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**ABSOLUTISM.** Early modern European princes liked to promulgate the myth that they held “absolute power.” For modern observers, both words create confusion. In contemporary English, the word *absolute* defines a dichotomy of this or that: a king would either have “absolute power,” or he would not. Early modern Europeans lived in a world of accepted ambiguity: they believed the sovereign prince’s power to be both “absolute” and “limited.” Nothing could be further in spirit from the sovereign prince’s “absolute power” than the modern idea that “absolute” means “unlimited.”

#### ABSOLUTISM, DESPOTISM, TYRANNY

The term *absolutism*, first used in a political sense in various European languages between 1796 (French) and 1830 (English), became popular through the work of late-nineteenth-century historians proselytizing for modern republicanism. The American John Motley’s use of it in *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856) offers a perfect illustration: he quotes Cardinal Granville, chief minister of Philip II of Spain (ruled 1556–1598), who wrote to the king that “I shall never be able to fulfill the obligations of slave which I owe to your Majesty.” Motley concludes: “[Granville] was a strict absolutist. His deference to arbitrary power was profound and slavish.”

Motley’s treatment of Philip and his father (Emperor Charles V, ruled 1519–1556) as “despots” enables us to trace the roots of the confusion among several pejorative terms. He juxtaposes *absolutism* and *despotism* in a way that has lasted into

the present: modern specialists of the eighteenth-century monarchies of east central Europe speak of *enlightened absolutism*, but outside that field the older term *enlightened despotism* is used instead. Dictionaries follow Motley’s lead: a *despot* is a “ruler with absolute power” or a “tyrant.” Making despot, tyrant, and absolute monarch synonymous concepts, however, completely misrepresents the political order of early modern Europe.

The myth of absolutism contains a kernel of truth. The prince’s prerogatives enabled him to act in an arbitrary, even extralegal manner, but within certain well-defined limits. Few questioned the exclusive right of kings to the regalian powers conceptually inherited from the Roman Empire: to coin money, to act as the supreme judge in the kingdom, to declare war and make peace. Two other such powers, making law and taxing, had an ambiguous status. Medieval Europeans believed that God had made the law; the king merely “discovered” it. They also insisted on the necessity of consent for state taxation, another sharp variance with Imperial Rome. Even in the military sphere, the constant outbreak of civil disturbances illustrates the unwillingness of early modern elites to accept the state’s monopoly of organized violence.

Most European states emphasized the contrast between a monarchy, a legitimate form of “commonwealth” (or “republic”) in which one man ruled in the interest of all, and its illegitimate mirror image, tyranny, in which one man ruled in his own interest. In the vocabulary of early modern Europe, the state chancery defined a king as a legitimate ruler

simply by calling him a “monarch.” Political theorists adopted the classic republican comparison of the state to a ship: the citizens were its owners, the king merely its captain. The king/captain had “absolute power” in moments of crisis (battle or storm), but the citizens/owners regained full control once the crisis passed. In the perpetual crisis of the late sixteenth century, some European kings sought to take advantage of the tempests by making “absolute power” permanent. States traditionally had a mixed form of commonwealth, combining legitimate rule by one person (monarchy), by a few people (aristocracy), and by many (timocracy). (The categories came from Aristotle, for whom—as for early modern Europeans—the word *democracy* did not mean legitimate rule by the many, as it does today, but anarchy.) In the late sixteenth century, however, princes sought, in the name of order, to create an unfettered monarchy.

#### AUTHORITY, POWER, RULERSHIP

The nineteenth-century substitution of “absolutism” for “absolute power” also blurred the distinction between power and authority. From the Middle Ages onward, Europeans spoke of the king’s “absolute power” (Latin, *potestas*) but rarely of his “absolute authority” (Latin, *auctoritas*—the supreme source of legitimacy in the polity). For them, God alone had absolute authority: *auctoritas* rested with their sovereign prince only when he acted in accordance with divine law, in a just government. In the late seventeenth century, however, monarchs and their apologists, such as Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704) in France and Robert Filmer (c. 1588–1653) in England, tried to claim “absolute authority,” based on the king’s divine right. Far from being a coherent theory of government, the divine right of kings was an incoherent, desperate attempt to salvage royal authority. Works such as Bossuet’s *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l’écriture sainte* (1709; Politics drawn from the Holy Scriptures) were riddled with inconsistencies and anachronisms, a fact gleefully seized upon by their opponents.

