POWER AND POLITICS IN OLD REGIME FRANCE

1720–1745

Peter R. Campbell

ROUTLEDGE

The cardinal de Fleury, after a portrait by Rigaud

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'A sophisticated and highly interpretive study of politics in the Age of Louis XV [that] will interest not only historians of *ancien régime* France, but all students of political life in Europe prior to the nineteenth century. By redirecting our attention to the crucial role that the King's court played…and by demonstrating how politics at the highest levels actually worked in practice, Campbell has rendered a valuable service to readers interested in the nature of the early modern state.'

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A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

All translations are my own except where indicated. I have tried to keep as much of the flavour of the originals as possible by rendering the sometimes idiosyncratic French into a freer English while keeping strictly to the sense. Where the English might depart somewhat from the original I have quoted the original in the footnotes, where there are also some untranslated passages. The French in such passages has been cited as in the original document, where grammar, spelling and punctuation are often at variance with modern usage.

PREFACE

This book is a study of government at the centre in the important but neglected period of French history between the Regency and the 1750s. The age of the long political ascendancy of the cardinal de Fleury is of course fascinating in its own right, and richly deserves reassessment. My study has, however, three further aims. First, it explores the nature of the *ancien régime* in the eighteenth century, viewing it not as a set of institutional structures but as a functioning socio-political system. Second, there is a particular focus on the nature and characteristics of political crisis between the ministry and the parlement of Paris. Third, it suggests that the norms of the socio-political system and the nature of crisis as revealed in the second quarter of the eighteenth century continued to characterise politics in the 1780s. Thus it is suggested that the final crisis of the regime in the 1780s can best be understood as in many ways a typical crisis of the regime, rather than as a 'revolutionary crisis'.[1] The book is therefore a case study of the nature of the state. It seeks to define old regime politics; to consider its problems and characteristics at court; and to explore the relations of those in power at the centre with key institutions.

This enterprise began with the intention of denning the essential characteristics of the regime when it was functioning normally, and this could not necessarily be said of the pre-revolutionary decade. The time of the rise and ascendancy of the cardinal de Fleury in the 1720s and 1730s seemed exactly suited to the task. Very little was known about him and nothing then had been written for nearly half a century.[2] As with most straightforward projects, however, it became a great deal more complicated. Not only was the chosen period much less quiet than expected, but it was also impossible to isolate it from historical views of the periods on either side of it. Most studies of structures and institutions, which would normally have provided the essential groundwork, had focused either on the troubled reign of Louis XIV or on the pre-revolutionary era, and were deeply influenced by the prevailing orthodoxies. It was necessary to make choices between the different historical traditions, for some historians emphasise the strength of central power and its degree of centralisation, and others have suggested that monarchical power was much more limited. Moreover, the reign of Louis XIV was thought to have brought about a host of lasting changes–a

transition to 'the modern state', and the curtailment of aristocratic power, for example. On the other hand, historians of the revolution had identified significant changes taking place from the 1750s to which the origins of the Revolution could be traced—a new spirit of revolt and a 'new politics of contestation'.[3] The issue had now become one of continuity and change. Was the political system in the age of Fleury to reveal continuities with the reign of Louis XIV, or were the seeds of revolution sown earlier than expected? A third possibility was intriguing: perhaps there were continuities throughout the century and the crisis of the 1780s was more traditional than thought.

Thus the second quarter of the eighteenth century can be regarded as a period of key importance for understanding the old regime. And yet few periods of French history today remain as little investigated as this one. In fact, before it would be possible to consider the nature of the political system, a complete reexamination of the period proved to be necessary, drawing upon the extensive but neglected sources. Surprisingly, the whole subject of government activity during these years had been no more than sketched by previous historians, who focused on foreign policy and religion.[4] Perspectives were often distorted, because nineteenth-century historians were still taking sides on such questions as the role of the parlements and the religious controversies. Distinguished scholars of both financial and institutional history writing at the end of the nineteenth century—Marion, Viollet, Luçay, Jouvencel—barely referred to this era, and a more recent study of the *conseil du roi* skims over Fleury's time in office, preferring to concentrate on the Polysynodie and the 1760s.[5] Works on the Paris parlement have until recently remained bound up in the old positions of a *thèse nobiliaire* or a *these royale,* with the magistrates interpreted either as a selfish oligarchy and the crown as the strong force needed to impose order, or as the harbingers of liberal restraints on despotic monarchical practices. In fact, as I will argue, neither position is sustainable, and it is important to explore the details of a complex relationship to arrive at a more appropriate view. Partisan accounts and unfamiliarity with Fleury's career have naturally led to misconceptions about his religious policy towards the Jansenist problem, one highlighted by the reception of the papal Bull *Unigenitus* in France. A ministerial policy that was actually the product of a moderate attitude has been characterised as doctrinaire and detrimental to the prestige of the monarchy—largely because the methods used to implement it were (as was surely to be expected in a monarchy) authoritarian.

Many other areas have remained under-researched. Since the young Louis XV was too inexperienced, too lazy or too indecisive to take decisions on policy himself, and allowed his former preceptor to exercise much of his power, biographies of the King have tended to skate over this period of Fleury's ascendancy.[6] After all, it was Fleury who held sway in the royal councils, conferred with ambassadors, decided on ministerial appointments, controlled access to his master, drew up guest lists for Marly—in a word, governed in all aspects except ceremonial. If crucial aspects of the era can legitimately be left aside by a biographer of the King,because he did not make policy, many of these were intimately bound up with the career of the first

minister, making a perspective on him all the more helpful. Historical biography certainly has a role to play in enlarging our understanding of the past, because it highlights the relationship of an individual to those aspects that institutional and social historians paint with a broader brush.

Unlike his predecessors as cardinal and minister–Richelieu, Mazarin and Dubois–André-Hercule de Fleury has never been the subject of a modern political biography,[7] nor has any of his ministers been studied in depth, with the exception of the colonial policies of Maurepas whose papers have found their way to the United States.[8] This book contains most of the elements needed for a biography of the cardinal de Fleury, although it does not adopt that form. The Cardinal's career provides the analysis with a chronological thread, and the activities and decisions of this important minister, the most powerful courtier after the King, provide an insight into the extraordinary complexity of politics. The need to acquire and preserve a position of favour and authority, the support of patrons, of friends and of the King himself, the compromises forced by factional pressure and the necessity of mastering not only the court but also a formidable range of policy decisions that sometimes came together with equal urgency–all this is recoverable only through biography.

However, in the following chapters, the life of Fleury is but one of several focal points that have been chosen for the analysis of the various forms of political conduct, in the manner of one walking around the galleries of Versailles and trying to unravel how it works as a system. Here a room gives an insight through its painted images of royalty; there the crush of courtiers paying court to the King after his *lever* discloses the importance of access to the fountainhead of favours; the ministers' wing of the huge palace reveals bureaucracy and patronage in action; now the conversation overheard between a group of peers and their confidants shows faction at work; after witnessing a reception of ambassadors we move on to eavesdrop on an important council meeting, or an interview between ministers and the men responsible for controlling the parlement of Paris. Moving outside the palace, other focal points attract our attention. We find police spies lurking in the cafés of Paris, listening out for the opinions of the people, writing up reports to the minister on rumours, factious speeches and popular discontents. Extraordinary tales of convulsionary worshippers and miraculous cures at the church of Saint Médard are on everyone's lips. Behind closed doors Jansenist priests can be found conferring with lawyers to undermine the government's religious programme by inciting the judges in the *palais de justice* to acts of legal opposition. The *palais* itself is frequented by all Paris, perhaps attending to some legal business at the nearby Châtelet, purchasing books, clothes, almost anything in fact, or there just to gossip and exchange news. The black-robed magistrates themselves gather in groups in the great hall of the *palais* in advance of the plenary sessions, some at the bar discreetly discussing manœuvres in the forthcoming debates, others protesting to themselves at the threat to their jurisdiction and honour, while some, older and more sanguine, counsel prudence to the young hotheads.

The systematic study of the forms and structures of politics in this period is, surprisingly–since political narrative was the focus of much nineteenth-century writing–still a relatively new subject.[9] My aim is, by means of a detailed analysis of activity at the centre, to ask the questions appropriate to a political science of the old regime, a political science (or political sociology) suited to the specificity of the period. That is to say, to ask the appropriate questions that lie beyond the orthodox view of the 'modern state', a view increasingly seen by historians as a nineteenth-century historical anachronism springing from a teleological view of history. In doing so, I shall take into account, when attempting to answer some of these questions, the recent advances in scholarship on court society, civility, patronage, clientage, mentalities and the study of language and 'political culture'. What constitutes power in the system, how does it work, and what are its rules, loci and limits? How are policy decisions made and what factors and groups influence them? How was politics talked about, and what terms, what rhetorical or discursive forms were used by contemporaries? How should we conceptualise the socio-political system, and according to what processes is crisis generated within the socio-political order? Why is the presentation and implementation of reforming policies such a problem in this regime–why are reforms almost always abandoned? These are all questions whose answers have a bearing on how we assess both the earlier period of Louis XIV, because it has been seen as a period of transition, and the later period of the collapse of the *ancien régime,* because the structures and problems remained largely the same. In the light of answers to these questions, we may go on to ask whether the ways in which historians presently conceptualise the state and political culture in this period are open to modification, and explore how far the historical view of the socio-political structures affects our understanding of the final crisis of the regime.

