Monarchism and Absolutism in Early Modern Europe

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Cesare Cuttica
Glenn Burgess
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R. Malcolm Smuts

The idea of an age of absolutism has lately fallen out of fashion, for several reasons. The word absolutism was coined only in the 19th century and the concept of a generic absolutist model can easily obscure significant differences between various monarchical states. In addition recent work has shown that in practice even the paradigmatic absolutist, Louis XIV, needed to rule in collaboration with the nobility and other privileged groups, rather than as an unrestrained autocrat. But if they did not speak of absolutism, early modern thinkers did often refer to absolute kings and in the 18th century even to enlightened despots. The 14 essays in this collection, which derives from a conference at the University of Sussex, examine various theories of royal power and authority between the 14th and 18th centuries. Rather than seeing absolutism as a unified phenomenon the contributors explore how different varieties of monarchist thought arose and interacted with other concepts of power and authority, as well as with political practice (p. 2). According to the editors, the resulting survey uncovers 'a discourse made up of a plurality of languages: Machiavellian, Tacitean, Bodinian, patriachalist, patriotic, constitutional, royalist, cynic, Hobbesian, Enlightened' (p. 17).

Inevitably some chapters succeed better than others, while the coverage of the vast topic of monarchist thought remains far from exhaustive, raising questions about what has been left out. But there are several solid chapters and interesting perspectives do emerge. In an intriguing essay, Janet Coleman seeks to reconstruct the political thought of Richard II of England and his circle from the charges lodged against him at his deposition. In the Middle Ages the concept of a *res publica* or commonwealth, as it was already rendered in English, did not imply any particular constitutional arrangements. But it was antithetical to the concept of 'tyranny,' defined as government by arbitrary whim rather than law. People did not think kings were bound by a contractual relationship with their people but did believe that royal actions should be

'procedurally channeled by the law of the land and adjusted through wise counsel of top magnate's advisors' (p. 23). In reality it was the magnates who primarily shared power with the king, and Richard's prime offense was to challenge their role by relying on his own circle of intimate companions. He justified his actions by drawing upon civil law doctrines to erect a theory of the supremacy of the king's will, claiming that the laws were in his breast and the lives and estates of the nobility subject to his pleasure. This assertion of royal authority was consistent with what kings were doing elsewhere in Europe and even in England the magnate's attempts to constrain royal power proved unsuccessful in the long run, until 17th-century parliaments revived Lancastrian theories.

None of the other essays picks up the topic of relationships between monarchist thought and the concept of the commonwealth at the point at which Coleman leaves it, in the early 15th century. But Glenn Burgess does return to this theme in an essay focused on the 17th century. He argues that around 1600, 'commonwealth' and *res publica*, were generally understood as designating an ordered community, with no anti-monarchical connotations. But within a few decades this had begun to change. The shift was made possible 'because commonwealth was not a neutral term … it embedded certain values … namely ideals of social justice … and the protection of freedoms and property' (p. 152). This raised the possibility that kings might violate commonwealth ideals, and that the potential for kings to do so rendered monarchy, at best, a deficient form of a commonwealth. A parallel change seems to have occurred with respect to the concept of an 'absolute monarch'. Originally this had simply meant a complete monarch but increasingly some writers associated the phrase with tyranny, a pattern that may have originated in Dutch opposition to the rule of Philip II, who was accused of trying to turn the limited monarchy of the Netherlands into an absolute rule analogous to the monarchy of Castile. Some English writers consciously resisted these changes in meaning, however, welcoming the Restoration as the return of a 'monarchical commonwealth', which they saw as the traditional form of English government, in which the subjects' rights were guaranteed by a King ruling in accord with the law.

