CHAPTER I

Historians, absolute monarchy and the provincial estates

THE 'WHIG INTERPRETATION' OF FRENCH HISTORY

After witnessing the rise and often rapid fall of three monarchies, two empires, five republics and the Vichy regime in the space of less than two centuries, the French people can be forgiven a certain scepticism about the durability of both their rulers and the country's political institutions. Yet through the ruins and debris left by kings, emperors and politicians of every hue, the French have long been able to seek solace in the fact that the state went on forever. The existence of a strong, centralised bureaucracy, simultaneously loved and loathed by the public, supplied a sense of permanence and reliability denied to the mere mortals who flitted across the political stage. Since at least the early nineteenth century, veneration of the state and a belief in its centralising mission has formed an important part of French national identity. It offered a force for unity that a divided and politically traumatised people could cling to, and, not surprisingly, scholars looked back beyond 1789 in search of its origins. The result was what we might describe as the French version of the Whig school of history. Whereas the British exponents of that school believed that the history of their country could be written in terms of a long and triumphant march from the Magna Carta to parliamentary democracy, the French saw a no less inexorable rise of the state. The argument can be pushed back to the middle ages when the monarchy gradually gained control of formerly independent provinces such as Brittany, Burgundy, Provence or Languedoc, but it is the first half of the seventeenth century that is usually taken to mark the birth of the Leviathan.

Historians of the early nineteenth century, most famously Alexis de Tocqueville, believed that it was during the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV that the monarchy first began the process of centralisation with the 'same patterns' and the 'same aims' as in their own day.[1] Throughout his

[1] A. de Tocqueville, *The ancien régime and the French revolution*, trans. S. Gilbert (London, 1955), p. 132.

inspirational work, *The ancien régime and the French revolution*, Tocqueville made repeated references to the alleged continuity of the French government before and after 1789, declaring that in the eighteenth century it 'was already highly centralised and all-powerful'.[2] Indeed, 'centralisation fitted in so well with the programme of the new social order that the common error of believing it to have been a creation of the revolution is easily accounted for'.[3] To justify his thesis, Tocqueville identified a series of interrelated factors including the exclusion of the nobility from an active part in public affairs, the decline of intermediary bodies, the dominance of Paris over the provinces and the establishment of a central authority of royal council, ministers and intendants.[4]

There was nothing particularly original about these arguments.[5] In 1844, Alexandre Thomas had published a magnificent study of Burgundy during the reign of Louis XIV in which he presented the Sun King, Richelieu, François I and even Louis XI as servants of the 'great national cause' through their contribution to 'the forging of unity through centralisation'.[6] Thomas was engaging in a polemic with Legitimists about the merits of the ancient privileges and charters of the French provinces, which he represented as a source of weakness and abuse, while Tocqueville had the regime of Napoléon III firmly in his sights. Yet their arguments formed part of a much broader interpretation of the *ancien régime* that took root in the same period and which has become known to generations of students as the 'age of absolutism'. The broad contours of that thesis are reassuringly familiar.[7] From 1614 to 1789, the French monarchy ruled without recourse to the Estates General, seemingly giving concrete expression to the theory that the king was accountable to God alone. Representative government in the provinces was also sharply curtailed with, among others, the provincial estates of Dauphiné, Normandy, Guyenne and the Auvergne falling into abeyance.

During the reign of Louis XIII the foundations of absolutism were laid. Under the gaze of the cardinal de Richelieu, the Calvinist citadel of La Rochelle was stormed in 1628, marking the end of the Huguenot 'state within a state'. Within a few years, it seemed as if the iron cardinal had

[2] For this, and other examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 25, 61, 84–5, 94, 222.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 88. [4] *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 62, 64–5, 99, 100–1, 222.
[5] Tocqueville borrowed extensively from P. E. Lemontey, *Essai sur l'établissement monarchique de Louis XIV et sur les altérations qu'il éprouva pendant sa vie de prince* (Paris, 1818).
[6] A. Thomas, *Une province sous Louis XIV. Situation politique et administrative de la Bourgogne de 1661 à 1715, d'après les manuscrits et les documents inédits du temps* (Paris, 1844), pp. xiv–xv.
[7] The following is no more than an attempt to distil the most significant elements of what we might call the absolutist thesis, and some of its tenets have been subsequently proved to be inaccurate.