One aim of this book is therefore to go some way towards substantiating the argument that, to judge from its political practices, a distinctive 'baroque state' existed in this period. This term is not meant to imply a precise relationship to an architectural style, but it can serve as a useful shorthand term of reference that avoids some of the misconceptions associated with other descriptions. Thus it was not the 'renaissance monarchy', because the later sixteenth century saw new departures on too many fronts from that illusively modern concept. Neither was it the 'modern state' that the monarchy of Louis XIV was erroneously thought to have created. Rather, 'baroque state' denotes a state formation that came into being during the age of the baroque, roughly from the later sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, and which survived, most of its essential characteristics and practices intact, long after the architectural style had passed out of fashion. 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'œil* features that promised more than they could deliver.

The political structures and limitations of the 'baroque state' were

deeplyrooted in the social structures; its processes of power operated in ways that, although of course anchored in the past, corresponded to the distinctive characteristics of the age. The venal bureaucracy was not 'modern', but neither was it any longer late medieval; clientage was much more fluid than it had once been, but it had not yet been dissolved by individualist notions of citizenship and the liberal state; the fiscal institutions and methods that first made their appearance in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance and which were substantially modified in the early seventeenth century were then to last almost unchanged until the Revolution; the court was no longer the itinerant royal household of the medieval and renaissance periods, but it had settled itself into more rigid structures which enabled it to enhance majesty in new ways and still remain the centre of political management. The 'baroque state' was apparently strong, because it had survived several crises, but was in fact deceptively weak and ill-suited to the challenges of increasing fiscal needs and ideological opposition. Perhaps only a reluctance to realise that the monarchy of Louis XIV had been unsuccessful at effecting a transformation of the state (if it ever attempted such a grandiose design), has prevented historians from attempting this rethinking before. In the eighteenth century the continuities far outweigh the changes.

For this reassessment to be proved, it is not necessary to write another study of the finances or patronage over a long period, or of the role of aristocratic governors, for example, although the latter would be particularly useful.[10] In order to reconsider the question of the state and its exercise of power, it is desirable to draw together a wide range of scholarly approaches and put them to the test by means of new research on neglected aspects of a specific period. Other scholars have laid the groundwork for this attempt, because a critical mass of detailed works on many different areas is now available. Several areas of scholarship look different in the light of these recent or unjustly neglected works. This book therefore grows out of the reassessments of *ancien régime* society and politics that have been taking place in the last three decades, but focuses on a period that has been largely ignored.

The precise nature of old regime politics is relevant to historians of the Revolution because, politically, the dissolution of the regime began at the centre. In 1787–9, government was still very much bound up with the structures and processes of a court society–even if new factors like an 'administrative mentality' and 'public opinion' had made themselves felt from the 1750s (see the Introduction). Moreover, current interest in political culture has focused on ideologies more or less to the exclusion of political structures. Politics itself is a subject that is above all studied in the short term, through biographies of ministers or studies of the pre-revolution. The long-term factors, what we might call the 'structural elements' of politics (and not necessarily the institutional ones), are often now neglected. These can only be identified by looking further back than the period immediately preceding the collapse of the regime in the 1780s. My aim is therefore to further the conceptualisation of politics in the *ancien régime* and, byopening the

door to the comparative analysis of political crises, help to highlight those features of the regime that led to political collapse at the centre. This book has been written as a case study of the working of the political system in a relatively tranquil period, as a point of comparison with before and after, and some attempt will be made to consider its wider implications.

SUMMARY OF THIS BOOK

This study uses the political career of the Cardinal-minister as a focal point, with the various chapters illuminating different aspects of political conduct during his years of power. The book is divided into two parts, drawn together by an Introduction and a wide-ranging Conclusion. The dual focus is rendered necessary by the variegated nature of political activity in a regime that had many political forums, all of which had relations with the court and ministry. Part 1 focuses on court politics, some aspects of the making of royal policy and the nature of faction. Part 2 is intended to highlight the extent to which other political forums existed and to explore the way these interacted with the centre. Jansenism and the parlement of Paris were chosen: the first because religious disputes were perceived to be the major political problem for the ministry in this period; the second because the courts too became involved in this issue, but more because crown-parlement relations were a problem that dominated the century. As this book explores the diverse forms of politics, and seeks to comprehend the regime, it is vital to consider how a crisis could arise within an apparently stable set of relations. The study of these aspects also illuminates further aspects of the decision-making processes in the ministry. Clearly it would be possible to extend the range of studies beyond the parlement and Jansenism into royal control over the urban communities and provincial estates, but that task lies beyond the scope of this volume. Such studies are, however, taken into account in the Conclusion in which the nature of politics and the state is reassessed.

The early chapters of Part 1 therefore consider in detail the rise to power of Fleury, bringing to light a network of patronage at the royal court composed of men having strong connections with Languedoc, his own native province. From 1713, much of the future cardinal's career was concerned with the controversy over the acceptance of the Bull *Unigenitus* in France, and religious policies are therefore discussed in some detail. As in the sixteenth century in France, and in the early seventeenth century in England, the religious issues led to a heightening of political awareness and a recourse to secular political theory in the service of religious liberty—with important unforeseen consequences within the political culture of the regime. By playing a careful game Fleury was able to prepare the ground for further advancement, cleverly exploiting his position of trust as royal preceptor and his understanding of the religious issues.

His acquisition of a ministerial post is explained against the wider background of the government during the later years of the Regency. There follows an examination of the activity of Fleury during the ministry of the duc de

Bourbon,1723–6, which explores the role of aristocratic factions at court and their effect upon policy. The use of new evidence from private letters, together with the formal pronouncements of the ministry, gives some insight into the political game in all its devious intrigues. This theme is set in a wider context in order to give a clearer picture of the political situation in France in the 1720s. Particular attention is paid to the nature, aims and methods of operation employed by the various competing groups that were to have an influence upon the formation of policy and the fate of the ministry. It has been essential to study the attitudes and aims not only of Fleury but also of others involved in the King's business, and of the authors whose letters and memoirs have been extensively used. A particularly important instance of this is the duc de Richelieu whose voluminous but neglected correspondence has proved such an invaluable source. The episode of the dismissal of Bourbon and Fleury's emancipation from his tutelage to the anti-Bourbon cabal reveals what an astute master of court politics Fleury was. By 1730 he was in full control of the situation.

The later chapters of Part 1 focus on the political system at the centre in the period of Fleury's ascendancy: essentially from the late 1720s to the mid-1740s. One chapter discusses the degree of control exercised by the cardinal over his ministers and their part in the formation of policy. The respective roles of King, Cardinal and ministers are considered, together with those informal influences that were also significant. Certain families and factions weighed heavily at court, able to influence appointments and thus policy. Royal control of patronage and clientage was an essential aspect of successful government, both in managing the court and the provincial elites. The last chapter examines the continuing role of faction, particularly in the struggle to succeed Fleury, and reveals just how vital it was for a statesman to control the court. The evidence on the famous Chauvelin affair is reviewed and the episode set in its context of faction, foreign policy and rumours of intrigues in the Paris parlement. Fleury began to lose his grip in 1740, and the triumph of faction at the time of his death in 1743 resulted in a kind of 'ministerial anarchy'. Louis XV proclaimed himself his own first minister but failed to impose either coherence in policy or discipline on his Secretaries of State and the factions behind them. The political system of the court was complex: it required constant vigilance and direction if the ruler was to preserve equilibrium. The Conclusion to this first part draws together the main themes of the political culture of the court.

Part 2 investigates a particular challenge to political equilibrium from outside the court. It focuses on the related issues of the sudden eruption of the *parti janséniste* into politics, and the development (and eventual containment) of opposition to Fleury's religious policy in the Paris parlement. Recent work has emphasised the importance of the *parti janséniste* in the 1750s in creating a new climate of political contestation, but it is clear that the formative period for the development of their strategies of opposition lay in the early 1730s.

The following four chapters present an analysis of the relations between the sovereign court and the ministry. Their focal point is the crisis of 1730–2 and

itsaftermath, as confrontation gave way to successful management. The intention is to examine the structure of this conflict, in order to see how it was generated and resolved within the values of the social and political system under study. The evidence reveals in detail who was involved, why, and what methods were employed to manage the complex situation. The next chapter further explores those techniques of management and control that were to be successful in preventing further serious problems until the early 1750s. In many of its major characteristics, the crisis of 1730–2 was typical, being the first of a series that culminated during the pre-revolution. It was to be replicated by those other major disruptions of 1753–4, 1756, 1770–1 and 1787–8. It therefore provides a new perspective on the conflicts that were seriously to undermine monarchical authority during the course of the century.

A particularly important theme of this book is government as the art of management of issues and interests. A repertoire of techniques existed not just for controlling potential problems with the parlements, but also with provincial estates, provincial elites, the court and its factions and the venal bureaucracy. The final chapter therefore draws together the conclusions of the analysis and attempts to put forward a more coherent model that explains the principal characteristics of the state in the eighteenth century. The continuities of structures and practices dating from the seventeenth century or even before are strongly emphasised; the evidence of the second quarter of the eighteenth century suggests that the state had not been transformed under Louis XIV. No convincing work on the later *ancien régime* suggests a later transformation. The baroque state thus lasted right up to the 1780s. An important question is whether and how far that model helps us to understand the collapse of the regime in 1787–9.

