on his possession of the Austrian Netherlands at the end of the War of Austrian Succession, he was accused of being unpatriotic by a jingoistic public eager for French expansion. Had the king only had affairs with aristocratic women, the fickle French would have taken him to their hearts! Only the short-lived ministry of the duc de Bourbon, sandwiched between the eras of Cardinals Dubois and Fleury, is not in some way rescued from the criticisms of

contemporaries or historians (Saint-Simon is particularly taken to task for his poisonous pen-portraits). This is definitely a 'warts-and-all' history. Le Roy Ladurie keeps nothing back that might be used by the prosecution: Richelieu was venal, overbearing and ruthless. All the kings and their ministers, however, were battling for France, gradually forging the hexagon, an almost mystical entity whose formation seems preordained. In The Ancien Regime even unsuccessful and costly wars have a silver lining. The War of Spanish Succession put a Bourbon on the Spanish throne and secured the western frontier; the Seven Years War resulted in the retention of the sugar islands, an essential motor of eighteenth-century economic growth; while the War of American Independence brought naval victories (Admiral Rodney's activities go unmentioned!) and liberated the Americans, albeit at the cost of bankruptcy.

The Ancien Regime, then, bends over backwards to be fair to those who shaped the nation's destiny. Its author is a historian of the *juste milieu*. However, Le Roy Ladurie has not sold his soul entirely to the devils of Richelieu's Academie. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century France may not have been the depressing place portrayed by Goubert in *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis* (1960), where most peasants had less than 10 hectares of land and continually struggled to survive, but nor was it the best of all possible worlds, where every villager had his daily chicken in the pot. Beneath the urbane tone of a historian of the establishment can still be heard the radical voice of a man of the left and a man of the south too, a member in his early days of the French Communist party. According to Le Roy Ladurie in a novel and interesting attempt to identify the political *longue duree* of the Ancien Regime, French political history over the three centuries 1460-1774 divides into alternating periods of 'openness' and 'closure'. In periods of openness - the reigns of Charles VII and Louis XII, the first part of the reign of Francis I, the reigns of Henri III and Henri IV, the Orleans Regency, the eras of Fleury and Choiseul - the crown and its ministers ruled with the co-operation and consent, direct or indirect, of the French elite, tended to eschew war, and after the Reformation tolerated religious dissent and allied in the main with the Protestant powers. In periods of closure - the reign of Louis XI, the eras of Richelieu, Mazarin and Louis XIV, and the middle and final years of the reign of Louis XV, dominated by D'Argenson, Maupeou and Terray - the crown was authoritarian, intolerant, tightened the fiscal screw, and from 1661 preferred Catholic to Protestant allies. The descriptive vocabulary itself reveals which of the two Le Roy Ladurie prefers. Although he goes out of his way throughout *The Ancien Regime* to be fair to the absolutists and warmongers, there can be no doubt from the text that his allegiance lies with the quasi-liberals and pluralists (if one can use such terms) who offered an alternative, more Anglo-Saxon vision of France's future. In this respect he echoes the sentiments of another establishment insider, academician Fumaroli, who has recently argued that the mid-seventeenth century guardian of this alternative tradition was Fouquet, removed from office by Louis XIV for ideological and cultural rather than simple personal reasons. Yet Le Roy Ladurie never lets the heart dominate the head. In the eighteenth century, he considers, peace with the leading Protestant power, constitutional and liberal Britain, was not really feasible: the struggle had begun for world dominion and France and Britain were what the British ambassador to Paris, Lord Stair, in 1717 described as 'necessary enemies'.

Le Roy Ladurie's account ostensibly ends in 1774, the point of departure for the next volume in the Blackwell series by Francois Furet. Usefully for the reader, however, *The Ancien Regime* ends with a lengthy conclusion that discusses the reign of Louis XVI and the coming of the Revolution. Here deploying a more analytic framework, the author is able to stand back from the morass of high political fact and offer his considered judgement on the collapse of the absolute state in 1789. The catalyst for the fall of the absolute monarchy was the war with Britain of 1778-83. Although support for the liberal Americans against an increasingly authoritarian Britain is deemed to have been the 'open' thing to have done, involvement cost the French crown 1.5 million livres, mostly borrowed, and completely undid the success of Terray's financial reforms of 1771-4. The long-term causes of the French Revolution, in contrast, are judged to have been straightforwardly Tocquevillian, although Le Roy Ladurie is less than candid in acknowledging this fact. The causes are seen to lie in the erosion of corporatism, the steady growth of the French bureaucratic and absolute state from 1515 (Ladurie believes it had about 100,000 venal and non-venal employees on the eve of the Revolution), and the dissemination of the writings of the philosophes. Together, by 1789, these had created a society 'individualistic and heavily atomized' (p. 475), angered and frustrated by the existing fiscal and career privileges of the nobility, no longer attached to a distant monarch, and indoctrinated in the

'chimeras and more abstract notions' of the Enlightenment, 'all the more readily since, in comparison with England, [the people] were excluded from the solid realities of power' (p. 485). There is no hint here of the long-standing Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. If growing numbers of bourgeois became discontented in the eighteenth century, they only did so as part of a larger politically-conscious and anti-absolutist coalition, alerted to the possibility and opportunities of self-government through the corrosive power of Habermas's burgeoning public sphere. This is an administrative-cultural, 'top-down' account of the collapse of the absolute monarchy that remains deeply indebted to a work first published in 1856.

