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Yves-Marie BercÖ©. *The Birth of Absolutism: A History of France, 1598-1661.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. viii + 262 pp. $42.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-15807-1; $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-15800-2.

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Monarchy Triumphant

The Birth of Absolutism is organized in fifteen chapters. The first twelve (pp. 1-192) deal principally with political, and to some degree, economic history, in chronological order from 1598 to 1661; the last three chapters (pp. 193-245) treat "Hopes and Beliefs," "Artistic Life," and "Material Life," in a summary fashion, and with less chronological organization.

Berce moves beyond his earlier studies of peasant and tax revolts (e.g., *History of Peasant Revolts* [trans., 1990]; *Revolt and Revolution in Early Modern Europe* [trans., 1987]) to provide us with a concise introduction to the triumph of royal absolutism in seventeenth-century France. In a most readable translation by a young British historian, this book should serve well as a text for courses on early modern Europe, and as a stimulating new study for scholars in the field of French history.

Important caveats enrich Berce's discussion, which spans the years from 1598–the year of both the Edict of Nantes, granting toleration to Protestants, and the Treaty of Vervins, bringing a period of peace between France and Spain–to 1661, the beginning of Louis XIV's direct rule (Louis XIV [b. 1638] had been monarch since 1643, but a regent and/or prime minister actually wielded power between 1643 and 1661). Berce rightly cautions that the reign of Henry IV (1589-1610) was imagined as a "golden age" more with hindsight than at the time. While Henry was monarch, "there seemed no end to intrigues and discontents" (p. 18), and the king was assassinated on 14 May 1610. The Jesuits, pursued by the *Parlement de Paris* as dangerous advocates of tyrannicide, in fact "neither preached nor taught differently" than other Catholic orders (p. 33).

Berce also points out that the term "Gallicanism" was not coined by historians until the nineteenth century (as an antonym to Ultramontanism); in the seventeenth century, the adjective "Gallican" simply denoted the Catholic Church in France (p. 57).

Central to the broad outlines of Berce's arguments is his assertion that absolutism was "a modern creation, the fruit of the political crisis of the later sixteenth century, not a legacy of the Middle Ages" (p. 62). In this view, establishment of a French monarchy that was accountable to no human authority was a response to a very particular set of circumstances, namely, the civil wars of the 1560s-1590s. Absolutism was not a necessary result of a long-standing evolution; it was implemented rather as a reaction to a traumatic experience. Though some disgruntled nobility later sought, in the 1648-53 revolts known as the *Fronde*, to curb centralization of power, the generation contemporary with Louis XIV "feared civil war like the plague" and "opted" for absolutism (p. 181). This generation implemented the absolutist program; they "repudiated the conspiracies and risings of their forefathers" (pp. 181-82). The original French title of Berce's work is *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme, 1598-1661* (1992). Absolute monarchy, from this perspective, was a timely solution in a 'drama' of violence and crisis of authority.

Some important questions emerge from this presentation of absolutism. Even if the particular circumstances of the Wars of Religion and the *Fronde* were the occasion for full implementation of the absolutist agenda, was not the way prepared by a long evolution of France toward centralized government? Did the late medieval growth in the power of the French monarchy count for nothing?

Berce's assessments of the governments of Marie de Medici, Richelieu, and Mazarin are provocative. He calls

the period of Marie's rule (1610-17) "one of the most prosperous and brilliant of the early modern age" (p. 43). Does Berce exaggerate in his desire to counter those historians who give a negative, dismissive evaluation to her regency? The *Fronde* was a revolt against Prime Minister Mazarin, led by nobles and others who wanted some share in government power. For Berce, it was a "direct and unpleasant consequence of the tragic policy decisions of Richelieu and Louis XIII" (p. 148); yet "most historians have abandoned themselves to admiration" of Richelieu (p. 155). The "tragic" decisions to which Berce alludes included skyrocketing taxes levied to finance French participation in the Thirty Years War. But to what extent is Berce an exception to admiration of Richelieu? For he goes on to recount the "triumph" and the "crowning glory" of Louis XIII and his minister in the 1643 French victory over Spain in the battle of Rocroi (p. 156). In 1649, adds Berce, news of the execution of King Charles I of England weakened the *Fronde* (p. 178). If so, how did the revolt continue on for another three years?

