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978-0-521-36782-0 - Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power  
and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc

William Beik

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN EARLY MODERN HISTORY

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J. H. ELLIOTT OLWEN HUFTON

H. G. KOENIGSBERGER

**Absolutism and Society in  
Seventeenth-Century France**

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# Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France

State Power and Provincial Aristocracy  
in Languedoc

WILLIAM BEIK

*Northern Illinois University*



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**To P.H.B. and D.H.B.  
who started it all on the rue d'Assas**

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## Preface

This book is the product of many years' effort to grasp the special quality of government in seventeenth-century France and its relationship to the social system. The seventeenth century saw fascinating shifts away from a France of particularist dissidence towards a more centralized monarchy, but the essence of the change has not yet been successfully captured by historians. Standard generalizations like the decline of provincial liberties, the rise of personal government, the domestication of the nobility, and the use of a regime of *commissaires* to supplant one of *officiers* are abstractions based on a certain conception of the modern state which fail to come to grips with the special nature of authority in the seventeenth century. More important, they fail to deal with the question of class interest.

I set out, therefore, to explore the anatomy of absolutism by studying the system in action in one manageable region, Languedoc. I discovered rapidly that I was pursuing two distinct and somewhat contradictory purposes. The first was descriptive: to recreate the atmosphere of the various governing institutions, whose distinctiveness would be an essential part of any understanding of the nature of the system. The second was analytical: to explore the collective rule of these individuals and agencies as part of a system with social implications. But description requires attention to specific cases, while analysis calls for comparative treatment and interaction. Doing both requires jumping back and forth from the actors to the action. It risks repetition and enforces selectivity at the expense of comprehensiveness. Trying to do 'too much' has been a problem from the start. No one is more aware than I of the history that might have been written of each corporate body, each town, each conflict; of the narrative and legal precision which has been sacrificed to the analysis; and especially of the second-hand nature of my presentation of the economic realities which underlay the political action. But I am confident that a suggestive attack on the whole will be more useful than an exhaustive survey of some of the parts, and hopeful that my suggestions can lead to a better understanding of the system of absolutism, which, to my knowledge, has not been studied as a whole in any province.

I also have the advantage of relying on two magnificent syntheses which

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continue to amaze me: the old-fashioned and absolutely authoritative political history of Ernest Roschach, the nineteenth-century archivist of Toulouse who based his work in turn on the notes of Dom Devic and Dom Vaissete, eighteenth-century Benedictine friars; and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's massive *Paysans de Languedoc*, without which my ruling class would be living in a vacuum. The more I have learned, the more I have realized that these two men knew it all already.

This study began as a doctoral thesis directed by Franklin L. Ford at Harvard University. It was supported by a Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Fellowship which enabled me to spend the year 1966–7 in France, where I learned to appreciate the warmth of the people and landscape of the Midi and the riches of their archives. The thesis which was completed in 1969 concentrated on the Estates and the intendants. But it was already apparent that a full treatment of the subject would require more extensive investigation of the sovereign courts, the municipal governments, and the ministerial archives in Paris. This work was carried out over a number of later visits in the midst of other preoccupations. I am grateful to Northern Illinois University for support in purchasing microfilms in 1970, to the American Philosophical Society for a travel grant in the summer of 1971, and to the American Council of Learned Societies for a Grant-in-Aid in 1977 to complete the documentation. Northern Illinois University accorded me a sabbatical leave in the fall of 1977. In addition, I had a leave of absence in 1974–5 during which I was working on another project with the aid of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a fellowship from the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. These last occasions were devoted to the study of popular revolts and popular culture, but they nevertheless afforded me the opportunity to tend to a number of details concerning Languedoc.

Like all historical writing, this study bears the mark of its time. The original project was conceived amidst outrage and protest against the Vietnam War; its research was carried out in a France seething with discontent on the eve of Mai 68. The critical stance of Boris Porchnev was especially welcome under these conditions, even as the diffusion of the magnificent *thèses* of Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie made us conscious of the 'Annales' approach. At the time the two schools – Marxist and Annales – seemed somehow allied in an effort to unmask the tyrannies of history 'from above'. I was too much of a novice then to be aware of the debates over 'orders', 'classès' and 'feudalism' which were raging at that very moment in the French academy. But this study matured in the aftermath of those debates as waves of Marxism, structuralism, and regional 'conjunctural' history washed over the Anglo-Saxon intellectual world. Like many of the heirs of the sixties, I moved from critical iconoclasm

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towards assimilation of these various traditions and from anti-war alienation to analysis of social systems, while in the meantime falling under the sway of the striking 'cultural' approaches associated with E. P. Thompson, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Maurice Agulhon. All of these influences lie behind the present work, and I like to think that some of the anger of its inception has been translated into critical analysis, borrowing some of the strengths of these schools without abandoning its original critical momentum.