Several themes transcend individual chapters of the work. That religious affairs are given considerable prominence will surprise only those who think of the eighteenth century as principally an age of rationalism and Enlightenment. The monarchy was theocratic, underpinned by religious ideology, and the King claimed to be the Very Christian Monarch. Challenges to this ideological marriage had to be suppressed, be they in the form of schismatic heresies within the one Catholic church or rationalist critiques from Enlightened authors. The church was composed of a set of institutions that were both part of a privileged corporate body and of the state structures. As a corporate body it had its own administration, its own fiscal and judicial institutions. Ecclesiastics played an important role in the government of France, with bishops and archbishops helping to control their dioceses, and priests their parishes, on behalf of the civil powers. There was a whole breed of administrative bishops who worked in the upper echelons of the provincial administration. In the provincial estates the presidency of a prestigious bishop was, with the support of the other ecclesiastical delegates, often a crucial factor in their management. The financial contribution of the church was significant both in terms of its 'free gift' to the king and for loans raised on the state's behalf through the security of the church. Ecclesiastics were drawn from noble and upper bourgeois families, it being a usual family

strategy for a second or third son to enter the church while the elder sons pursued a career in the robe or the military. If patronage and clientage were necessary for advancement in the army or bureaucracy, they were no less necessary in the church. The management of ecclesiastical patronage was therefore an important aspect of government because it involved so many families of the elite, and because it was a means of control. Clerical disputes in the quinquennial Assembly of Clergy had to be managed just as carefully as did quarrels in the courts or provincial estates.

Much of this book is focused upon the world of the court, which was clearly the centrepiece of the whole political system. This is in marked contrast to the prevailing view that the state had become bureaucratic and administrative. Of course the state was in many ways administrative, with bureaux, clerks, paperwork and rules, but it is a question of degree. Its ethic at this stage was far from bureaucratic, in a Weberian sense, and its servants did not exhibit a modern sense of hierarchy and duty. The vast majority of bureaucratic offices were venal, and their incumbents needed patronage to acquire or retain them–and these offices were themselves a basis for further patronage. Influence, as well as administration, made the system function, and the brokerage of influence took place at court.

This study therefore contributes to the history of the political elite as a group by analysing its attitudes and conduct in the governance of the state. When due consideration is given to the socio-political structures, it becomes apparent that the higher aristocracy continued to play a much more important role in the government than it has often been given credit for. The current tendency of research is to show that, far from having excluded the nobility from political power, governments continued to rely upon the upper echelons of that order. The present study goes some way to explaining the rationale behind this situation.

This book is therefore an attempt to explore the world of politics in one period, drawing upon the range of interpretative techniques available to us, in order to arrive at a wider understanding of the regime. To recapitulate, my research has been based on the following premise. Although most modern political regimes possess an administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, the analysis of this structure may not describe the processes of power at a given moment.[11] All regimes have both a formal structure of power and informal processes and it is important to discover the relative importance of each. Yet the history of the government in early modern France has been written chiefly in terms of its institutions and theories and there have been few studies devoted explicitly to the structures of power which go beyond the confines of administrative history. Since the development of the bureaucratic state was a lengthy process involving struggle, it is necessary to ask how power operated before the ultimate triumph of the centralising state. If it can be shown that power did not operate in a solely bureaucratic way, and that the ethic that prevailed was substantially 'pre-modern', then the history of administrative centralisation will be put in a different perspective, as indeed will be the collapse of the regime in the 1780s.

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to politics in the *ancien régime*

Approaches to politics under the ancien régime; *the debate on 'absolute monarchy'; institutional history and the ethic of office-holding; the history of the royal finances; patronage, clientage and friendship; the study of faction; office and political power; court society; political culture, public space and the politics of contestation; defining politics in* ancien régime *France: an unsolved problem; the nature of crisis within the socio-political system; the need for a new history of politics.*

Understanding the nature of the state and politics requires a detailed analysis of the socio-political system. This should be based not principally on theoretical perspectives but on a new and wide-ranging history of politics that encompasses the mentalities of the elite.[1] For well over a century, from at least 1850 onwards, an orthodox view of the political system of the *ancien régime* held sway.[2] As historians were in broad agreement on the interpretation, they began to concentrate unduly on the minutiae of diplomacy and the arcane details of institutional structures. Challenges to this orthodox view were further delayed by the virtual abandonment of the history of politics and of the state by many of France's finest historians after the Second World War. For nearly thirty years politics was neglected by scholars of *ancien régime* France. Under the influence of the Annales school, many preferred to leave aside traditional narrative history to concentrate on social, economic and mental structures, and seldom followed Marc Bloch's lead in studying the elites.[3] Political history was left to the institutional historians because it was *'histoire événementielle'*–the history of mere events–and could not be investigated statistically. There was a short-term loss, but in the long run the new kinds of history have brought benefits even to political history. They have enhanced our understanding and widened our horizons. In particular, the better understanding of social *mores* and cultural attitudes can now be integrated with traditional approaches to provide a more subtle history of the state. More recently, historians have turned to the social sciences and to critical theory for analytical tools that can help them to avoid anachronism and more accurately reflect the experience of times gone by. It is now possible to return to the study of politics armed with a deeper understanding of the period and a new repertoire of interpretative schemata.

In the last two decades a number of revisionisms have been put forward. Studies of prosopography, patronage and court society have, for example, presented a different picture of the seventeenth century. The period after 1750 has become the subject of debates on forms of political culture, on public and private spheres, and a new politics of contestation. Interestingly, at this latter end of the period few works discuss patronage, while seventeenth-century historians rarely discuss political culture. Few scholars have considered the political system from the early seventeenth century right through to the eve of the Revolution, and the newer approaches have not yet been applied to the whole period.[4] If drawn together, these revisions would powerfully undermine the orthodox view and provide strong grounds for reassessing the nature of the regime. This present work is intended to present such a reassessment, but it would be wrong to focus entirely on the newer work. History is a collective and cumulative enterprise and numerous nineteenth-century works still form the bedrock of any interpretation.[5] Although some older approaches have been marginalised or revised by recent research, others remain an inspiration. At one stage or another all have contributed to our understanding, and may still do so, in different ways.

Prompted by the new approaches, the present study focuses on an important and neglected period of history in order to see how far they might be integrated within an analytical narrative. It has been prepared in the belief that a firm archival basis must remain the core of the historical enterprise. Inevitably, as for the whole of the *ancien régime,* the archives are incomplete, even ministerial papers are lost or inaccessible, and important lacunae exist in every series. That is why the study of a long period of over twenty years can bring us into contact with many representative aspects of politics, where a shorter period would suffer unduly from the absence of sources. However, even an archival study must be informed by theoretical, sociological and discursive perspectives, for no historical study could claim to be wholly empirical. Consciously or unconsciously, such perspectives are an inextricable element in any sound research. Even so, a narrative rooted in a wide range of archival sources remains necessary because it controls and tests the use of theories by confronting them with specific situations. It can help to reveal the genealogy of historical discourses and representations by exploring the specific strategies involved in their employment. In order to arrive at a new model of the state and its inherent tensions, it is therefore necessary to consider past approaches and more recent perspectives in some detail.

THE DEBATE ON 'ABSOLUTE MONARCHY'

Most studies of the *ancien régime* have approached it from the perspective of the absolute monarchy, or even 'absolutism'. The latter term has given rise to a good deal of confusion because it is a neologism first used in the 1820s when it already denoted a concept that was far from identical to the concept of 'absolute monarchy' as understood during the *ancien régime*. Consequently, the monarchy has long been

associated with a particular set of characteristics. It is said to have been administrative, centralised, bureaucratic, modern—in short, 'absolutist'.

In the field of conceptualising the *ancien régime,* no study has been more important than Tocqueville's, and his interpretation has recently come back into fashion.[6] Although he avoided consideration of the reign of Louis XIV, his book implicitly accepted most of the orthodox view of that reign that was expressed by Lemontey, Thierry, Guizot and Mignet.[7] His book—or perhaps the tradition it embodied—is so influential that, from the mid-nineteenth century until almost the present day, there has been substantial agreement among historians that the reign of Louis XIV, building on the changes directed by Richelieu and Mazarin, was a turning point in the history of the French state.[8] The argument goes that after having defeated the Fronde, that last attempt by the *grands* to acquire real political power, and having also defeated 'selfish' social groups and provincialism, the monarchy was able to rally support and continue building the modern state. The nobles were drawn to court where they were encouraged to spend their fortunes and finally to rely upon the monarch for funds. The elaborate court ritual and etiquette, ever respectful of rank, gave them prestige without real power, as they dissipated their energies in quarrels of precedence and the search for favours. The rebellious parlements were said to have been reduced to obedience by 1673 and a large standing army created. Meanwhile, Colbert and other ministers, under the aegis of the far-sighted Louis XIV, were able to reform the state and eventually to transform it into a modern state. This was defined as a 'state' (and the use of the word itself is revealing, in contrast to an alternative description such as 'court society') in which power was centred in the bureaucracy. Ministers and not courtiers made the decisions with Louis himself in a smaller and more efficient council of state, whose various other component councils became increasingly well organised. Rule by bureaucracy and council was made effective in the provinces with the eclipsing of the role of the aristocratic provincial governors by a breed of new men thought to have been drawn from the bourgeoisie (they were in fact almost exclusively from the *noblesse de robe*), the intendants. These lawyers, most often masters of requests used to service in the council of state, were obedient to and dependent upon the secretaries of state and able to impose royal authority on recalcitrant, privileged, provincial elites of nobles and venal office-holders. Thus the reign saw a significant advance in the effectiveness of royal authority brought about by royal commissioners organised within a system that was significantly more powerful, bureaucratic and centralised than the preceding regime.