Of course, Le Roy Ladurie is well aware that the Bourbon state never had the administrative grip that Tocqueville (for his own ideological reasons) supposed, even if he never openly admits that the Ancien Regime was the friend of corporatism, as much as its opponent, albeit for fiscal reasons, as Bossenga's recent study of Lille, *The Politics of Privilege* (1991), so convincingly shows. Nevertheless, the inconvenient fact that Ancien-Regime France was scarcely the modern state *avant la lettre* is never allowed to stand in the way of the general thrust of this interpretation. Describing the process whereby the absolute monarchy lost the affection of the people as one of 'auto-erosion', Le Roy Ladurie admits that the crown post-1750 both fostered equality by its reforms and continued to nurture corporatist divisions. The reader is asked to accept, however, that this only weakened French attachment to corporatism the more. Crown attacks on corporate privileges compromised the authority and status of all corporate bodies, while the beneficiaries of corporatism resented state supervision and interference (p. 476 n). The work is even Tocquevillian in its refusal to accept the gloomy account of the French economy post-1770, which has been a standard part of the history of the Pre-Revolution since the publication of Labrousse's, *La Crise de l'economie française à la fin de l'Ancien Regime* (1943). While accepting that there was a crisis in viticulture around 1780, Le Roy Ladurie insists that there was no general malaise before 1786 or 1788 (p. 491n). This is the ultimate *trahison des clercs*, for it was the Marxist Labrousse rather than Braudel who was the true founder of the *Annales* School after the Second World War and who supervised the research of the generation of early modern French historians to which Ladurie initially belonged.

The Ancien Regime, then, is a particularly fascinating work to the extent it is a measure of the distance which France's most internationally renowned and productive early modernist has travelled in the course of his distinguished career. This assessment should not detract from its value as a work of general history. *The Ancien Regime* is definitely the richest and most satisfying account of the political history of Bourbon France available in English. The translation by Mark Greengrass (himself a French early modernist) is readable and careful and uninformed readers will find the chronological appendix and glossary a useful aid to understanding. As an essentially politico-administrative history of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, it is more engaging than the recently published work of James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France* (1995), if Collins, an Ancien-Regime fiscal historian, is more intelligible on the history of crown finance. As a history of Ancien-Regime France, however, Ladurie's volume will only supplement, not replace, the two volumes of Goubert and Roche. *The Annaliste Les Français et l'Ancien Regime* still remains the most sensitive account of the economy, society, state and culture of Bourbon France. It is scarcely an elegant work and it largely neglects high politics but its analytical approach permits proper weight to be given to the complexity, vitality and uniqueness of the Bourbon realm in all those areas of French life that Ladurie only refers to in passing.

Readers, too, should be wary about accepting the thrust of Ladurie's final chapter without considerable qualification. Like many historians today on both sides of the English Channel, Ladurie has fallen for the convergency theory first developed by Crozet in his comparative study of the English and French economies in the eighteenth century. France, in *The Ancien Regime*, appears as another England, entrepreneurial, dynamic and enlightened, but held back by an inefficient and ineffective absolute monarchy. It is the Revolution which halts the onward march of the French economy not the constraints of the Ancien Regime. In this respect, Ladurie's account is certainly not Tocquevillian! However, as David Parker's brilliant *Class and State in Ancien Regime France: The Road to Modernity?* (1996) reminds us this is a viewpoint based upon highly questionable statistics which defies common-sense (especially ch. 7). In this reviewer's opinion, France was not England in the eighteenth century. It was a highly regulated,

corporative society where entrepreneurial initiative had to fight for space. Many educated Frenchmen in commerce and the professions found this regulated world comfortable and safe - in many ways it was a more caring and cohesive society than England's where the philosophy of 'let the buyer beware' and laissez-faire was deeply entrenched - but others, imbued with the spirit of the liberal Enlightenment, did not. More dynamic, more greedy, they wanted an open, deregulated society which people like themselves would dominate. To the extent that the absolute monarchy in the eighteenth century sustained, indeed continually promoted the corporative regulation of society on the grounds of the public good even (and perhaps especially) in the reign of Louis XVI, the absolute monarchy as much as corporatism was targeted for reform.

The 'rise of the bourgeoisie' cannot be excluded from the history of the French Revolution, for the large majority of the discontented were bourgeois, if their number contained many nobles. It was these people - ambitious lawyers, like Robespierre, hitherto condemned to a professional life of boredom in sleepy Arras who used the opportunity of the calling of the Estates General to gain election to the Third Estate and push the quarrel between crown and parlements in a much more radical direction. By ignoring the powerful grip of corporatism on French life in 1789, both Tocqueville and Le Roy Ladurie play down the extent to which the Revolution was a social event. It was not just an attack on an unpopular monarchical despotism and the remaining, redundant privileges of the nobility and clergy, but an uncompromising onslaught on a cloying corporative order that both protected and policed most of the urban well-to-do as well. Those who wanted to break free from this corporative web became revolutionaries and changed the face of France. They wanted a unitary French state dominated by principles of laissez-faire and in 1790-1 they established a deregulated, individualistic society that Margaret Thatcher two hundred years later could only dream of. In important respects there is much still to be said for the old Marxist view of the French Revolution, suitably refined and extended. In the rush to embrace Tocqueville in the wake of his 'rediscovery' in France by Francois Furet, Ladurie's work suggests that French historians are guilty of neglecting the insights of the tradition of Jaures, Mathiez and Lefebvre.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/10#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/169>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>