



The French Centralizing Monarchy (1624–1715)

by Carlo Capra

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Secondary Source:

Although the abstract noun absolutism was unknown in the seventeenth century, and would remain so until it was coined by Châteaubriand in 1797 and popularized by German nineteenth-century historians, a contemporary of Richelieu or Louis XIV would not have hesitated to describe France as an ‘absolute monarchy’ or to speak of the king’s ‘absolute power’. If asked to explain the adjective, he would have had recourse to some Latin formula like **legibus solutus** or **superiorem non recognoscens**: a monarch was absolute because his power came directly from God and was therefore independent from any other authority on earth, including that of pope and emperor; he was absolute, moreover, because his sovereignty was ‘no more divisible than the geometrical point’ (Cardin Le Bret, 1632) and because he was not subject to any law, being himself the source of legislation and the fountain of justice. . . .

The nobles admitted to the court of Versailles, after 1682, amounted to roughly 10,000 individuals, representing about 5 per cent of the French aristocracy, which in turn constituted about 1 per cent of the entire population. . . .

It remains true, however, that the assumption of personal rule by the Sun King at the death of **Mazarin** fostered a new climate of confidence and collaboration between power elites and the royal administration. Roger Mettam elaborates the point that ‘Louis, far from imposing a new kind of power structure on the country, worked within the constraints of a hierarchical and aristocratically dominated society, using the traditional powers of the monarchy to enlist the aid of some influential families and to reduce the obstructiveness of others’ and that ‘there was scarcely anything which could meaningfully be called “modern” in the France of Louis XIV’.¹ This seems rather difficult to accept if one thinks

¹ Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford, 1988), 8, 12.

Glossary:

legibus solutus: released from laws
superiorem non recognoscens:
 a king does not recognize a superior in his own kingdom

Mazarin: Italian cardinal who served as the Chief Minister to Louis XIII and Louis XIV

Citation: Carlo Capra, “Governance” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750: Volume II: Cultures and Power*, Hamish Scott ed., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 493-496.

of the restructuring of royal councils, of the central role attributed to the controller of finance in the administration and economy of the kingdom, of the establishment of the **General Farm** and the introduction of new forms of taxation, of the cowing of the **parlements**, of the partial codification of laws, of the build-up of military organization, of the consolidation of provincial intendancies, of the new dimensions of royal cultural patronage and propaganda, etc. A well-known authority on French ancien régime institutions, Bernard Barbiche, even speaks of 'la révolution de 1661' to mark the crucial phase of a transition from a justice state to a finance state, from arbitration to administration: 'in the seventeenth century, the monarchy became conscious of the fact that its task was not only to arbitrate and to judge, but also to foresee and to manage'.²

As far as the aristocracy is concerned, the shift from opposition against the state to cooperation and integration—as symbolized by the submission of the **Great Condé** after the peace with Spain of 1659—can be partly explained with the charismatic personality of Louis XIV and the aura of majesty and authority surrounding him. But no less important factors are the European trend towards the re-establishment of hierarchy and authority after 1660 so well described by Theodore K. Rabb³ and, especially, the widespread perception of the dangers of disobedience and of the advantages to be gained by basking in the Sun King's glory. This might mean spending at least part of the year at Versailles, a court whose function was not only the domestication of nobility, but that of a clearing house of patronage on a national scale. It also meant, however, seconding the action of royal administrators and agents in the provinces and meeting with promptness the king's financial demands in the pays d'états, where the voting and allocation of taxes was the business of the local assemblies of the three orders.

2 Bernard Barbiche, *Les institutions de la monarchie française à l'époque moderne* (Paris, 1999), 15–16.

3 Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1975).

General Farm: tax collectors who received bonus payments for collecting taxes for the French king

parlement: Supreme court in France

Great Condé: a powerful nobleman and general who challenged the power of Louis XIV