

Cesare Cuttica and Glenn Burgess (eds), *Monarchism and Absolutism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), xiv + 297 pp., £60 (hb), ISBN 978 1 8489 3198 5

This fascinating and important collection of essays grows out of a conference held at the University of Sussex in July 2010. Collectively, the papers do much to deepen and enrich our understanding of monarchism and absolutism in early modern Europe. As several of the contributors point out, these are examples of words ending in ‘ism’ that were not used in the early modern period. As a result, they have proved notoriously slippery in the historiography and they pose intractable problems of definition as well as real hazards of anachronism. These essays go a long way towards clarifying what such terms might mean and how they should and should not be used.

In analysing absolutism in both theory and practice – as an ideology and as a system of government – the contributors explore the nature of early modern monarchy and the extent to which it was separable from absolutism. One major reason why this was such a complex problem was that some of the characteristics conventionally attributed to absolutism were simply true of early-modern monarchy generically. Equally, monarchy need not be equated with absolutism, for example in those states where it was elective. The two categories of absolutism and monarchism thus overlapped but did not coincide. Among the salient qualities of this volume as a whole is the precision with which key distinctions are made, notably in the arguments that there was no necessary link between royalism and absolutism; that absolutism was a type of government whereas arbitrary government was a way of governing; that issues of sovereignty should be distinguished from forms of administration; and that absolutist theory cannot be equated with state-building. In forging these distinctions, concepts that have all too often been elided in the existing scholarly literature are carefully

separated and brought into a much sharper focus. Conversely, false antitheses are scrupulously avoided, for example in the recognition that monarchism and republicanism were by no means incompatible, although several of the contributors subject Patrick Collinson's idea of a 'monarchical republic' to searching and persuasive criticism.

These themes emerge particularly powerfully in the excellent essays by Johann Sommerville, Glenn Burgess and Edward Vallance. Sommerville argues that absolutist theorists, including Bodin, Hobbes and Bossuet, 'adopted views which accord better with the modern model of absolutism as social collaboration than the older idea that absolutists aimed at autocratic centralization and bureaucratization' (120). In analyzing their writings, Sommerville distinguishes between their views on the location of sovereignty (which they regarded as indivisible), the form of administration (which could be mixed), and the day-to-day functioning of government (which often involved collaboration between monarchs and social elites). He concludes that 'investigation of the writings of absolutist theorists shows that they favoured collaboration with nobles and others and had no programme of bureaucratization or centralization' (130). Burgess's essay pays particularly close attention to the use of words in early-modern English socio-political vocabulary. He identifies the 1640s as the key decade in which Parliamentary theorists came to associate 'absolute' monarchy with 'arbitrary' power and tyranny, and hence to argue that ideas of a commonwealth were incompatible with monarchy. Royalist writers of the 1650s and beyond therefore faced the task of trying to disentangle such claims, and Edward Vallance offers an interesting case-study of one such writer, Robert Sheringham, whose *The King's Supremacy Asserted* (published in 1660 but circulating in manuscript during the early 1650s) reasserted that the English monarchy was both 'absolute' and 'limited'.

The volume is genuinely European in its range and coverage. Cesare Cuttica's essay presents some telling comparisons and contrasts between three theorists writing in the early

1630s: Sir Robert Filmer, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, and Cardin Le Bret. Cuttica identifies these as exponents of three specific strains of absolutist theory which he terms, respectively, patriarchalist, Machiavellian and Hobbesian. By adopting a cross-Channel perspective, Cuttica shows how much these writers were working within a European intellectual culture. This approach also proves highly illuminating in Part II of the book, which comprises a series of essays on various eighteenth-century states, notably Prussia (John Christian Laursen), the Habsburg Monarchy (László Kontler), Denmark-Norway (Henrik Horstbøll), and Naples (Girolamo Imbruglia). All these contributions examine writings that were variations on common themes, and they indicate the remarkable plasticity of ideas of absolutism and monarchism into the eighteenth century.

The value of a continental perspective, and the degree to which diverse writers were addressing similar clusters of issues, is also evident in the final group of essays on thinkers as varied as Pufendorf (Michael Seidler), Hobbes (Ioannis Evrigenis), Bayle (Luisa Simonutti), and Diderot (Tim Hochstrasser). These essays range widely across both time and space, and yet they are linked together by similar concerns not only with the nature of monarchy and sovereignty but also with representations and perceptions of them. In particular, Tim Hochstrasser's essay on 'Diderot's role in the selection of his friend Falconet as the sculptor of the "Bronze Horseman", the equestrian statue of Peter the Great commissioned by Catherine II in 1766' (207) shows the value of interdisciplinary approaches that address visual and iconographic sources as well as written ones.

All in all, this is a ground-breaking volume, and the standard of the contributions is consistently high. It amply fulfils the editors' stated aim of 'presenting a fresco of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European monarchist thought' and thereby laying 'the foundations for future work comparable to that achieved in the study of republicanism' (3).

Taken together, the essays reveal the scope and challenge of this subject and demonstrate that this is an area in which much further research can be productively pursued.

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