Burgess has nothing to say about the role of the nobility in this discussion, and a casual reader might conclude that the connections between magnate power and the concept of a commonwealth that Coleman traces had disappeared by the late Tudor period. But work by John Adamson, Paul Hammer and Richard McCoy, among others, indicates that this was not entirely the case.(1) This collection never explicitly problematizes the historical relationship between aristocratic republicanism in all its guises and monarchical thought, a significant omission. But Johann Sommerville's chapter does throw some light on the subject by arguing that theorists of absolute monarchy including Bodin, Hobbes and Bossuet had no fundamental objection to giving noblemen a privileged role in the practical operation of the state, any more than they objected in principle to institutions like representative assemblies or courts of law. Their concern was to establish the king's absolute sovereignty, rather than to prescribe the form a monarchical state should assume in its day-to-day operation. These thinkers never advocated bureaucratic centralization, large standing armies or the subordination of noblemen to paid royal officials, which historians used to regard as characteristics of absolutism. This is an important point, though one that leaves unanswered the question of whether some other body of thought existed that did promote such innovations, another issue that none of the essays directly confronts.

Two additional contributions examine patriarchal theories of royal power. Gaby Mahlberg argues that although seventeenth century republicans were not necessarily opposed in principle to monarchy they did consistently object to 'a concrete brand of Stuart divine-right monarchy that claimed to be naturally derived from fatherhood and in which the power of kings and fathers was seen as identical' (p. 48). Although tracing dissent over such claims back to the late 1620s, she concentrates on the anti-patriarchalist writings of Algernon Sidney and Henry Neville. Cesare Cuttica compares the 'patriarchalist absolutism' of Sir Robert Filmer with the 'Machiavellian absolutism' of Jean Louis Guez de Balzac and the 'Hobbesian absolutism' of Cardin le Bret. These three theorists, all writing in the 1630s, agreed in wanting to elevate royal sovereignty and power but supported this position in significantly different ways.

Cuttica introduces another related theme when he writes that 'by representing the ruler as *pater patriae*, Filmer turned the monarch into the first patriot that is into a *patriot king*' (p. 134) and then adds that

patriotism also provided the starting point for Balzac's *Le Prince*. The need to defend the fatherland and its vital interests from enemies and adverse fortune provided Balzac with a rationale for elevating the King's discretionary powers and 'prudence' above the normal laws of justice. Although Le Bret apparently did not explicitly invoke the concept of patriotism, he also saw the Prince as 'the vital breath that set in motion the body politic' (p. 141). Somewhat surprisingly, we therefore find 'absolute' royal power defended through a terminology and set of values often associated with republican resistance to tyranny, as in the Dutch revolt against Spain and later in the American and French Revolutions.

Two additional chapters extend this discussion while focusing on the 18th century. Lazló Kontler shows how the Austrian academic theorist Joseph von Sonnenfels justified Austrian monarchy by its administrative competence and supposed rationality, which allegedly promoted the welfare of the country and its people, justifying patriotic dedication to the ruler. Sonnenfels shared a wider Enlightenment interest in empirical knowledge and practical reform. He believed in the possibility of creating a 'science of the state' that would reconcile competing individual interests to the public good, while providing for the security and prosperity of the citizenry. Among other reforms he wanted to establish homes for unwed mothers to discourage infanticide, a 'commission of public morals' to censor the press and oversee education and a board of public health. But he was convinced that the best way to achieve these measures was through the 'enlightened despotism' of an all-powerful ruler, who would harness and direct the energies of his subjects for the common good. Montesquieu was wrong in thinking that patriotic virtue could only flourish in republics, he argued; a benevolent and rational monarch would be more effective in promoting love and devotion to the nation.