In a project begun so long ago the list of those who have helped along the way is enormous. When I was just beginning, Irene Brown shared her expertise on Toulouse with me; and when I arrived there Janine Estèbe took the time to introduce me to the departmental archives. She probably does not remember that without her prodding I might still be sitting in the Bibliothèque Municipale. Professors at the University of Toulouse were hospitable far beyond the call of duty, notably Nicole Castan, Yves Castan, Henri Gilles, Frédéric Mauro, and Philippe Wolff. Jacques Sennelier and Jean-Luc Schreiner initiated a long, productive friendship by showing me the countryside south of Toulouse, and Robin Briggs shared his archival knowledge with me.

Through the years I have benefited from the attention of innumerable archivists and library personnel, many of them nameless. I am grateful to them all, and especially to Henri Blaquièrre, conservateur-en-chef, Robert Nadal, and Anne de Font-Reaulx in the Archives Départementales de la Haute-Garonne; to Odon de Saint-Blanquat, archiviste, and the indomitable Madame Maillard in the Archives Municipales de Toulouse; and to Jean Sablou, directeur, in the Archives Départementales du Gard. A number of experts read all or parts of this study, including Paul H. Beik, C. H. George, David Hunt, Sharon Kettering, J. Russell Major, Richard Price, Marvin Rosen, Harvey Smith, Gerald L. Soliday, and Charles Tilly. My colleagues in the history department at Northern Illinois were consistently supportive, especially Emory G. Evans, Stephen Kern, J. Carroll Moody, and Otto Olsen. I want to thank Cheryl Fuller, Elaine Kittelson, and Jean Schiller for so cheerfully and expertly coping with the typing, and Joseph Parot and Myrtie Podschwit whose help in Founders Library was indispensable. I also want to thank two of the editors of this series, Olwen Hufton and J. H. Elliott, whose comments have greatly improved the text. I am grateful to Mark and Marion Cummings, Claude Jego and Michel Thomas, Dolores Portis, and Terry Murphy for special kinds of encouragement, and to Nancy L. Roelker whose warm support through the years has meant a great deal to me.

Then there are those whose influence has been so pervasive that no simple thanks are adequate. My powers of analysis and my understanding of the

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real world have been immeasurably enriched by ongoing dialogue with three friends and historians: David Hunt, Larry Portis, and Paul Robinson. My sons Eric Kauffman and Carl Kauffman, who have had to grow up living with a Languedoc they have never seen, contributed endless patience, encouragement and good cheer. Finally there is Millie Beik who has taught me more than words can acknowledge and whose influence is alive on every page.

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A.A.E. France	Archives des Affaires Étrangères, Paris. Fonds France
A.D. Gard	Archives Départementales du Gard
A.D. Hér.	Archives Départementales de l'Hérault
A.D. H-G.	Archives Départementales de la Haute-Garonne
A.D. Lozère	Archives Départementales de la Lozère
A.M. Albi	Archives Municipales d'Albi
A.M. Mende	Archives Municipales de Mende
A.M. Mp	Archives Municipales de Montpellier
A.M. Nm	Archives Municipales de Nîmes
A.M. Tse	Archives Municipales de Toulouse
A.N.	Archives Nationales, Paris
Aubéry	Antoine Aubéry, ed., <i>Mémoires pour l'histoire du Cardinal duc de Richelieu</i> , 2 vols. Paris, 1660
B.M. Tse	Bibliothèque Municipale de Toulouse
B.N.	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
Clément	Jean-Baptiste Colbert, <i>Lettres, instructions et mémoires</i> , ed. Pierre Clément, 7 vols. Paris, 1861–73
Depping	Georges-Bernard Depping, ed., <i>Correspondance administrative sous le règne de Louis XIV</i> , 4 vols. Paris, 1850–5
Dubédat	Jean-Baptiste Dubédat, <i>Histoire du Parlement de Toulouse</i> , 2 vols. (Paris, 1885)
Le Pesant	Michel Le Pesant, <i>Arrêts du conseil du roi: règne de Louis XIV</i> . Paris, 1976
Lubl.	A. D. Lublinskaya, ed., <i>Lettres et mémoires adressés au Chancelier P. Séguier</i> . Moscow–Leningrad, 1966
Malenfant	Étienne de Malenfant, 'Mémoires, collections et remarques du palais', A.D. H-G. mss. 147–9
Mel. Col.	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Cabinet des Manuscrits, Mélanges Colbert
ms. fr.	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, manuscrits français