Instead of challenging this original model directly, modern research has chipped away at its edges by showing that intendants were not always all powerful, that many of the reforms were in fact unsuccessful in the long run (indeed often in the short term), and that the state perhaps sided with the rural communities against the seigneurs.[9] Even Mousnier conceded that governors and intendants were not invariably the natural enemies they had so often been considered,[10] and some provincial elites remained strong in face of the intendants. In response to this, there was talk of medieval survivals in the system—such as 'fidelity', the influence of the

royal household and the continued favour of some leading courtiers–but at this stage historians never regarded the survivals as potentially key elements. Although the idea that Colbert and his intendants were effective 'new men' found fewer and fewer supporters, it was replaced by the view that the venal officers were running things and restricting the central power. An hereditary *noblesse de robe* was substituted for an hereditary *noblesse d'épée*.

But, in the last decade or so, it has become increasingly apparent that the mid-nineteenth-century vision of a modern state, a centralised state, that was simply inefficient in its lower echelons is a gross exaggeration.[11] Worse, it is a description that belies its origins: Tocqueville accepted the orthodox view because it suited him. He wanted to show that the French Revolution was not responsible for the centralisation of the state since it had already been centralised by Louis XIV. And if his argument that the *philosophes* purveyed an illusion of politics was to hold true, he needed to argue that the monarchy had already destroyed all intermediary powers between itself and the people. He already saw in the French state that resulted from Louis XIV's reforms the French administration of the nineteenth century, and never far below the surface lies his attack on the despotism of Napoleon III. What he perhaps chose to play down (for what would have become of his striking thesis?) was that the appearance of the centralising administrative state that he found in official documents was far from being its reality, and that many of the practices that characterised the state before Louis XIV continued up to the eve of the Revolution. This is the aspect that much recent research confirms.

Historians' determination to make their model of absolute monarchy conform to either the 'renaissance state' or the 'modern state' (and often the content of these terms was identical) has meant that some of the important characteristics of the state in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been described either as 'survivals' or as 'forerunners'–but rarely as the essential elements of a state that was a distinctive formation in itself. The accent is placed either on the continuities or on the ruptures, depending on how the historian situates himself in the debate–and the division between right and left is often apparent–but never on the integrality of a truly *'ancien régime'* state.

Attempts to deal with the state have often suffered from three main flaws. The first is to consider the doctrine of absolute sovereignty to have implied a right of royal intervention in many areas of life that in the eyes of contemporaries lay well beyond the scope of legitimate government. In fact, it was a looser doctrine confined to justifying intervention and the exercise of rights that lay within the rather circumscribed traditional conception of what were the legitimate areas for the exercise of government. The second flaw confuses the doctrine on sovereignty with the actual configuration of the state apparatus at a given historical moment. 'Absolute monarchy' is taken to mean a certain organisational form of the state: 'absolute monarchy' (or worse, 'absolutist' monarchy) is defined as a centralised and bureaucratic state apparatus designed to execute the will of the sovereign. The practice is equated with the theory (and this is Tocqueville's error). In fact, the monarchy was 'absolute' in theory well before its court and bureaucracy developed

the forms associated with this second definition of absolute monarchy.[12] Since the doctrine of undivided sovereignty never meant absolute power, it could never be a basis for unlimited bureaucratic interference in the provinces. Nor should the state apparatus be seen simply as an expression of the royal will: it benefited from a great deal of consensus and co-operation from society, particularly in the realm of justice as arbitration. It is therefore a mistake to draw a direct causal link between this long-standing doctrine and the introduction of any new institutional practices. On the contrary, where new practices were introduced they were often developed from the hazy area of the prerogative powers of the monarch whose duty it was to protect the commonwealth from threat. Institutional change was almost always *ad hoc,* not the result of theoretical promptings, and can generally be related to the imperatives of war. The third flaw is that historians who were already predisposed towards institutional history accepted legal and institutional statements such as royal edicts as proof of actual practice.

INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

Part of the reassessment that has been taking place is the consequence of a wider critical re-evaluation of institutional history and its sources. The myth of the centralised 'absolute' monarchy originates first with the 'propaganda' of the monarchy itself and second with the nineteenth-century historians of institutions. The history of institutions formed the bedrock of studies on the *ancien régime,* both because the evidence was plentiful and because the influence of legal history was strong in France. Administrative records and legal manuals served to reconstruct the spheres of activity of the various corporate bodies and councils of state. Far from recognising the importance of impressive rituals and over-confident assertions in royal edicts (or were they propaganda?) as aspects of the persuasion that was necessary in the absence of more concrete forms of power, many nineteenth-century historians accepted the image of monarchy uncritically. Few chose to supplement their administrative records with the private correspondence of members of their institutions. Of course, studies of institutions were at their time invaluable, but always suffered as a basis for a wider interpretation of the monarchy by according too much weight, for example, to the letter of an edict or to the legal descriptions of how a corporate body was supposed to work, that could be found in the manuals written by the jurists. For all sorts of reasons, such records tend to suggest that business was carried out according to the prescribed forms and ignore the 'tumultuous reality' of politics.[13]

A pertinent example of the misleading impression given by legal sources is the case of the intendants being given powers to control the debts of the communities after the 1660s. This was a turning point in the history of the state, it was argued, as communities were reduced to the tutelage of the intendants.[14] But a closer look would have shown that their new powers were ineffectual in resolving the problem. There is evidence that many intendants failed in the enterprise and in the 1680s foreign war led the crown to ask the same communities to raise further loans, and

these soon surpassed previous debts. Because it failed in its aim of reducing communal indebtedness, it must be inferred that the tutelage was less than complete. The whole exercise amounted to no more than another partial repudiation of debts and a confirmation of the bulk of them. In this example, as in many others, not enough attention was paid to the actual practice of the men at the time, to their daily interaction at a given moment. To quote Vicens Vives, who first articulated such criticisms in a devastating reply to Mousnier and Hartung, 'the history of the political and juridical principles of absolute monarchy has been seen to be inadequate, if not actually erroneous, for the purpose of uncovering this reality [of the daily experience of government] and giving us an accurate view of it'.[15] It must be said that in the last fifty years some very valuable studies of institutions have tried to reveal the practices and sociology of the corporate bodies that formed the state. But Vicens Vives' criticisms were still justified, because the terms of reference and the overall framework of interpretation too often remained unchanged.[16] However, as a consequence of the shifts in perspective and of the return to politics, this orthodox interpretation has been challenged in a number of areas. A very different picture is beginning to emerge.

THE HISTORY OF THE ROYAL FINANCES

One form of history that had previously given a very distorted picture of the monarchy was the study of its finances. Institutions and decrees were studied rather than the social world of the financiers or the effectiveness of the decrees in practice.[17] Histories of finances and of the office of controller-general presupposed a more coherent bureaucratic system than actually existed in contemporary conceptions. In particular, these histories underplayed the hand-to-mouth existence that characterised old régime finances in wartime. Today it may even be doubted that a straightforward 'financial history' is conceivable, so anachronistic is the concept of one: it should instead be a complex history of credit, of the preconceptions of the money markets, of the involvement of the courtly pressure groups, of the role of financiers as middlemen and of the family histories of the clans whose members held high financial office. The most thought-provoking recent work has been by Bayard and Dessert on financiers in the seventeenth century, and Brugière on the period of the Revolution.[18] Dessert's huge and meticulously researched work on the age of Louis XIV was prefigured by Dent's study of the period of Mazarin.[19] Both reveal the existence of financial clienteles connected to the clans of the finance ministers such as Sublet de Noyers, Fouquet or Colbert.

These networks provided the bulk of the king's money through their responsibility for the sale of venal offices in the fiscal or military administration and by providing opportunities for the profitable investment of the surplus wealth of the richer court nobility and the provincial elites. Bonney has revealed that the principal direct taxes did not provide the bulk of the funds themselves, because the enormously expensive wars were largely financed by borrowing, but they did provide security for large loans

raised by the minister or his clientele.[20] Dessert shows that of the men entering into multiple contracts to supply money to the state, the notorious financiers, 85 per cent were noble, almost all held royal offices and most were closely connected both with the financial affairs of families of the high nobility and with the clans of Colbert and his successors. It has been concluded that the financial system relied upon the court nobility and the provincial elites for funds and that these were made available through the nobles' own agents who were the financiers. Ironically, the monarchy could not attack the system without undermining its own court nobility upon whom it relied in so many other ways. Some of the profits went to the financiers but most went to the lenders at court and in the provinces. At court, pressure and contacts alone could ensure the repayment of interest on *rentes* or the honouring of other government bills of exchange in wartime, while the provincial estates could guarantee repayment on the strength of their financial control over local taxation: interest payments would be met by increased taxes on the peasantry and urban poor. This system was successful in keeping Louis XIV from bankruptcy as a result of his building programmes and foreign wars, though credit was expensive and private profits quite large at the expense of the crown and the taxpayer.