Yet the central premise of a Bossuet or a Filmer—the connection of God and ruler—permeated even the humblest official publications. The 1768 catechism sent by the Prussian government to local schools summed it up succinctly:

Q: From whence comes the power held by the ruler?

A: This power comes from God. . . .

Q: What does it mean to resist authority?

A: To resist authority is to rebel against the divine order.

The problem for eighteenth-century monarchies was that however much they might push such ideas with ordinary people, elites had rejected them. This division reflected larger cultural currents: while eighteenth-century elites bought secular books, peasants who became literate invariably bought religious ones. The religious cosmology of rural dwellers propagated the sacred element of monarchy at the same moment that the increasingly secular cosmology of urban elites rejected it.

Three different elements of rulership—*potestas* (‘power’), *auctoritas* (‘supreme legitimizing authority’), and *imperio* (‘rulership’)—overlapped in early modern political theory. *Auctoritas* could not be divided, because it emanated solely from God. Power and rulership could be divided: tens of thousands of European nobles had their own courts, which tried the cases of tens of millions of peasants. To Europeans, as the Prussian catechism says, the just monarch mediated divine authority, providing legitimacy to the power and rulership carried out by many. The Reformation destroyed this neat arrangement, because a Protestant subject naturally did not accept the idea that a Catholic king mediated God’s will, so monarchs had to find new tools to reforge the connection. The 1768 catechism, created for Catholic students living in a Protestant state ruled by a deist king, is evidence more of that earlier failure than of “absolutism.”

The French legal philosopher Jean Bodin (1530–1596) created the new political synthesis that undergirded the new monarchies by redefining sovereignty in *Les six livres de la République* (1576; The six books of the commonwealth). Bodin made sovereign power into the perpetual, inalienable, and indivisible supreme lawmaking authority in the state: “The first mark of the sovereign prince is the power to give law to all in general and to each in particular.” Subsequent European political theorists, like Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) in Germany and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) in England, took up Bodin’s definition of sovereignty.

Monarchies adopted the idea that sovereignty rested with the lawmaking prince, giving us one measure of the anachronism of Bossuet's claim that the king was chiefly a judge, discovering laws that were "sacred and inviolable." Bossuet's master, Louis XIV (ruled 1643–1715), stripped his chief law courts, the parlements, of their right to the title "sovereign court," precisely because he rejected the idea that his sovereign power to make law could be shared with anyone. A century later Louis XV, speaking to the Parlement of Paris (1766), spelled out the monarchy's underlying premise: "The sovereign power resides in my person only . . . my courts derive . . . their authority from me alone . . . to me alone belongs the legislative power." His subjects disagreed: the Parlement of Paris, in the name of the "nation," sent remonstrances to Louis XV insisting that his arrest of a high royal official, on grounds of "a law of the state," meant that "all orders of birth and distinction, all bodies [corporations], all ranks, all dignities must henceforth fear the imperious force of absolute power." This exchange pointed out the obvious contradiction between defense of the interests of the nation and of the privileges of the few.

#### LIMITATIONS ON "ABSOLUTE" RULERS

Bodin's original definition of sovereignty had limited the "absolute" sovereign prince in two ways. First, "all the Princes of the Earth are subject to the laws of God and of nature, and to many human laws common to all people." Second, the sovereign had "absolute" power only in the realm of public law; the citizens had control of private law. Theory and practice struggled most at those points, such as taxation and religion, where private and public law intersected. Bodin believed the king had no right to taxation without citizens' consent; Bossuet urged the king to act justly but gave the subjects no right of consent. All European states struggled with the question of whether or not religious choice was a matter of individual conscience, and hence private, or of social concord, thus public. The French case here demonstrates the extraordinary meaning of arbitrary power: Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes (1598), which defined religion as a matter of conscience and thus permitted Protestants to worship; his grandson Louis XIV revoked it (1685), claiming to defend public order, and thus made Protestantism illegal in most parts of his kingdom. Waves of

persecution and massacres of Protestants, as well as a mass emigration, soon followed.

