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978-0-521-70956-9 - A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

William Beik

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A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern France

A magisterial new history of French society between the end of the middle ages and the Revolution by one of the world's leading authorities on early modern France. Using colorful examples and incorporating the latest scholarship, William Beik conveys the distinctiveness of early modern society and identifies the cultural practices that defined the lives of people at all levels of society. Painting a vivid picture of the realities of everyday life, he reveals how society functioned and how the different classes interacted. In addition to chapters on nobles, peasants, city people, and the court, the book sheds new light on the Catholic church, the army, popular protest, the culture of violence, gendered relations, and sociability. This is a major new work that restores the *ancien régime* as a key epoch in its own right and not simply as the prelude to the coming Revolution.

WILLIAM BEIK is Emeritus Professor of History at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. His previous publications include *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France: The Culture of Retribution* (1997) and *Louis XIV and Absolutism: A Study with Documents* (2000).

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*For Carl Kauffman,
in loving memory of
Eric Kauffman*

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Preface

Constructing a social and cultural history of early modern France is a fascinating but intimidating project. It requires an exploration of every level of society and an understanding of each group's life experiences, fears, hopes, beliefs. It requires knowledge of their access to resources, their collective efforts, the disparity of their class positions. Attempting to attain these goals was a humbling experience for me. Instead of simply formulating and organizing the accumulated knowledge of many years of teaching and research, I found myself scrambling to fill enormous gaps in my knowledge. Contrary to my intention of mastering the monographic literature on each topic, I ended up having to cite certain key studies without acknowledging many others.

The concept of social history is vast and undefined. There is no such thing as a master narrative that puts all the parts in their places. A would-be commentator must decide which aspects to feature and how they are to be connected. The result will be one particular story out of the many possible stories that someone else could put together by making different choices and exclusions. In my case the primary goal has been to explain how the social system operated in the period of royal rule, while at the same time conveying an appreciation of the lives and experiences of the working majority. I have tried to explain clearly the workings of institutions and processes that will be unfamiliar to a modern reader. The "culture" in the title is meant in the anthropological sense of customary behavior, belief systems, and ritual practices. This culture complements and extends an understanding of the social. I do not mean "high" culture in the sense of the creative arts, literature, philosophy, and science. Those achievements are lightly covered or not at all.

My approach to social history is no more value-neutral than anyone else's. Certain choices have colored my account. First of all, I emphasize the "otherness" of early modern French society. This

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means stressing the ways it was distinctive, not the ways it was becoming modern. It means thinking of the society as a system, held together by power relationships, cultural habits, and economic forces. This approach, which might be called “structural,” is decidedly out of fashion. But unless we think, however tentatively, of each element as part of a larger system, there is no way to assess the relationship of the parts to the whole or to each other, and consequently no principle for the selection of which elements to study. Why explore literacy, women’s roles, the lives of servants, or crop rotations, for example? Focusing on structure also means emphasizing long-term continuities, but without denying the importance of change. There is no need to adopt the extreme position of certain *Annalistes* who think in terms of a Braudelian *longue durée* or of *l’histoire immobile*. Change is everywhere, and progress needs to be explored, but that is not the primary goal here.

Second, this is not a book that emphasizes conflicting interpretations. My goal has been to offer one coherent, descriptive interpretation which readers can grasp and use. The best way to understand a society is to acquire one consistent view of it and then to criticize that view by exploring alternatives, rather than approaching each issue as a heated debate. I encourage readers to approach my book in this spirit. Many alternative views can be found in the lists of further reading after each chapter. The emphasis is on accessible books in English, but I have also included certain key monographs in French.

Third, I concentrate on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the center of gravity of this distinctive society which spans the years from 1400 to 1789. Those two centuries saw at its height the classic France of powerful monarchy, elegant society, and dominant nobility. Each chapter explores a different aspect of that society and its evolution throughout the period. Some go back to medieval origins, others follow through into the eighteenth century, but the focus is always on the central sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Fourth, my focus is the extensive France of many provinces, not the king, the court, and the city of Paris. Many vital events did take place at the center, but Paris was not France, and it is important to remember that we are dealing with a large, diverse country filled with tens of thousands of active participants who were not easily swayed by anything that happened at court or in the capital.