made good his boast to 'abase the pride of the nobles'.[8] After the king's brother, Gaston d'Orléans, had led the latest in a long string of unsuccessful aristocratic revolts, Richelieu ordered the execution of his principal lieutenant, the duc de Montmorency, in October 1632. Such ruthless treatment of a powerful grandee sent an unequivocal message that the habitual disobedience of the high aristocracy would no longer be tolerated. Finally, once France had officially entered the Thirty Years War in 1635, the government's desperate need for funds obliged it to circumvent traditional judicial and administrative officeholders, whose loyalty and efficiency were questioned. They were replaced by the intendants, holding revocable commissions, whose broad professional remit was defined to include 'justice, police and finance'. It was these new state servants who were supposedly in the vanguard of centralisation.

When Richelieu and Louis XIII died within a few months of each other the political scene changed dramatically. In 1643, the new king, Louis XIV, was a mere child, and the regency government of Anne of Austria and cardinal Mazarin was soon confronted by a backlash led by angry officeholders and disgruntled aristocrats, with the latent support of a war weary populace. The boy king was driven temporarily from his capital during the *parlementaire* Fronde of 1648–9, and then saw his own relatives, headed by the Grand Condé, raise their standards against Mazarin. Although eventually defeated, the Fronde was a painful reminder of royal weakness, providing a lesson that was not lost on the young monarch. After Mazarin's death he was determined to complete the work that Richelieu had started, breaking the power of the grandees by obliging them to attend upon him in his magnificent chateau at Versailles where, cut off from their power bases in the provinces, they were effectively domesticated. New robe nobles, allegedly of middle-class origins, dominated government and, after being chased from the provinces during the Fronde, the intendants returned to their posts with their powers and status enhanced. Finally, the parlements were punished for their earlier rebelliousness by a law of 1673, which obliged them to register laws before making remonstrances.

Here, then, are the main ingredients of a thesis that seemingly carried all before it, ensuring that historians long treated the monarchy of Louis XIV and absolutism as synonymous. There was, of course, one glaring problem with the concept of the Sun King commanding a powerful, centralised state – the revolution. How could the monarchy have declined so rapidly and comprehensively? In answering that question, historians were undoubtedly

[8] L. André, ed., *Testament politique* (Paris, 1947), p. 95.

aided by the personal shortcomings of Louis XV and Louis XVI, neither of whom could match the regal splendour of their great predecessor. Yet, as both men had employed ministers whose commitment to reform was unquestioned, a more weighty explanation was required. The answer was to be found in the persistence of privilege. According to this interpretation, the death of Louis XIV was followed almost immediately by a reaction of powerful privileged groups led by the parlements, the Catholic Church and the court aristocracy. Their largely selfish opposition to egalitarian reform of the fiscal system paved the way to the royal bankruptcy that preceded the revolution of 1789.[9] The monarchy had thus been unable to complete its centralising mission, and to return once more to Tocqueville, it was the revolution that picked up the baton, completing 'at one fell swoop, without warning, without transition, and without compunction . . . what in any case was bound to happen, if by slow degrees'.[10] With this teleological flourish, worthy of the finest Whig historians, he nailed his colours to the mast; the rise of the modern French state was one long and inevitable process.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE MONARCHY

If few historians were tempted to put matters quite so bluntly as Tocqueville, by the late nineteenth century the absolutist thesis was firmly established as the orthodox interpretation. Rare were those like Pierre Ardascheff, who, on the eve of the First World War, published an innovative study of the intendants during the reign of Louis XVI, arguing that they worked in a mutually rewarding partnership with the provinces.[11] Ardascheff also rejected Tocqueville's claim that the intendants were part of a tightly controlled, centralised administration, suggesting instead that they were far more independent than was usually imagined.[12] The impact of his argument was limited, and subsequent historians tended to reinforce the prevailing interpretation. After examining the early decades of Louis XIV's personal rule, the influential Georges Pagès declared:

[9] Historians of all political hues were attracted to this interpretation, see: A. Cobban, 'The parlements of France in the eighteenth century', *History* 35 (1950), 64–80; F. L. Ford, *Robe and sword. The regrouping of the French aristocracy after Louis XIV* (London, 1953); and A. Soboul, *The French revolution, 1787–1799. From the storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (London, 1989), pp. 27–8, 37, 81–2.