The wider conclusions to be drawn from this work pose a challenge to the notion of the rise of the modern state. The monarchy was dependent upon this system and had little room for manœuvre. As it operated almost constantly on a war footing in desperate need of funds, it was not able to reform itself in peacetime; on the other hand, any attack on the vested interests would lead to the ruin of so many important families that the social elite itself was threatened and consequently put up stiff resistance to any reforms. These fiscal and financial inadequacies constituted a permanent weakness of the regime and limited the power of the monarchs. Financially, the monarchy was far from being either coherently bureaucratic or 'absolute'. Nor is it at all clear that most ministers had the inclination to attempt real reform in peacetime, for even Colbert concentrated his efforts on making the existing system more uniform rather than changing it.

PATRONAGE, CLIENTAGE AND FRIENDSHIP

This new history of the fiscal system ranges widely into the realm of social history and contributes greatly to our understanding of the assumptions behind political activity. In particular, it emphasises the importance of networks of clients and clans in facilitating financial dealings. The history of the exercise of power in the medieval and renaissance periods has long taken into account personal bonds, patronage, clientage and political friendship. The orthodox view of a transition to an administrative monarchy under Colbert once again militated against taking such relations seriously for a later period. Only recently has much emphasis been placed on these phenomena in France after the Frondes. Patronage, that is the non-bureaucratic operation of power through a system of personal relations as it then existed, was both a fundamental mechanism of social and political advancement

and a vital aspect of the system of government which exploited it as a technique for seeking support. For other periods of history the application of this concept is not new and it has been found particularly fruitful when applied to the politics of the late Roman Republic.[21] In British history there is currently much debate on the nature and role of corruption, patronage and courtly politics, while Namier's studies of mid-eighteenth-century British politics, though much modified by later research, certainly pointed to it as an important phenomenon.[22]

Before the 1980s, the patron-client relationship in France was referred to mainly as a social mechanism helping to explain provincial revolts and advancement in politics. In this context three historians should be noted: Mousnier emphasised the importance of patronage as a 'feudal survival' in the social system and directed the attention of his seminar in Paris towards clientage and the concept *of fidélité,* although he remained an institutionalist in his writings on government.[23] He argued that fidelity or loyalty to God, between master and servant, protector and creature, between members of the same corporation and ultimately between subject and king, were all important manifestations of the same sentiment that was not to disappear until the age of Enlightenment. Ranum wrote a pioneering work in the 1960s on Richelieu and his creatures who owed their rise to his patronage, revealing patronage as an aspect of ministerial control; more recently, Harding contributed an invaluable book on the provincial governors in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in which he emphasised the importance of social factors in the successful execution of their charges.[24] In the wake of these studies, others began to focus on early modern French patronage and clientage as a subject in its own right.[25]

The most comprehensive study of patronage and clientage in seventeenth-century France is by Kettering. It is a wide discussion that sets historical evidence, drawn mainly from her previous study of mid-century Provence, in the context of sociological literature.[26] Unfortunately, it was produced before scholars such as Boucher and Mettam had directed attention towards that centrepiece of the whole system, the royal court, as it grew to dominate society and the central administration, although this perspective has been included in more recent articles.[27] The subject of patronage is now a well-established aspect of society and politics in France. In his conclusion to a symposium on social mobility in seventeenth-century France, Mousnier stressed that

> At each stage of ascension, favour is indispensable, the favour of a *grand seigneur,* of a *grand officier,* then of a member of the governing group: chancellor, surintendant, prince of the blood, another prince, a minister. Favour is indispensable in order to get through the bottlenecks that occur at various stages, to get to the highest ranks in society—it is just as necessary as a multiplicity of occupations.[28]

The psychology of patronage has attracted the attention of Neuschel.[29] In contrast to Kettering, who sees the system as more rigid, she argues that in the late sixteenth century, it was impossible to regard oneself as 'being' a client over a long period. She

argues that their psychology was a product of narrative discourses that constructed them, and that in the absence of modern analytical categories fostered by literacy, perceptions and categories were very different from ours. Her evidence of language and behaviour suggests that a nobleman might *behave* as a client on relevant occasions, but that consciousness was not articulated in an analytical way that encouraged a sense of *being* in a continuous sense. This view would fit in with other specialised studies of the behaviour of particular noble affinities, in which 'clients' are observed to profess fidelity to more than one patron, to change sides or play off one patron against the other, and to set limits to their obligations. A fluidity was always present in the system as advantages and rewards were redefined and claims to have fulfilled obligations were renegotiated. The focal point of loyalty tended to be towards a family or lineage, rather than an individual, and family strategies were discussed in family councils.[30] Honour was clearly a notion around which patronage and clientage revolved, and the honour of having connections to the influential might itself have been almost a social necessity and sometimes a reward.[31] Entering into social relations with individuals of high status conferred status and honour on lower ranking individuals.[32] Friendship took place between those of equal rank, even though the language of friendship was often used by a superior to an inferior, thus honouring him.

In spite of recent work, it cannot yet be said that a clear picture, or even a precise definition, of patronage, clientage or friendship has yet emerged. Unfortunately, sociological studies of patronage in the modern world, based on examples from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, apply only in very general terms to the early modern period.[33] If the work on the *ancien régime* were incorporated into the sociological literature, it would surely lead to a process of redefinition and the posing of new questions by sociologists. However, although precise definitions are elusive, broad generalisations are possible and a preliminary consensus has emerged. It is certainly helpful to draw a distinction between patronage, clientage and friendship. The former involves the according of favours, be they pecuniary or honorific, or other services, to a client of inferior status. The relationship is reciprocal, and the other party is expected to return the service at some stage by loyal action. Friendship, also based on an exchange of services, takes place within the same social level between relative equals, and is important both in local politics and at court. Kinship networks often led to the working together of 'clans' that included relations by marriage and blood of many social levels, and thus could involve both friendship and clientage.

It is, however, difficult to go beyond generalisations without entering a world of example and counter-example, in which the contours become decidedly blurred. It is not clear that the patron dominated 'his' network of clients, because he was the focus rather than the apex of the network and because his position as a patron depended upon his ability to deliver rewards and favours. The demands from clients were constant, and if not fulfilled at least in small measure, could lead to defection to another more powerful patron.[34] Furthermore, lesser clients could have several patrons, as an ultimate choice was rarely forced upon them, and were

themselves both friends of other men and also patrons of lesser individuals (who might nevertheless also be clients of another more powerful patron). Historians of the seventeenth century are beginning to form a picture of the varieties of provincial networks among the clienteles of some of the leading noble families, and now recognise the fundamental importance of these sorts of personal relations in government and society. If fidelity had ever been a legal contract (though perhaps not absolutely binding in practice) it certainly no longer was.

For the later seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century the situation is harder still to pin down exactly. In fact, almost no work on patronage is available on the eighteenth century after the reign of Louis XIV. This neglect should not lead us to underestimate its significance. The same principles of personal relations figure prominently in the sources for the eighteenth century also. Memoirs are full of references to favours owed, expected or received. Even the *Mémoires* of Saint-Simon, that rich source of detail on patronage, were written in the 1730s and 1740s and they contain no suggestion that things had changed by the time of writing. The memoirs of the due de Luynes, from 1735 onwards, and of the duc de Cröy from the 1740s, are similar. The archives bearing on the work of every ministry contain very many letters pleading for a pension, or the preferment of a son, a friend, or a faithful servant. The antechambers of ministers, prestigious courtiers, commissioners or anyone with control over the distribution of monetary funds or offices in the administration, the church or the army, are known to have been crowded with people asking for some small or large favour, some share in the patron's success. Private letters reveal a constant preoccupation with personal *crédit, considération* and rank, while it is generally accepted that marriages within the richer sections of the community were primarily arranged as a suitable alliance between families.

Thus in the eighteenth century, the management of personal relations within loose structures of patronage remained extremely important. Work on the subdelegates, those officers who worked for the intendants, and on financiers shows that patron-client relations still existed.[35] These suggestions are reinforced by recent studies of the clerks in the bureaux of the ministers of war and foreign affairs. Rule and Baxter both conclude that even at the end of the reign of Louis XIV family, fidelity and clientage were more important than bureaucratic structures. The two could co-exist of course; Rule concludes that 'The patron/client relationship is still intact in 1715; indeed, in the foreign office, it may be stronger than it was in 1680. However, the bureaucratic machinery has, it would appear, become somewhat better articulated'. Baxter, summarising his work on the war department, says that while 'much further work needs to be done to pinpoint the decline of the clientage system and the emergence of a new, more impersonal civil service…evidence in the war department suggests that it was much later, in the eighteenth century, than Antoine proposes'.[36] It has been suggested that there was a transition to 'administrative clientage' (that is, clientage within the bureaucracy) from those wider networks that dominated social relations a century before. This may be so, but it is likely that it was less of a general transition and more a matter of the rise of 'administrative clientage' in addition to courtly and provincial networks, and that it

was connected with them, such that seventeenth-century-style patronage continued to exist. In Burgundy up to the 1740s the Princes de Condé continued to build up and exploit a large, unified network of clients, linked by marriage and office.[37] As politics by the eighteenth century had changed to working generally *for* the King, even if *against* his ministers, the system functioned as an aid to the government of Burgundy, and to a faction led by the House of Bourbon-Condé. Unfortunately, there has still been no study that seeks to incorporate these insights into our wider understanding of government at the centre. It is hoped the present study will contribute to this area.