So-called "absolute" rulers found themselves limited in many ways. They had unlimited right to make public law but no right to touch private law, or "custom." Privilege ("private law") protected virtually every powerful member of every European society. Nobles everywhere had special rights, special courts, and a wide array of inviolable legal rights (according to their view) or privileges (according to the prince). Citizens of towns had many of the same privileges, and clergymen (especially in Catholic regions) had their own laws and courts and exemptions. Provincial customs almost everywhere in Europe, except in England, governed property transfers such as inheritances. "Absolute" rulers like Louis XIV of France and Joseph II of Austria (ruled 1780–1790) had no legitimate authority to change such customs, which governed even weights and measures.

#### THE DECLINE OF THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE RISE OF ABSOLUTISM

Modern discussions of "absolutism" often forget the direct connection between the breakdown of religious unity and the creation of a new theory of "absolute power" in the 1570s. The old theories, with their direct ties to *auctoritas* and thus to laws promulgated by the prince but authorized by God, were not likely to convince a Protestant subject to obey a Catholic king, or vice versa. Political discourse everywhere in Europe moved away from the time-honored concept of "the public good," embodied in a commonwealth, and toward "the good of the king's service" in a monarchical state.

Most Europeans lived in a commonwealth—a political society based on citizens—between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. These citizens, as in an ancient Greek city, formed a small percentage of the adult male population: only nobles and certain wealthy commoners (above all urban elites) participated in governance. Almost all participation in governance happened at the local level, usually in a town; when sixteenth-century townsmen spoke of being "citizens," they invariably meant citizens of their town. These commonwealths usually relied on a mixed constitution (*forma mixta*, an ideal Europeans took from the ancient historian Polybius), in which a prince, the aristocracy, and the broader

group of prominent men shared power. In the last third of the sixteenth century, however, a Europe-wide constitutional crisis destroyed most of the commonwealths.

The flirtation of European monarchies with "absolutes" had two stages. In the first, defensive stage during the seventeenth century, monarchs from the tsar of Russia to the king of Spain claimed "absolute power" to remedy the chaos around them. Many of their subjects, hungry for order, went along with them. In the second, offensive stage, states claimed absolute authority to act on behalf of the community. The sixteenth-century commonwealths had collapsed constitutionally because of the conflicts between the ruler and the common good, above all with regard to religion. In restoring civil order, seventeenth-century monarchs sought to consolidate power, and they did so in a long, bloody, socially disruptive process that destroyed the civic order.

In the late seventeenth century, however, the old distinction between power and authority became more fluid. The great monarchies claimed an implied "absolute" authority in the name of public utility. Whereas citizens had once protected the common good through governance, with oversight and assistance from a small state apparatus, now the state became its guardian. In France, urban elites and some nobles shared power through the state apparatus, deliberately shunning the republican mechanisms (representative assemblies, elected judges, elected financial officials) proposed by the provincial nobility in the 1560s and 1570s. By the eighteenth century, secure in the identification of the state and the common good, officials sought to "reform" society, relying on the "absolute" authority of the ruler. Moreover, that authority had become progressively more secular, as cultural currents desacralized the monarchy in the eyes of elites.

#### ABSOLUTISM IN PRACTICE

In German lands, this transition from the old state of orders, the *Standestaat*, to a state of laws, or *Rechtstaat*, relied on cameralist and Pietist philosophers such as Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi (1717–1771) and Christian Wolff (1679–1754). Cameralism and Pietism provided secular and religious rationales for a philosophy of social action, carried out by the only universal social organ: the

state. Everywhere in German lands, rulers sought to create the well-ordered police state, through laws promulgated by an "enlightened" state, under the "absolute" authority of the prince. In Austria, for example, Maria Theresa signed an edict (1774) mandating the creation of grammar schools in every parish in her empire; the edict also created an upper school and a training school for teachers in each provincial capital.