[10] Tocqueville, *Ancien régime and revolution*, p. 51.

[11] P. Ardascheff, *Les intendants de province sous Louis XVI* (Paris, 1909).

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 95–6, 400.

> . . . the former frondeurs have become the most attentive courtiers. The parlements register edicts without saying a word. The assemblies of the [provincial] estates no longer even discuss the *don gratuit*. The malcontents have disarmed or are compelled to fall silent.[13]

A belief in the modernising role of the monarchical state was another familiar feature of the historical landscape. As a result, many of the great institutional and political histories of the first half of the twentieth century traced the seemingly permanent struggle between the crown and the parlements or provincial estates of the realm.[14] Historians were divided about the virtues of royal polices and the legitimacy of the provincial opposition, but they were united in assuming that the extension of state power had been achieved through confrontation and conflict.

There was also a general consensus that one of the consequences of the governmental changes of the seventeenth century was the emergence of a more impersonal bureaucratic monarchy.[15] That interpretation has received its fullest recent expression in the works of Michel Antoine, who has examined both the maturation of the governmental structure of councils, ministers and intendants created by Louis XIV and its shortcomings.[16] As Antoine makes clear, the almost exponential growth of business transacted by the *contrôleur général* transformed his office into the real heart of government. Yet the sheer volume and complexity of the workload handled by the *contrôle général* meant that even the most dedicated monarch was unable to control its operations. As a result, decisions supposedly emanating from the king's council were being made elsewhere by the increasingly specialised technocrats of what he terms the 'administrative monarchy'. Antoine's works are those of a passionate defender of the system, but he is ultimately forced to concede that the monarchy died by its own hand by creating a bureaucratic structure that was beyond the

[13] G. Pagès, *La monarchie d'ancien régime en France de Henri IV à Louis XIV*, 3rd edn. (Paris, 1941), p. 181.

[14] A classic example was provided by the spat between Marcel Marion and Barthélemy Pocquet about the rights and wrongs of the infamous Brittany affair, M. Marion, *La Bretagne et le duc d'Aiguillon, 1753–1770* (Paris, 1898), and B. Pocquet, *Le pouvoir absolu et l'esprit provincial. Le duc d'Aiguillon et La Chalotais*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1900–1).

[15] For a number of influential examples, see: Pagès, *Monarchie d'ancien régime*, pp. 134–81; M. Bordes, 'Les intendants éclairés de la fin de l'ancien régime', *Revue d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* (1961), 57–83 and his *L'administration provinciale et municipale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1972); F. Bluche, *Louis XIV* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 133–56, 615–26; J. Egret, *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire* (Paris, 1970), pp. 43–5, 93–132; and J. Rule, ed., *Louis XIV and the craft of kingship* (Ohio, 1969), pp. 9–10, 28–30.

[16] M. Antoine, *Le conseil du roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva, 1970), pp. 377–431, 629–34.

control of the king and the traditional ideas and institutions that supported him.[17]