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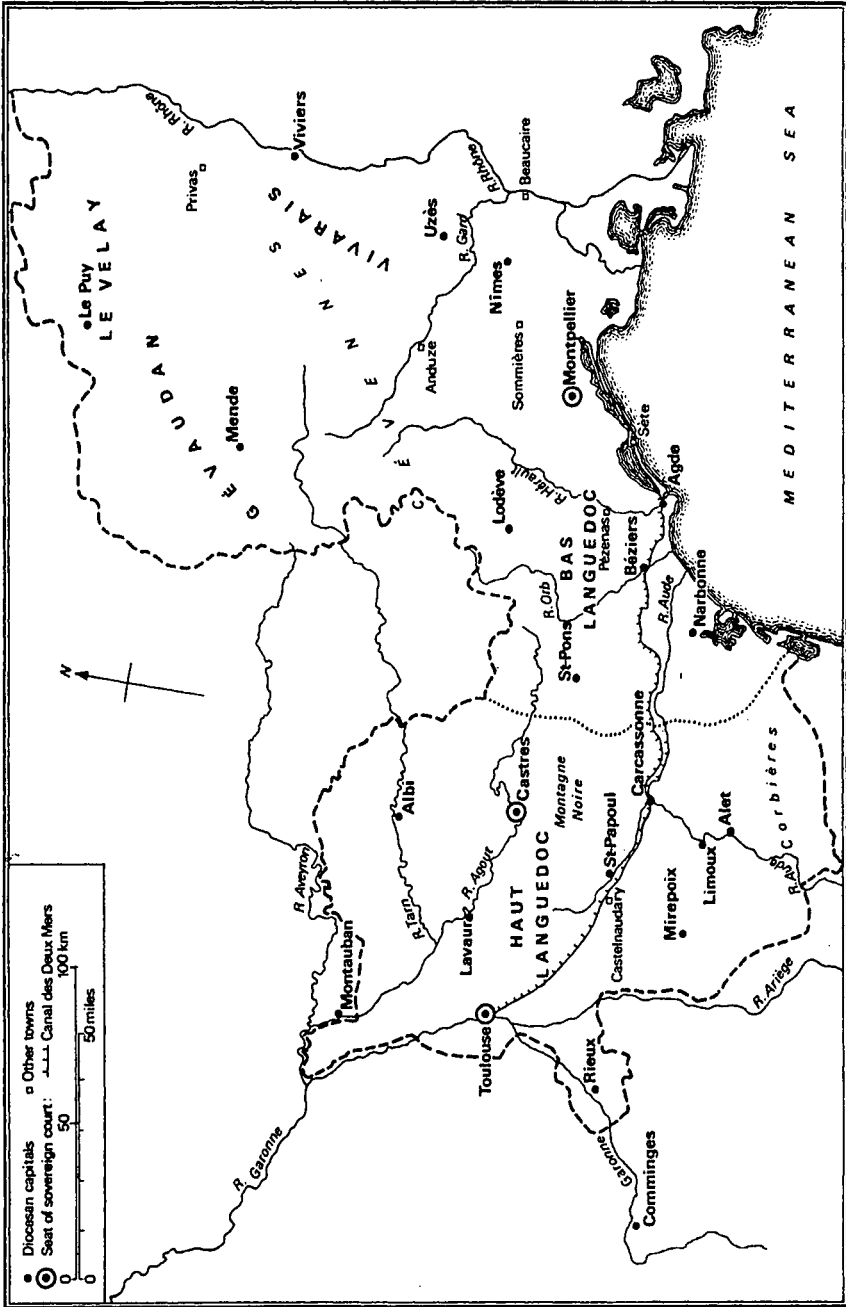
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Narbonne, Inventaire nouv. acq.	Ville de Narbonne, <i>Inventaire des archives communales antérieures à 1790</i> , série BB, vol. 1. Narbonne, 1872 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, manuscrits français, nouvelles acquisitions
Porchnev	Boris Porchnev, <i>Les Soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648</i> . Paris, 1963
P-V	Procès-verbaux of Estates of Languedoc
Roschach, vol. XIII	Dom Claude Devic and Dom J. Vaissete, <i>Histoire générale de Languedoc</i> , vol. XIII by Ernest Roschach. Toulouse, 1876
Roschach, vol. XIV	Dom Claude Devic and Dom J. Vaissete, <i>Histoire générale de Languedoc</i> , vol. XIV (documents) ed. Ernest Roschach. Toulouse, 1876
Rozoi	Barnabé Farmian de Rozoi, <i>Annales de la ville de Toulouse</i> , 4 vols. Paris, 1771–6



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Languedoc in the seventeenth century