The uneven implementation of the 1774 edict illustrates the reality of "absolutism." Maria Theresa's empire had many nationalities and religions. Some groups viewed the creation of state-run schools as an attack on their ethnic or religious identity, but other ethnic groups used the schools for their own ends. Bohemia implemented the edict so thoroughly that two-thirds of its children enrolled in grammar schools by 1790, while Hungary enrolled virtually no one. Even in Austrian lands, school attendance rates ranged from 30 to 70 percent, in all cases a significant improvement, but evidence of radically different local responses to central action.

Prussia also tried to implement broader schooling. Johann Felbinger, the driving force behind these reforms in both places, voiced the same frustrations as any French or Russian bureaucrat when he wrote of the Prussian reform in 1768: "It is almost beyond comprehension that the express commands of such a powerful monarch, commands which a royal minister and two provincial chambers have sought to execute for the past several years, have had so little effect." Practical realities placed great limits on the real exercise of power. News and royal orders traveled at a horseman's pace, armies even more slowly. It could take months to move troops from one part of France or the Habsburg Empire to another. Early modern monarchies had to mediate the interests of kings and local elites, creating a compromise that preserved their common interests, in order to accomplish anything.

Princes in the post-commonwealth monarchies, having destroyed civic society during the search for order, boldly challenged the traditional limits on their prerogatives in the second, offensive phase of development. Monarchs could carry out grandiose personal projects, like Versailles or the Schönbrunn palace, or even construct a new capital city, as in the

case of St. Petersburg. In wartime, rulers could trample on the most precious privileges of the powerful: in 1695 Louis XIV created the *capitation*, a tax on all French people, including otherwise exempt nobles, clergy, and urban elites. He created the tax by his simple will, even in provinces that still had Estates, which were legally subject only to voted taxes. Monarchs did not use this greater authority simply to levy taxes or build fancy palaces, however; European states became more involved in education, health care, poor relief, and transportation and communications. Above all, states created new laws. In France, the process began in earnest with Francis I (ruled 1515–1547), who issued more edicts and ordinances than all his predecessors combined. In German lands after 1680, cameralist ideas led to the promulgation of staggeringly detailed “police ordinances” that regulated every conceivable aspect of daily life. In England, Oliver Cromwell’s Puritan Commonwealth (1649–1660), acting just as “absolutely” as any monarchy, even outlawed Christmas.

In the final stage of the assault, monarchs such as Joseph II of Austria attacked the holy of holies, customary property rights. Using the new calculus of utility to revive an idea of the commonwealth days, both Joseph (1781) and the French Revolutionaries (1790) confiscated church property in the name of the “public good” and abolished contemplative monasteries and convents as “useless.” Joseph eliminated a third of all abbeys and secularized 40 percent of the monks and nuns in his lands. He also attacked lay property, “abolishing” in 1781 many of the personal restrictions on serfs, allowing them to marry, move freely, and choose their professions, and trying to legislate reductions in the forced labor (*robot*) they performed as rent for their lands. The most notable response to his efforts was a peasant uprising in Transylvania, where Romanian rebels burned noble manors and murdered their oppressive Hungarian lords. Joseph sent troops to butcher the rebels, whose leaders were drawn and quartered, their body parts publicly displayed. Joseph wrote to the governor: “I never imagined that such a terrible thing could happen . . . after the advice which I have given so often and so assiduously to promote the general good and general security.”

In the eighteenth century, three developments changed the relationship among the monarch, the state, and society. First, the social and economic system became more capitalistic, abetting profound cultural shifts, such as a greater level of literacy and the creation of a broader and more vocal public opinion. Second, the state apparatus grew exponentially, enabling the state to interfere in everyday life in ways unimaginable in earlier times. Third, European elites demanded greater accountability from their rulers. In England, that meant more power for Parliament; in France, it meant a vigorous intellectual challenge to the established order by writers such as Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu (1689–1755), Voltaire (1694–1778), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). In east central Europe monarchs like Joseph II or Frederick II the Great of Prussia (ruled 1740–1786) unilaterally implemented “enlightened” ideas.