According to Antoine, one of the consequences of these developments was the emergence of modern public employees, 'the first senior civil servants'.[18] Eighteenth-century France gave the world the term bureaucracy, and certain of its characteristics can be glimpsed in key institutions, offering some qualified support for his hypothesis. The engineers of the *Ponts et Chaussées* are amongst the most persuasive examples, as they were appointed by competitive examination, were paid salaries and retirement pensions and founded their careers upon talent rather than personal contacts.[19] Philippe Minard has observed similar patterns in his thoughtful analysis of Colbert's inspectors of manufacturers, and he concludes that amongst their ranks 'the face of the civil servant can be glimpsed through that of the *commissaire*'.[20] The employees of the *ferme générale*, the intendants of finance and the *premiers commis* who served in the bureaux of the secretaries of state can also be added to this list.[21] In a period when finance ministers flitted across the stage as frequently as actors in a theatrical farce, it was their permanent officers who provided a much needed repository of knowledge and competence. It was in these lower tiers of the government that the backbone of the state machine was to be found, and in terms of personnel at least the continuity between the *ancien régime* and its revolutionary successors is beyond doubt.[22] There were, therefore, forces within the monarchy that were seeking to move in a more uniform and egalitarian direction, and from an administrative perspective there was undoubtedly a degree of continuity in the years after 1789. Yet the degree of modernisation of the governmental structure should not be exaggerated, and during the last twenty-five years the traditional conception of a bureaucratic, administrative monarchy has been subject to serious challenge.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 634. [18] *Ibid.*, p. 390.

[19] J. Petot, *Histoire de l'administration des ponts et chaussées, 1599–1851* (Paris, 1958), and A. Picon, *L'invention de l'ingénieur moderne. L'école des ponts et chaussées, 1747–1851* (Paris, 1992).

[20] P. Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme. État et industrie dans la France des lumières* (Paris, 1998), pp. 75–114, esp. 113.

[21] See: G. T. Matthews, *The royal general farms in eighteenth-century France* (New York, 1958), pp. 185–227; J. Clinquart, *Les services extérieurs de la ferme générale à la fin de l'ancien régime. L'exemple de la direction des fermes du Hainaut* (Paris, 1995), pp. 60, 183–208; and J. Félix, 'Les commis du contrôle général des finances au XVIIIe siècle', *L'administration des finances sous l'ancien régime. Colloque tenu à Bercy les 22 et 23 février 1996* (Paris, 1997), 81–102.

[22] C. H. Church, *Revolution and red tape. The French ministerial bureaucracy, 1770–1850* (Oxford, 1981), offers an impressive analysis of the development of French bureaucracy.

REVISIONISM AND THE NEW ORTHODOXY

It was with a certain amusing symmetry that Yves-Marie Bercé published his textbook, *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme* in France at exactly the same time as Nicholas Henshall's, *The myth of absolutism*, appeared in Britain.[23] These diametrically opposed texts illustrate perfectly the gulf separating the hostile camps in the debate. Bercé has written of the rising power of the French state in the half century after 1630, with Mazarin's victory in the Fronde marking 'the triumph of the very absolutism and centralisation against which it had been directed'.[24] It is a firm restatement of the classic thesis, and when Bercé declares that 'Mazarin wagered on a cause which had a long past and a glorious future: the power of the French state' his stance is unequivocal. He is not alone, and François Bluche, while more nuanced in his judgement, suggested in his acclaimed biography of Louis XIV that the king could be considered the 'first enlightened despot'.[25]

Henshall, on the other hand, rejects the term absolutism as a myth resulting from a misreading of the political system of the *ancien régime* by the historians of the nineteenth century.[26] As he freely acknowledges, his work has been inspired by the writings of, among others, Roger Mettam and Peter Campbell, who form part of the radical wing of revisionist thinking. They are at pains to point out that to talk of absolutism is to commit the sin of anachronism, and to risk imposing a whole series of value judgements about the nature of the French monarchy that would have made little sense to contemporaries.[27] When an historian as distinguished as Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret can describe the death of Louis XIV as ushering in a period of 'destalinisation',[28] it is easy to share their misgivings. Louis XIV

[23] Y-M. Bercé, *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme, 1598–1661* (Paris, 1992), published in English as *The birth of absolutism. A history of France, 1598–1661* (London, 1996), and N. Henshall, *The myth of absolutism: change and continuity in early modern European monarchy* (London, 1992), Sharon Kettering, *French society, 1589–1715* (London, 2001), pp. 81–95, has recently made a useful attempt to steer between the two extremes.

[24] Y-M. Bercé, *Birth of absolutism*, p. 177–8.

[25] Bluche, *Louis XIV*, p. 619. A claim repeated by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The ancien régime. A history of France, 1610–1774* (Oxford, 1996), p. 130.