Broadly similar ideas seem to have inspired an appeal by the Danish crown to its subjects to devise proposals for economic improvement for presentation to the King on his birthday in 1755. This episode provides the starting point for Henrik Horstboll's discussion of three Danish writers and pedagogues, Jens Schielderup Neerdorff, Andreas Schytte and Frederik Sneedorff. J. S.Neerdoff, founded an academy for the moral and practical education of Danish nobles in 1747, and ten years later published a refutation of John Locke's attack on absolute monarchy in *On Civil Government*. According to Neerdoff absolute monarchy was the original form of Gothic government, rooted in a fundamental bond of trust between ruler and people natural to Germanic peoples. Schytte succeeded Neerdoff at his Academy, giving lectures on civil government, which he eventually published in eight volumes. He shared the elder Neerdoff's admiration for absolute monarchy but believed that the prince should be guided by various advisory councils and, ultimately, by 'public opinion'. By contrast J. S. Neerdoff's son, Frederick, became an admirer of the American republic and a student of revolutions, who advocated the spread of liberty, toleration and secularism. The comparison shows how a common concern for such 18th century values as education, rationality and the importance of public opinion might develop within either 'absolutist' or a republican and revolutionary frameworks. This cluster of essays suggests that the history of patriotism and its relation to both monarchist and republican thought might be another fruitful avenue for future research.(2)

In the remaining chapters Edward Vallance reconstructs the Presbyterian and Parliamentarian background of the 1650s royalist publicist Robert Sherringham, as a warning against expecting too much consistency in political allegiance in mid 17th–century England. John Christian Laursen examines the seemingly improbable influence of Cynic philosophy on certain strains of monarchist thought, especially in the work of Johann Friedrich Struense, Prime Minister of Denmark in 1770–2. Girolamo Imbruglia looks at Jansenist influences on political thought in Naples in the 1760s, while Michael Seidler provides a detailed reconstruction of Pufendorf's theory of the state. Ioannis Evrigenis furnishes a detailed comparison of Rousseau's and Hobbes's views on the state of nature, while Luisa Simonutti discusses Bayle's views on 16th–century monarchomach political thought and the *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*. The final essay by Tim Hochstrasser discusses Denis Diderot's friendship with the sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet and views about the political importance of monumental statues.

This collection does show the variety of philosophical 'languages' through which writers articulated views of monarchy but for this reader it also raised questions about whether enumerating languages is the best way

of sorting through the thicket of early modern political thought. It seems potentially more useful to identify major concepts and conceptual problems that interested numerous thinkers over extended periods of time. As I have suggested, two of these – the concepts of the commonwealth and patriotism – emerge from comparing the essays here assembled. The idea of the state of nature and the pursuit of rational systems of social improvement through political reform also suggest themselves as potential organizing themes in some of the chapters. Except for Seidler and a brief section in Sommerville's chapter, none of the contributors devotes much attention to concepts of the state, although this word had already attained a prominent place in Europe's political vocabulary by the late 16th century. Apart from Hochstrasser the contributors also ignore the role of the visual arts, court ceremony and performative genres like ballet and opera in projecting ideas about monarchy and monarchs. But despite such lacunae – inevitable in any one-volume collection – there is much of interest in these essays.

Notes

1. See for example John Adamson, *The Noble Revolt: The Overthrow of Charles I* (London, 2007); Paul Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585–1597* (Cambridge, 1999); Richard McCoy, 'Old English nonour in an evil time: aristocratic principle in the 1620s' in *The Stuart Court and Europe: Essays in Politics and Political Culture*, ed. R. Malcolm Smuts (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 133–55 .Back to (1)
2. For three other recent essays addressing this topic see Peter Arnade, 'The city defeated and defended. civism as political identity in the Habsburg-Burgundian Netherlands,' Alastair Duke, 'In defence of the Common Fatherland. Patriotism and liberty in the Low Countries, 1555–1576,' and Robert von Friedeburg, '"Lands" and "Fatherlands". Change in the plurality of allegiance in the sixteenth century Holy Roman Empire,' in *Networks, Regions and Nations: Shaping Identities in the Low Countries, 1300–1650*, ed. Robert Stein and Judith Pollman (Leiden and Boston, 2010), pp. 195–216, 217–240 and 263–82.Back to (2)

The editors wish to thank the reviewer and do not feel the need to respond.

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