Jean Bodin and the Rise of Absolutist Theory

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CAMBRIDGE
at the University Press
1973
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Preface

One consequence of the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572 was the polarization of French constitutional ideas. Appearing on the one side was a radicalized version of the French constitution, which was advanced by the Huguenots to justify resistance. On the other side, and in opposition to it, was the theory of royal absolutism systematically developed by Bodin.

The central thesis of this book is that Bodin’s absolutism was as unprecedented as the doctrine it opposed. Prior to the 1570s the mainstream of the French tradition had been tentatively constitutionalist, and Bodin himself had given strong expression to that tendency in his Methodus of 1566. His earlier theory of sovereignty, elaborated in that work, was implicitly adapted to a notion of limited supremacy.

Ten years later, with the publication of his République, this position was abandoned. But the absolutism of the later work was so confused and strained that it cannot be taken as the natural outcome of the older view. It was rather an abrupt, and largely ill-founded, departure not only in Bodin’s intellectual career but in the general movement of French and European thought. It cannot be fully understood except as an ideological reaction to the seeming menace of the newer constitutionalism.

In the present work I have tried to explain how this absolutist view was formed. Insofar as I have been successful, I shall also have clarified at least some of the obscurities for which Bodin’s thought has been notorious. I should like to think that this study will also be of use to students of a later period. Much absolutist doctrine of the seventeenth century was either based on Bodin’s theory or else relied on similar assumptions.

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. All quotations have been translated in the notes as well as in the text.

All citations to the French version of the République refer to the Scientia Verlag facsimile reprint of the 1583 edition (Aalen, Germany, 1961), and all citations to the Methodus refer to the text of the edition of 1572 edited (with a French translation) by Pierre Mesnard (Presses Universitaires, Paris, 1951). Citations to these works also include references, in parentheses, to corresponding passages in the English translations. For the République, the numbers in parentheses refer to the facsimile reprint of the Knolles translation of 1606,
Preface


In many citations two dates are given. The former refers either to the first edition, to the main edition in the author's lifetime, or in some cases to the date when the work was composed. I have done this only for works written or published in or about the sixteenth century, and only where the date of the edition actually used is different. The additional date has been given only in the initial citation of a work.

I should like to thank the many friends and colleagues who gave me help and encouragement. My fellow-members of the University Seminar for the Study of Political and Social Thought at Columbia University discussed parts of an earlier version of this book in manuscript. At various times I benefited from conversations and exchanges with Ralph E. Giesey of the University of Iowa, John H. M. Salmon of Bryn Mawr College, and especially Donald R. Kelley of the New York State University at Binghamton, who was very often a source of helpful information and stimulating criticism. In preparing the present version I was very much indebted to Abraham Ascher of Brooklyn College for his thoughtful encouragement and to William L. Weinstein of Oxford University for a very useful conversation on the concept of limited supremacy. I am grateful to Donald R. Kelley and to Herbert A. Deane of Columbia University for careful readings of the final typescript.

I should like to thank the Council for Research in the Social Sciences of Columbia University and the European Institute of Columbia University for grants in aid of my research during the academic year 1968–9. The European Institute was then directed by the late Philip E. Mosely whose generosity to students as well as colleagues is already becoming a legend at Columbia. I also profited greatly from my attendance at the Internationale Bodin Tagung, Munich, 1970, which was organized by the Geschwister-Scholl-Institut für politische Wissenschaft of the University of Munich. The papers delivered at the Conference, together with reports of the discussions and a comprehensive Bodin bibliography, will soon be published.

I am, finally, especially grateful to my wife, Paula, not only for her editorial assistance but for her patience and encouragement throughout.

J.H.F.

New York City
February 1972