[26] Henshall, *Myth of absolutism*, pp. 210–12. As does J. B. Collins, *The state in early modern France* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–2, in another important general survey.

[27] For a sample of their comments, see: Henshall, *Myth of absolutism*, pp. 199–212; R. Mettam, *Power and faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 6–7, 34–41; and P. R. Campbell, *The ancien régime in France* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 46–70, and his *Louis XIV* (London, 1993).

[28] G. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French nobility in the eighteenth century*, trans. W. Doyle (Cambridge, 1984), p. 10. The introduction to this hugely influential work is entitled 'le ghetto doré de la noblesse royale', and has as its starting point the assumption of an aristocracy reacting against the absolutism of Louis XIV.

behaved on occasions as an autocrat, as the Huguenots and the nuns of Port-Royal could both testify, but he should never be compared with modern tyrants. As a result, Mettam treats the term 'absolutist historians' as if it was synonymous with error, and Campbell has suggested that 'baroque state' be used as an alternative.[29] Revisionism is, however, about more than just terminology, and it strikes at the heart of our understanding of the development of the French state, with almost every aspect of the traditional interpretation being vigorously challenged.

As we have seen, it was long argued that the political authority of the nobility rapidly declined once the great aristocrats had been confined to Versailles, far way from their power bases in the provinces. Rather than seeing the palace as part of a deliberate strategy to tame the nobility, historians such as Mettam and Jeroen Duindam have offered an alternative explanation.[30] They have drawn our attention to the court's primary role as royal household, an arena to which the grandees naturally gravitated both to protect their own rank and status and to pursue their wider personal and family strategies. It was through attendance upon the king that they could hope to secure the titles, offices and pensions needed to finance their opulent lifestyles and to reaffirm their position in the social hierarchy. Even the most cursory glance at the generals, governors, ambassadors and senior clergy appointed between 1661 and 1789 confirms that the grandees were fully employed. It is true that during the personal reign of Louis XIV, the offices of secretary of state were dominated by the robe dynasties, most famously those of Colbert, Le Tellier and Phélypeaux. Yet as Mettam makes clear, Louis XIV constantly sought the advice of members of his extended family and the aristocratic courtiers, none of whom would have accepted the office of secretary of state, which they believed was beneath them.[31] It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that these aristocratic prejudices were abandoned with damaging consequences for the monarchy.

Crucially, Louis XIV took personal responsibility for the distribution of royal favour, successfully 'focusing attention upon himself as the fount of patronage, because of his evenhanded distribution of favours'.[32] The contrast with the ministries of Richelieu and Mazarin, when many aristocratic revolts had been inspired by a sense of hopelessness resulting from

[29] Mettam, *Power and faction*, *passim*, and P. R. Campbell, *Power and politics in old regime France, 1720–1745* (London, 1996), pp. 4–5, 314.
[30] Mettam, *Power and faction*, pp. 47–65, and J. Duindam, *Myths of power. Norbert Elias and the early modern European court* (Amsterdam, 1994).
[31] Mettam, *Power and faction*, pp. 55–65, 81–101. [32] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

the monopoly of royal favour enjoyed by the cardinals, was striking. Such desperate measures were no longer required, and to achieve their ends, the courtiers formed into relatively fluid factional groupings, the infamous cabals and *partis* that haunted the corridors and council chambers of Versailles. It was a world that changed little in the hundred years after 1682, when Louis XIV made the great palace the principal residence of his government and court.[33]

By putting Versailles back into its proper historical perspective, the argument that the nobility was deprived of its authority loses some of its shine. Much the same can be said of our understanding of politics in the period. One of the dangers arising from a uniquely bureaucratic conception of the monarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is that it overlooks the persistence of more traditional features of government. The ability of individuals or institutions to achieve their personal or corporate goals depended, in part, upon their ability to secure access to the monarch, or the powerful courtiers or ministers that surrounded him. Within this context, influence was exerted through private, informal contacts, and winning the ear of the king's favourite,[34] or mistress, could produce results far more rapidly than petitioning through the official channels of ministers and their clerks. There is nothing incompatible about a vision of government functioning in both a formal and informal way, and to try and study the royal administration from just one perspective runs the risk of distortion.