THE STUDY OF FACTION

Faction has remained a nebulous phenomenon for scholars, in spite of its crucial importance in the making and unmaking not only of royal policy but also of the advancement of individual aristocratic families within their status group. Although it has often been subsumed under the same heading as patronage and clientage, it is perhaps more complicated. Until very recently it was not much studied in the French context–at least not in the sociological sense of a search for its importance and characteristics–although innumerable works of popular history recount the machinations of courtly groups.[38] Faction was certainly pervasive at court, and there were often continuities over several generations or decades. These loose groupings of individuals, families and clans appear to have had a repertoire of techniques they exploited.[39] They employed spies, clients, indulged in wire-pulling in institutions and had characteristic notions and assumptions about interest and loyalty. But how stable are they? It is hard to know, for while some networks remained in operation over a long period, such as the Le Tellier and Phélypeaux clans, others were *ad hoc* alliances for a specific purpose and would soon lapse into rivalry again. Perhaps the ability to construct a sound and durable clan of friends and clients was an important aspect of long-term survival in the cut-throat worlds of court and province–a comparative study of families would be well worth the monumental effort that would be required.[40] But just as the structures of court and administration evolved during the seventeenth century, so too would the nature of faction, as families adapted to new situations and ground rules. A feature of central importance was access to the King or to those with his ear; it was crucial, both for social mobility and for influencing decision-making. Those with the royal ear were also the most discriminating in choosing whether or not to advance the claims of those who petitioned them.

On the whole, it is still true to say that faction under the *ancien régime* is a neglected topic of research. Historians will have to ask what was its source in social *mores* and explore its role not only in politics but also more generally in social advancement, where it was clearly linked to patronage. Factional conflict, as rival clans and groups fought for advantages, was a constant feature of life at court and in provincial capitals. Conflicts at court might well be played out in the estates or

parlements, as attempts were made by clients at the bidding of courtiers to sabotage policies; and rivalries between factions of the provincial elites would take on a courtly dimension as those able to speak for them were pressurised into action. Institutional historians have tended to attribute policies to ministers, but historians sensitive to the social element in politics will consider the question of how far ministers could afford to be independent from factional considerations–put simply, did ministers have factions, or did aristocratic factions have ministers?

OFFICE AND POLITICAL POWER

The comparative neglect of the social processes involved in power was partly a reflection of a general lack of research into the working of the central government as a whole. Now that it is appreciated to what extent the government failed to carry out its more controversial decrees in the provinces, the next stage is to ask afresh how it was that the government succeeded in having any effect at all. For a long time it was accepted that the royal will was enforced by a system of budding bureaucracy which, because it was in an early stage of development, was inefficient and sapped its own effectiveness by its failure to control privilege and corruption (because it was less than 'modern'). In this way the problem of the government before the Revolution could be explained as the failure to improve efficiency by the use of bureaucratic concepts. In this spirit, there have been studies of the offices of *secrétaire d'état* or *contrôleur général* over the centuries, and the role of the intendants has been closely investigated–although strangely enough the eighteenth-century governors have been almost completely ignored. Yet the assumptions are often anachronistic, because a pre-modern society that was bounded by notions of patronage, hierarchy, corporatism, privilege and honour simply could not be expected to develop a modern bureaucracy.

Office-holding must be understood in its own context.[41] The extremely widespread practice of venality had some significant advantages for the monarchy. A moderately efficient administration was provided at a low cost to the state, since the original price paid for an office represented a loan to the state that was never to be repaid, with the 'salary' being a low interest return on the original investment. A sometimes high level of professionalism was maintained, with fathers educating sons to succeed them, because offices were inheritable family patrimony. On the other hand, several modern bureaucratic characteristics were more or less absent. No civil service ethic existed to prevent corruption, especially in a system where the expenses of administration were usually paid by the office-holder; a significant degree of financial peculation was normal: only extreme cases were punished in exemplary fashion. With office being seen as an investment, as inheritable property and as the basis of social dignity, it was naturally a very sensitive issue and government interference was resented. Moreover, there was no effective chain of command. The independence of each officer and corporation meant that officers were prepared to carry out traditional tasks but rarely willing to take on new

functions for the central government, particularly if this brought them into conflict with other members of the local elite. Authority came as much from social status and informal influence as it did from the legal powers invested in the office.

It is not difficult to argue that the *ancien régime* saw a system of government in which the nature of the office bore very little relation to the degree of political influence wielded by its holder. In the central government, we shall see that a first gentleman of the bedchamber like the due de Richelieu might at times have as much influence over ministerial decisions as a secretary of state like Amelot or Orry. Here again though, it would have been impossible to tell without a detailed study not of the office but of the man: he might have acquired the post for purely prestigious reasons or have been given it as a reward for past services, as a reflection of his existing influence. A family as strong as the Noailles might, by its accumulation of court offices, governorships and royal favour, be in a position to exercise as much power as a minister. Fleury himself held no ministerial portfolio and yet had almost complete control over the direction of French ministerial policy for many years.

Another important consideration is that the success of a decision by an official depended largely on his own ability to see that it was enforced: in a state that was not well policed, and where royal resources were limited, there were many ways in which the privileged subordinate officials and the recalcitrant elites could avoid co-operation.[42] Much that the royal government ardently desired and even decreed was never implemented in France, and for an intendant or secretary of state to be successful in his functions he could not rely exclusively on the administrative hierarchy. His *crédit* at court, the network of his friends and clients, his prestige and his ability to settle for negotiated compromise all came into play to increase the effect of his power over his subordinates. Civil obedience to the royal administration was not a deeply rooted habit; it needed to be encouraged and exacted and many generations of Frenchmen passed before the use of patronage could be suspended and the system described as impersonal and bureaucratic.

To comprehend the prevailing ethics of office-holding at the time without too much anachronism is a difficult task. Several historians have attempted to argue for a transition from government by officers to government by 'commis'. Is not this too sharp a contrast that distorts the commissioners' reality by forcing them into the mould of the modern state? It is perfectly legitimate to trace the origins of a modern office back to its antecedents during an earlier society and form of government, but only if the different ethic which prevailed in the earlier case is fully recognised. Often the argument has fallen short of this ideal, with the transportation backwards in time of the modern concept of the office as determining the nature of a man's functions in the administration. In fact, not only were social aspects of power crucially important, but also the first priority of venal officers was more often family, honour, status, corporate loyalty, or money, than the efficient exercise of royal power.[43]

An example may help to clarify the point that administrative office and power did not necessarily correspond, but varied greatly according to the circumstances

and the individual. From the 1680s until 1739, Provence had two intendants, a father and his son. The elder Le Bret in the early years of the century was little more than a useful aide to the archbishop of Aix and to the military commandant who actually governed the province in the continual absence of the governor. The son, on the other hand, was able to manage the province quite effectively, because he was by then of the second generation in Provence and had benefited from the roots which his father had put down in the province and inherited the network of clients that he had slowly built up. In this situation Villars, the governor from 1713, rarely visited Provence and the commandant was of no importance. But both intendants had needed to be First President of the Parlement of Aix, an office at the nub of provincial politics, and to exploit their links with court families. As the historian of the intendancy concluded, 'the intendant was ineffective without personal relations with the governing elites and neighbouring intendants …To carry out and develop his instructions and initiatives, the intendant had available only an embryonic bureaucracy and derisory financial means'.[44] Authority was clearly not necessarily based upon the tenure of a formal office, and the system functioned far from bureaucratically. The relative importance of the governor, commandant, archbishop and intendant varied according to circumstances which have to be closely investigated and their power was largely dependent upon their prestige. This was in turn intimately connected to their ability to secure support and patronage at court and control patronage in the province.[45]

The study of the methods and rivalries of the ministers also reveals a system of personal relations that was a far cry from the 'administrative monarchy'. There was, of course, a large measure of bureaucratic routine in these jobs, but at their highest levels they reflected the continuation of patrimonialism. Frostin has revealed, in his studies of the Pontchartrain, that the accumulation of tasks reflected the power of the individual, as well as of the clan, perhaps more than that of the bureaucratic office. He notes the 'very personalised character of political office, the fiction of the unity of the central government, the limits of the power of the controller-generalship of finances, and above all the importance of the combination of the marine with the king's household'. Colbert had not transformed the finances into a chief ministry, as is proved by the relative obscurity of his successors in the 1680s. Furthermore, the ministers were constantly trying to expand their power at each other's expense. Jérôme de Pontchartrain from 1699 to 1715 was constantly encroaching on the duties of the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and the controller-general.[46] His father, Pontchartrain, had been the patron of a financial clan, just as Colbert had been before him, which had helped him to finance the war of the League of Augsburg. As Chancellor, Pontchartrain behaved not as a bureaucrat but as the grand patron or protector of the magistrates. His relations with the First Presidents of the parlements were personalised and were all the more effective for being so.

> In a strong position by virtue of his own past as a magistrate and his close kinship ties with distinguished parlementaire families, strengthened too by

> the robe solidarities which led the judicial officers to see in him one of their own kind, in his task of making himself obeyed, Louis de Pontchartrain benefited from the real advantages of confidence and above all competence.[47]

The Chancellor was firm, but diplomatic and conciliatory in his dealings. He was both bureaucrat and patron, and a client of the King. Equally important, he was the head of a clan whose interests he was expected to preserve and extend. The same might be said of the Joly de Fleury, the Maupeou and the Lamoignon throughout the eighteenth century.