Such action attacked the rights of the citizens (almost all of them nobles) in the name of public utility. Only those with privileges, like the Hungarian nobility with its powerful diet, could stand up against this new state offensive. The tumultuous events of 1789 in France bear witness to the strains on the new relationship. One of the Revolutionary leaders, Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, the count of Mirabeau, aptly remarked (August 1789) that “privileges are essential as a defense against despotism, but [are] an abomination used against the nation.” The great conflict between monarchies and citizens at the end of the eighteenth century became a cataclysm, because the states made their assault on the old citizenry at precisely the moment when a new, more inclusive definition of citizen came into being. Thus people like Mirabeau could support the Parlement of Paris in its conflict with the king in 1788, because they viewed the Parlement as the protector of “rights” against a “despot,” yet could demand the abolition of that same Parlement a year later, because the French Revolution had placed political power in the hands of the nation, making the Parlement, as a defender of “privileges,” an anachronism.

#### CONCLUSION

Early modern political vocabulary used words like *absolute* or *commonwealth* to mean different things than they do today. Modern dictionaries define a

*republic* or *commonwealth* as “a political order whose head of state is not a monarch,” yet most sixteenth-century Europeans, like Bodin, viewed monarchy as the best form for a commonwealth. The seventeenth-century linguistic shift, in which *republic* and *monarchy* became antonyms, informs us about fundamental changes in the nature of European monarchies. Sixteenth-century documents often refer to rulers as “sovereign seigneurs,” showing the ambiguity of the prince’s status. Those petitioning the ruler called themselves “loyal and very faithful servants” of the prince. Seventeenth-century documents speak of the “sovereign” and of “very humble and very obedient subjects.” The citizens of the states that preserved the old commonwealths, such as the United Provinces of the Netherlands or Venice or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, described the “sovereign” princes of their neighbors as “despots,” because in their view these rulers had broken the covenant with the citizens.

“Absolutism” exists as a term to define, in largely pejorative ways, a given phase of European monarchies. Nineteenth-century liberal historians, spokesmen for a middle class struggling for political power in a secular state, created it to bludgeon defenders of the old order into submission. Little wonder that it is not an effective description of early modern monarchies. Many European states evolved in three stages from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. In the commonwealth stage, various levels of government shared sovereignty, both theoretically and practically. Starting in the late sixteenth century, political theory defined sovereignty as indivisible, making the old divided sovereignty intellectually obsolete. These sovereign monarchies struggled throughout the seventeenth century to establish the internal order that would enable them to use indivisible sovereignty to expand the central state’s power. By the 1690s European states of every kind sought to regulate even private life. Peter I the Great of Russia (ruled 1682–1725) could force his boyars to cut their beards, while the English Society for the Reformation of Manners could convince the government rigorously to prosecute swearing. Given the reality of such state interference in daily life, and the massive extension of the sphere of public law, monarchies in which the prince had no theoretical

limits to his right to make public law posed a profound threat to elites.

The theoretical powers of a monarch changed very little from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries; the states ruled by those monarchs, however, underwent fundamental transformation. Lying on his deathbed in 1715, Louis XIV remarked, “I am going, but the state will remain.” Louis understood that the state had begun to supersede the monarch, which made all the more urgent what Gouverneur Morris, a member of the American Constitutional Convention, rightly identified from Paris in February 1789 as “the great Question, shall [France] hereafter have a Constitution or shall Will continue to be Law.” Because of the far greater power of the central state and because of its claims, increasingly derived from secular foundations, to universal authority in society, European elites could no longer allow a political system in which one man’s will made the law.

*See also* Autocracy; Divine Right Kingship; Enlightened Despotism; Equality and Inequality; Monarchy; Representative Institutions; Sovereignty, Theory of; State and Bureaucracy; Tyranny, Theory of.

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