Rethinking the nature of court society is only one part of a broader revisionist programme, and there is now a much greater awareness of the enormous degree of continuity within almost every aspect of *ancien régime* society and government. Central to that argument is a belief that it was, in part, through the workings of patronage and clientèle that the crown extended its authority, suggesting that the *ancien régime* state had as much, if not more, in common with its medieval ancestors as with modern bureaucratic regimes. A lively debate has raged about the strength of clientèle ties, with, at it most extreme, Roland Mousnier arguing that it was possible to talk of emotionally intense bonds of loyalty, what he termed 'fidelités',

[33] Recent studies highlighting the role of court faction in old regime politics include: M. Bryant, 'Françoise d'Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon: religion, power and politics – a study in circles of influence during the later reign of Louis XIV, 1684–1715', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 2001); Campbell, *Power and politics*; J. Hardman, *French politics, 1774–1789. From the accession of Louis XVI to the fall of the Bastille* (London, 1995); M. Price, *Preserving the monarchy. The comte de Vergennes, 1774–1787* (Cambridge, 1995); and J. Swann, *Politics and the parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995).

[34] Bryant, 'Marquise de Maintenon', provides an excellent example.

linking patron and client.[35] Such bonds undoubtedly existed, and there is no shortage of examples of individuals risking their lives and their fortunes for a benefactor. However, as we might expect, many patron-client ties were more complex, or, as Sharon Kettering describes matters, 'the ideal may have been a fidelity relationship of lifelong devotion to one patron, but the political reality was messier'.[36] It was, therefore, common for clients to swap patrons, or serve multiple patrons, as part of the broader pursuit of self-interest, and it was these personal, non-bureaucratic ties that proved crucial not only to the expansion of royal power in the seventeenth century, but also to the functioning of the *ancien régime* political system.

An examination of the principal officers and administrative servants of the crown quickly reveals the importance of patronage. Struck by the contrast between the aristocratic warlords, who repeatedly plunged France into civil war before 1661 and their courtier descendants, historians assumed that they had been cut off from the provinces, where the intendants now reigned supreme, with governorships being gradually transformed into sinecures.[37] By the end of the eighteenth century it is likely that this was the case,[38] but the pace of change was much slower than was initially thought. Instead of losing contact with the provinces, the absentee governors, in the words of Robert Harding, 'revived their renaissance roles as brokers'.[39] Their social rank brought proximity to the king and an authority that even the most powerful minister could not ignore, and quite naturally provincial bodies, or private individuals, looked to them for assistance and preferment.[40] The works of Katia Béguin and Beth Natcheson have provided some of the most compelling evidence in favour of the continuing power of the governors. They have demonstrated the immense influence wielded by the Condé in Burgundy, and this study will reinforce that argument.[41] Elsewhere the evidence is more mixed. The duc de Chaulnes proved an effective governor

[35] R. Mousnier, 'Les concepts de "ordres", d' "états", de "fidelité" et de "monarchie absolue" en France de la fin du XVe, siècle à la fin du XVIIIe', *Revue Historique* 502 (1972), 289–312, and his 'Les fidélités et clientèles en France aux XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', *Histoire Sociale – Social History* 15 (1982), 35–46.

[36] S. Kettering, *Patrons, brokers and clients in seventeenth-century France* (Oxford, 1986), p. 21. Kettering's work is an essential introduction to the subject.

[37] Bordes, *L'administration provinciale*, pp. 26–7, 32–5.

[38] A research project on the role of the provincial governors in the reign of Louis XVI might well yield some interesting results.

[39] R. R., Harding, *Anatomy of a power elite: the provincial governors of early modern France* (New Haven, 1978), pp. 201–3.

[40] Mettam, *Power and faction*, pp. 47–54.

[41] K. Béguin, *Les princes de Condé. Rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du grand siècle* (Paris, 1999), and B. Natcheson, 'Absentee government and provincial governors in early modern France: the princes of Condé and Burgundy, 1660–1720', *French Historical Studies* 21 (1998), 265–98.