COURT SOCIETY

The nerve centre of the system of patronage and clientage, in so far as government was concerned, was that centre of brokerage, the royal court. It has only recently become clear how vital the royal court was as a central edifice of the political system. Unfortunately, it too has been neglected by historians and has rarely been studied as an essential part of the political structure in France. Ceremony and household offices have usually been interpreted as an elaborate trap set by Louis XIV to catch and domesticate the higher aristocracy. The thesis of the 'domestication' of the nobility (by which is meant the negation of its political power by diverting its energies in the inconsequential world of the court), of course, depends upon the view that what was really important in government took place in a bureaucracy that was separate from the court. But the court was the only central institution in the otherwise fragmented state–except for the royal council, which met at court. The court had originally been the royal household, which meant that it was at once the King's home and also the seat of his government. This dual function remained its characteristic, but the court by its size and permanence outstripped its function as household and greatly developed its function as instrument of government. In fact, the household was the nerve centre of the whole system, especially after the complete installation in Versailles in 1682. The administration, located in a wing of the château, thus had to function in the context of the court whose priorities were sometimes different.

Thus little can be understood about the politics and conflicts of the regime without taking the court into account. For the nobility, access to the King was to be had through court or household offices, and access to the King made it easy for courtiers to request favours for themselves or their clients. This enabled the King to exploit as fully as possible his position as ultimate patron with control over the acquisition of offices and allowed him to hold families enmeshed in a web of royal patronage. It must be emphasised that the system relied more on mutual benefits than on a clear triumph of the King over the nobility, because the King needed his nobles not only as an audience for his theatre of power but also as clients who could use their own influence over men to help him govern. Thus the high nobles, still influential in the provinces even if no longer permanently in residence, requested

favours which enhanced their prestige and therefore encouraged the provincial officials to respect and obey them and the King. Conversely, the King could not afford to be arbitrary in his treatment of members of leading families by refusing graces and favours because he would thereby attack their honour, in denying what was thought to be their due. Nor did he have an entirely free choice of candidates for high offices, being restricted to choosing among those families which were already powerful and therefore had *crédit* in the provinces. A delicate balance was needed–a balance that could only be kept with the hand of a skilled master or his trusted minister. If the King had to appear severe and unpredictable at times, this was in order to emphasise his position as supreme arbiter.

Elias' sociological perspective is currently very influential with those in search of an integrated view of culture and politics. His brilliant and pioneering sociological essay on court society was written as a thesis in 1933.[48] *The Court Society* contains not only Elias' theory of early modern society, but also the first glimpses of his work on 'the civilising process' that was to be published in two volumes in English in 1939.[49] He makes a major contribution to sociology both in his critique of the now-dated style of history of his day, and in his emphasis on the proper tasks and methods of sociology. However, his agenda for sociology in 1932 reads like one for good social history today. Historians today share many of his criticisms of old-fashioned history circa 1933, and through the new history of *mentalités,* have moved closer to his interest in a set of great psychological changes.

His explanatory framework places the accent on relationships and processes. His primary interest is nevertheless the civilising process. For him, this process is inextricably bound up with the 'monopoly mechanisms' of control over force and taxation (which the King never in fact had). But, and this is an extremely helpful emphasis, crucially important for him is not a simple notion of 'development', but the ideas of 'relationship', 'interdependence' and 'competition'. He also emphasises the existence of processes of cultural domination and communication and of social mimesis. He was attempting to conceptualise a whole society–a socio-political system or, as he terms it, a figuration. The key to this early modern society is 'the court society'.[50]

His model has a great deal to commend it. First and foremost is his emphasis on the existence of a socio-political system, a crucial aspect of which was its psychology. He offers a stimulating insight into the courtier and explains the rationale for behaviour we now find hard to understand. He shows how extravagance, concern with prestige and etiquette were of central importance to the court nobility. These concerns had a value to the ruler who exploited them as a form of control: many will be familiar with the remarks of Saint-Simon on Louis XIV's erection of greetings, ceremonial devices and household offices into a political currency.[51] His contribution is outstandingly helpful when he talks of the 'kingship mechanism' as the preservation of equilibrium within the socio-political system: in contrast to a whole tradition of historiography, he emphasises balance instead of unambiguous centralised power in the hands of the ruler. His emphasis on display and representation finds more than an echo in much current work on ceremony and

ritual.[52] His study of the great changes wrought by the development of civility constitutes a masterly sweep of psychohistory going well beyond Magendie's account of *La politesse mondaine*.[53] Elias even discusses one aspect that has become central to many scholars' interpretation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the emergence of public and private. There is thus a link that can be made between the work of two great sociologists, Habermas and Elias. For Elias, the absence of the private sphere is a particular feature of court society, and one that accords well with current emphasis on Habermas' theory of the public sphere.[54]

But if, on the one hand, the book is a masterpiece and remains an inspiration, on the other hand, it is today far from being beyond criticism on the grounds both of method and evidence. Although the book appears to centre upon the regime of Louis XIV as the epitome of court society, and Elias frequently cites the memoirs of Saint-Simon, most of his evidence actually comes from the eighteenth century, in fact from the middle period of the reign of Louis XV. Conduct books, dictionaries and articles from the *Encyclopédie* are his major sources. But there is no systematic use of evidence, there are no case studies of specific situations and he prefers to pick examples to support his argument. He assumes that the evidence of the conduct books upon which he draws so heavily is direct evidence of the civility of the elite of courtiers, and that they recount the way people really thought.[55] This view is problematic because perhaps they were often written for bourgeois and provincial outsiders. Rakes, for example, took their identity from a deliberate flouting of the new conventions. Elias' concern to generalise creates the impression of a sound structure, while he is misleading or unhelpful on specifics, in which he appears to be uninterested. Recent work on the nobility has revealed another flaw in his perspective. It seems that Elias retained a certain nineteenth-century vision of nobility–for him, it was about prestige, status, faction–as if it was not also about power and pursuit of wealth.[56] It can also be argued that he paid no attention to what is now a very important area of modern research, namely patronage and clientage–not only as a mechanism of social mobility but as a stabilising process in 'court society' or the baroque state. Perhaps the most challenging problem is that his analysis is a part of an all-embracing theory, for court society is only a part of a wider system. His work is being fitted by some into the reinvention of an alternative to Marx or Weber.

Overall, Elias' book remains a thought-provoking text, an inspired one given its date–and yet few working historians today would attempt to test his work with detailed research. The debate has moved on and too much new material has been accumulated for his analysis to stand intact. Unfortunately, in the present state of studies there is neither a satisfactory theoretical approach, nor sufficient empirical work on the court in France.[57] The present study aims to carry forward the work on politics in a court society into the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

POLITICAL CULTURE, PUBLIC SPACE AND THE POLITICS OF CONTESTATION

From the history of psychology to intellectual history appears but a stone's throw, and the latter constitutes another approach to the period. Much reinvigorated of late, the intellectual history of the *ancien régime* has contributed a number of concepts which have now entered the mainstream of history.[58] In attempting to conceptualise the *ancien régime* and its processes, intellectual historians have appealed to the concept of 'political culture'. It is a useful notion, broad enough to include a vast range of research and narrow enough, by virtue of the designation 'political', to focus attention. But it too is not without its difficulties. Not everyone working in this field would agree with the suggestion that there was a single political culture in a country as regionally and institutionally variegated as France. Moreover, in current debate, the concept of political culture is closely dependent upon three other contentious concepts: those of discourse, public space and public opinion. These too remain the subject of controversy. Because the present work engages with several of these themes, albeit from a very different perspective, it is necessary to consider the approaches in some detail.[59]

The idea of discourse is now employed by scholars in many fields of history and has been an extremely fecund notion. Drawing heavily on the works of structural anthropologists it constitutes a radical move away from the traditional history of ideas. By focusing on the language of texts (which might not be the conventional texts of theory but could equally well be the structure of a festival or the composition of a parade or painting) the basic categories, assumptions and values of a society may be unearthed or 'excavated'. Because language does not merely describe a reality outside itself, but actually constructs meaning by providing the structural framework in which we operate or even exist, language and power are intimately connected, as Foucault has shown. Therefore, investigating the concept of monarchy, for example, equals investigating monarchy itself. Does then investigating the concept of politics in one set of texts equal investigating politics itself? To assume as much would be to beg the question posed by this whole book, which focuses on power and 'politics' in practice.

The great strength of discourse is that it has indicated areas in which we should be more sensitive to changes in the basic categories in operation in political society. Further, it has made us realise that there are competing discourses in many domains of life–private, public, sexual, religious and political, for example. It has also highlighted the importance of the forms of expression or the language employed in politics, although the distinction between a historically identifiable discourse and the language employed at a given moment remains blurred. Nevertheless, the approach prompts a much more fluid and complex interpretation of politics; as such it is also an important advance on both the more static model of the *ancien régime* and the idea of fairly simple lines of development. It raises questions about the tenability of conventional forms of explanation in historical studies and is thus to be welcomed. An important theoretical difficulty, however, is that if discourse and

culture are allowed to include everything then the problem of singling out causes and effects remains unsolved–and perhaps insoluble. The problem of intentionality is neatly but unsatisfactorily sidestepped by making individuals into discursive constructions. This is relevant in the present context because two distinguished historians, Furet and Baker, both appeal to the notion that the inherent contradictions in the discourses provide the key to understanding the origins and development of the Revolution.[60] There are two problems with this. The first is that such a view tends to make the discourses into the principal actors in the historical drama, which undervalues the complexities of political struggles. Second, it is important to ask whether contradictions in the discourses were really responsible for the shape of politics–was politics not, for example, really 'about' political management, family strategies and patronage and clientage?