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Finally, I often highlight longer, descriptive examples, drawn in many cases from lesser-known monographs, in order to convey more concretely the distinctive nature of life in those times. These longer descriptions occupy the space that might have been devoted to discussion of the many regional variations that were so characteristic of French society. Readers will have to accept on faith that the examples given are fairly representative of common characteristics, despite the fact that there were a great many variations on these common themes.

Choices also imply omissions. Those familiar with my book on absolutism may be surprised to find that I do not directly discuss state institutions or the way the political system worked. Issues of power and state development are important, of course, but I have avoided the complicated and tedious task of explaining how the government operated. Readers will therefore need a certain familiarity with the political history of France, because I do not discuss the reigns of kings or provide any political narrative. The brief synopsis of early modern French history provided on pp. 367–71 may help with their orientation.

Other dimensions are also omitted. Aspects of economic history, such as patterns of trade, systems of manufacturing, or types of business enterprises, are only lightly covered. Colonies and naval activities are slighted. Cultural values, as defined above, on the other hand, provide a natural complement to social–historical questions by adding psychological factors such as identities, motivations, and behavior to the material factors provided by social history.

The chapters begin with basic social and economic arrangements involving nobles, peasants, and towns. They move on to the rise of the new judicial–financial class, the many dimensions of religious life, the impact of the royal army, the sociology of group solidarities and conflicts, traditional cultural practices, and the rise of new cultural influences. The last two chapters explore the aristocratic forces at court and, finally, the changing world of the eighteenth century.

This book would never have been finished without the calm and intellectual stimulation I enjoyed as Senior Fellow at Emory University's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry in 2005–6. I am deeply grateful for this privilege. I was also assisted in 1999 by a research grant from the University Research Committee of Emory. I want to thank Richard Fisher and Michael Watson at Cambridge Press for their longstanding editorial support.

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But above all, I want to acknowledge my deeper obligation to all the friends, colleagues, and students who have provided inspiration and encouragement during the long academic career that produced this book. My thanks go out to the students of History 311 at Northern Illinois University and History 315 at Emory University; and to graduate students who became friends from both institutions, including Greg Andrews, Darryl Dee, Carolyn Eichner, Amy Enright, Viviana Grieco, Chris Guthrie, Colleen Guy, Jeff Houghtby, Brian Kaschak, Nancy Locklin, Michael Perri, Doug Powell, Steve Reinhardt, Mike Rogers, and Jay Smith. A project like this is sustained over the years by more than just scholarly influence. Friends and colleagues, new and old, have been supportive and inspirational in many different ways. These include Wally Adamson, Yves-Marie Bercé, the late Tom Blomquist, Sue Bowen and the late Ralph Bowen, Jim Collins, Natalie Davis, Robert Descimon, Jonathan Dewald, Jim Farr, Margot Finn, C.H. George, Janet and David Greene, Alain Guery, Al Hamscher, Mack Holt, David Hunt, Jitka Hurych, Stephen Kern, Sharon Kettering, Charles McColleston, Jamie Melton, Judith Miller, Otto and Corinne Olsen, David and Margaret Parker, Matt Payne, Larry Portis and Christiane Passevent, Richard Price, Jonathan Prude, Marcus Rediker, Paul Robinson, the late Nancy Roelker, the late Marvin Rosen, Jacques and Danielle Sennelier, Helen Shirley and the late Jim Shirley, Jerry Soliday, Sharon Stocchia, and the late Chuck Tilly. Finally, above them all, there is Millie, friend, partner, lover, critic, whose influence has been immeasurable. This book is dedicated to Carl Kauffman in loving memory of his brother, Eric Kauffman.

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Map. Map of early modern France