With the restoration of royal power from 1653, and with the 1659 peace treaty between France and Spain, "Mazarin had certainly emerged as the winner" (p. 192). Berce thus sees Mazarin as ultimately successful in both domestic and foreign policy. By Mazarin's death in 1661, the monarchy was firmly in control of France, and France, not Spain, dominated Europe. Berce criticizes those historians who have judged Mazarin according to "racial stereotype" by finding in him Italian subtlety. The author argues that it would be more accurate to view him as a "typical" papal negotiator: "a man of peace, prudent yet stubborn, relying more on the power of discussions than on the fortunes of war" (p. 184). Has Berce perhaps substituted an ecclesiastical stereotype for a "racial" or national one?

Chapter thirteen, "Hopes and Beliefs," includes the suggestion that the early seventeenth century was "the age of the picaresque or comic novel" (p. 193). Berce argues that the literature of those years reflects the tensions of an age that mixed ideals of honor with a reality of "knavery and absurdity" (p. 194). This is an intriguing suggestion, but one that requires further discussion by the author. However, Berce's concise overview of seventeenth-century conceptions of society as a body (with each part playing a fixed and interdependent role), or as a pyramid of social roles, and of the world as a stage, is superb (pp. 206-10). From Berce's discussion, it would seem that the metaphor of the world as stage was not unique to Shakespeare.

Berce maintains that French society in the seventeenth century was a "pre-modern" society, and thus not one where "individualism" held sway, but rather one in which people were wrapped in "complex networks of solidarity" (p. 211). If Berce found discontinuity between the medieval and the early modern political order in France, he finds continuity in the history of attitudes toward the poor. Historians such as John Bossy (*Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* [1985]) have argued that, by the seventeenth century, the medieval honoring of the poor as images of Christ had been replaced by an elite desire to subject the poor to a regime of hard work and discipline. Berce asserts that, while seventeenth-century hospitals were built to house the poor, they were not prisons, and admittance was difficult to gain. A "certain historiographical fashion" associates the establishment of hospitals such as the Paris *Salpetriere* with a repressive "great enclosure" and with an elite agenda of social control of the poor. But the forcible imprisonment of beggars "became a reality only in the later eighteenth or even nineteenth century" (p. 199).

With this criticism of the "great enclosure" thesis, Berce elicits fundamental questions. When did medieval "solidarity" give way to "individualism"? When did biblical categories, language, and ideals (e.g., the poor as images of Christ) lose their power in society? When does the "modern" era begin, and what is meant by "modern"? Though Berce fails to consider the fact that there were decrees ordering confinement of beggars under Louis XIV (1643-1715), the author is surely right to highlight the resilience of Christian ideals in seventeenth-century France.

These last three chapters are excellent, but they deserve greater integration with the previous twelve. Chapter fourteen, on the arts, argues that Italian influence was strong, in part mediated by figures such as Marie de Medici and Cardinal Mazarin. Chapter fifteen ends with an appropriate conclusion for its themes (material life), but there is no separate conclusion for the book as a whole. Yet there are ways of integrating cultural and political histories. Hopes and beliefs, the arts, and material life all played central roles in supporting and/or undermining absolute monarchy. These considerations were not simply additions, appendices, or afterthoughts to politics.

The bibliography provided for this book is useful, but St. Martin's Press could have done a better job of providing references to English-language versions. Not even English translations of Berce's own works are mentioned.

The Birth of Absolutism remains an important, stimulating study, one that is both accessible to newcomers to the field of seventeenth-century France and engaged in many of the debates that occupy specialists. It deserves a wide readership.

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