The concept of 'public space' is currently finding favour with historians of politics and language, particularly with those involved with public opinion, journalism and political theory, all of which are touched on in the present work. To the Hegelian distinction between family, civil society and the state (which have long been employed by some sociologists and political theorists to structure their reflections) Habermas added a fourth organisational category of modern society, the bourgeois public sphere, which first emerged during the eighteenth century. According to Habermas, in contradistinction to the (public) sphere of absolutist authority, a realm emerged in which 'private' bourgeois individuals employed their critical reasoning. Within this sphere, composed of cultural institutions such as salons, cafés and the printed matter, all of which were potentially independent of the state, newly politicised discussions could take place. 'Bourgeois' representations of the world sought 'transparency', that is to portray and organise it as it really was.[61] Although many historians draw upon Habermas' basic model, there are several different readings of him and some major disagreements.[62] The idea of a space or sphere is certainly helpful in suggesting that statements or texts need a forum in which to become effective, a 'space' in which they can legitimately be presented, and of course that space has recognised boundaries. It has its as yet only partly written history: elements of this history include the improvement of communications, and especially of printing, which led to a great expansion in the accessibility of information, particularly of scientific, literary and political information within a developing urban society, comprising new cultural institutions.[63] In this way, the sphere of life concerned with public events greatly expanded, and by the mid-eighteenth century intellectuals in France appear to have become aware of it. At this point, the idea of public opinion emerged in a more structured way and it has recently attracted the attention of historians.

In an influential contribution, Baker has traced the evolution of public opinion from a manipulable mixture of rumours and opinions in the 1750s to its characterisation as an imaginary tribunal, that is, an authority replacing the traditional monarchical authority as the ultimate arbiter in society.[64] For him, it appears to have been not so much the creation of a sociological group, such as the bourgeoisie, as 'a political invention', the product of 'a new politics of contestation'.

Baker's theory of a politics of contestation presupposes the concept of political culture, and it suggests that ideology was at stake in political struggles between the crown and the parlements from the 1750s onwards. But Baker's interpretative framework is drawn from sociology and philosophy, and is not based on a detailed study of judicial politics in any preceding period. Three chapters in the present work will argue that what could well be called a politics of contestation appeared in its essential characteristics in the 1730s, during the struggle over Jansenism, and that the 1750s saw an extension of these earlier themes. So, if a politics of contestation existed earlier, then why did it not produce 'public opinion' earlier? In fact, several historians would give an earlier date for the formation of public opinion, thus making the 1750s less of a turning point. Potentially much more damaging than chronology to the link between a new politics of contestation and public opinion, is the argument that such a politics may not have existed in the sense Baker understands it (his position is not simply that politics is contestation, but that it was ideological contestation). In contrast to his position, it will be argued that jurisdiction, and not political ideology (in his senses of either justice or will), was more of an issue for magistrates–around whom the debate has focused–from 1730 to 1770.[65] This raises the question of how important public opinion was in politics in that period. Are we dealing with an intellectual construction alone or a genuine political force? There is no denying that the concept of public opinion as a tribunal was used to legitimise both the participation of outsiders in politics and opposition from existing players, but how far it made any difference to the course of events before late 1788 may be questioned. Was it just a rhetorical justification? At issue in the debate is the significance of some conceptual categories used by people involved in politics, and the extent to which the nature of politics before the Revolution had been transformed by any such developments. Both of these problems are relevant to the present study. The detailed study of political practice suggests that 'public opinion' was far from transparent right up to the 1780s and that much of it was generated by the occult activities of Jansenists, courtiers and ministers.

DEFINING POLITICS IN *ANCIEN REGIME* FRANCE: AN UNSOLVED PROBLEM

Notwithstanding the emergence of a conceptual public sphere, politics in the *ancien régime* was still basically occult, courtly, and conducted by nobles whose notions of a separation between public and private were decidedly blurred. As Elias has suggested, the activities of courtiers cannot easily be said to fit into the public sphere, and even magistrates who were well aware of the distinction often entered into opposition for private reasons such as familial advancement. Several chapters of the present work try to give substance to the view that political life, as revealed by practice under the *ancien régime,* was sufficiently different from the ideas of it presupposed by the present notion of public space, to raise serious questions about precisely how the notion of the public sphere is to be applied to the political culture

of that time. As with public opinion, this is not to deny that this fourth dimension was being invented within the Enlightenment and was to have a subsequent importance in revolutionary politics. The eighteenth century was a great age of beginnings, of antecedents. These criticisms are not intended so much to invalidate the notion of public space as, by revealing it to be an interaction of many perhaps neglected elements, to point out the difficulty in locating it.

To a considerable extent, therefore, the new intellectual history of the *ancien régime* has not yet risen to its own challenge of its wide definition of discourse, because the evidence is still taken overwhelmingly from theoretical works and legal texts. Texts are not put in the context of prevailing practices and social texts are rarely studied.[66] Within this seductively all-embracing theory of discourse, it is necessary to remain constantly on guard against the temptation to assume that a given political discourse truly reflected an individual point of view, without fully considering the use to which the rhetoric was put and the activities of the participants. Often the discourses were employed in a deliberately mystificatory way by highly sophisticated rhetoricians. It is therefore vital to study closely the process by which the language used in the public sphere was generated.[67]

When the study of 'political' disputes is undertaken, the extent to which arguments took place in a language which did not truly reflect the main concerns of one set of participants is striking. For example (and this is an aspect explored at length in Chapters 11 and 12), was the parlementary crisis of 1730–2 really 'about' constitutional thought, as Carcassonne and his successors have assumed–even though there is overwhelming evidence of manipulation by a religious clique and the exploitation of very real jurisdictional concerns?[68] The Jansenist magistrates' recourse to the language of constitutionalism in the 1730s, and more so in the 1750s, on the face of it suggests constitutional motivation, when in fact their main aim was, arguably, religious salvation and they employed similar factional methods to their Jesuit opponents.[69] This is one of the few areas in which the intentions behind the language can be clearly elucidated. To use Quentin Skinner's phrase, the problem of what the theorists were doing has in this case been solved.[70] Thus, in the same way as for institutional history, too often there is a failure to use informal documentation or the evidence of day-to-day politics in all its forms, with the result that its extraordinary complexities are far from being fully appreciated. It is indeed ironic that studies of discourse implicitly seek to explain the political culture without concentrating on 'the facts of political life'. They thus come dangerously close to defining political culture by the works of those on its margins, commentators like journalists and *nouvellistes,* rather than those at the centre who were engaged in making decisions and managing competing interests.[71]

A theory of discourse that would have been more familiar to contemporaries is rhetoric. Every educated person in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been taught the principles of rhetoric, that is the use of the proper structure for a persuasive argument in a given context. Naturally, rhetoric had to be suited to the time and place, and this place was usually the public sphere. Works on rhetoric

focused particularly on eloquence for the clergy and lawyers. We shall see that the recognition of contemporary attitudes towards rhetorical positions is important for an understanding of certain aspects of political conflicts, particularly in the sphere of the parlementaires' jurisdictional politics.[72]

Undoubtedly, any study of politics must now take into consideration the prevailing forms of political expression. However, this study should not be confined to theoretical texts alone. Ceremonies such as the *lit de justice a*nd the royal funerals were vehicles for political conceptions and have been studied as such with great profit.[73] It is important to explore the practices, events and structures in order to understand the sets of values and assumptions articulated by the players in the game. These assumptions make up a language of politics, again in its widest sense. It is necessary to deal not just with the legalist, jurisprudential, formal language, but with the wider range of discourses or rhetorical forms.[74] The way of speaking about political situations in private correspondence, with its insight but also with its set of expectations and contemporary priorities, should be studied, together with the differences visible from our own perspective. Often 'actions speak louder than words', and this kind of 'discourse' can best be excavated by studying the activities of courtiers as much as, or perhaps more than, their writings, be these ephemera or attempts at analysis like La Bruyère's.

Of course, their activities are only recoverable through extant texts or monuments, whether letters, memoirs or dwellings. For such a study even historical memoirs—on which so much political history has been based, often without further recourse to correspondence that might corroborate or refute their assertions—are another problematic category of evidence. They represent a particular vision of politics, they define its boundaries by exclusion and inclusion. In many cases, their narrative is about the significance and valour of the actors in a game of personal and family advancement and honour. But when we confront the memoirs with the sort of material that lies in the archives of the authors' families we have a very different perspective. Political documentation is dwarfed in volume by the often dozens and sometimes hundreds of volumes of papers relating to investments in land, the operation of the family as a major creditor to clients and investments in financial schemes. It becomes clear that financial dealings at court are almost left out of the memoirs, except where the desire for riches, knowing no bounds, leads to excess by others, even breaching the lax codes of conduct that prevailed then. Noble participation in politics did not therefore correspond to the public image put forward, and if the court was, on the one hand, a theatre of civility it was, on the other hand, a rather more sordid centre for the seeking of place and the preservation of fortune. Much has been written about the former, little about the latter.

A second point is that a certain view of causation is enshrined in memoirs and court history in general—and it is usually a naive view. Their authors reveal a very strong tendency to reinterpret with hindsight the actions of courtiers or politicians as if all their actions were pre-planned and scheming. We do know that courtly behaviour required an exceptional degree of self-control, and this would no doubt