

The Republican Monarchy, the real one [or “the true one”]

The title seduces at first glance. One thinks of Maurice Duverger’s celebrated analysis of the institutions of the Fifth Republic, particularly of his book *The Republican Monarchy or how democracies give themselves kings* (1974). [France shifted from the Fourth Republic, a constitution dominated by the legislature, with a figurehead president, to the strong president system of the constitution of the Fifth Republic, in 1958.] But the (book-length) essay of the American historian James B. Collins only deals, one believes, with France prior to 1789. The monarchy of the Valois [ruling house in France from 1328-1589] and the first Bourbons, before Louis XIV, could it be considered already a “republican monarchy?” Thus, the debate comes back full circle. [The literal translation is “Thus, the buckle is buckled.”] The most “natural” political regime for the Hexagon [France] would be this mixture of monarchy and republic put into action after 1958 under an elective form, after having been expressed in an hereditary form from the 14th to the 17th century. At bottom, in this teleological reading, the ship would have returned to port under General de Gaulle [who carried out the 1958 change]. Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI would have betrayed the spirit of the republican monarchy in making it lean too heavily on the monarchical side, whereas in 1792 [fall of the monarchy], 1875 [founding of the Third Republic] and 1946 [founding of the Fourth Republic] would have put too much on the republican side. [All three of those republics – the First, Third, and Fourth – had all-powerful legislatures.] De Gaulle would have established a sort of invisible bridge which retied his regime to the former “monarchy” theorized by the likes of Jean Gerson [15th century], Nicole Oresme (14th century), and Jean Bodin, author of *The Six Books of the Republic* (1576), this monument that contributing to forging sovereignty in France. [Bodin’s book created the modern definition of sovereignty.]

The remark [the French word “propos” here means something between a simple remark and an actual theory] would have something seductive about it, yet it would obviously be going a bit too quickly. Even as it is audacious, this little essay has nothing about it of an anachronistic sketch. It is a learned book, often very erudite, written a bit awkwardly (it keeps the oral style of the lectures given at the Collège de France on which it is based), but it is at the same time a work of a very great originality, full of luminosity (or brilliance) and humor, truffled with savory back-and-forths between the past and the present (to make tremble a complacent French historian), and which reveals itself to be one of the most stimulating reflections on the history of the State and of French society of the Ancien Régime ever published for many years. One might compare it to the brilliant essay of the historian Denis Richet, alter ego of François Furet [famous specialist of the French Revolution, whose work overturned many assumptions about the Revolution], on *La France moderne: l’esprit des institutions* (1973 – article wrongly says 1975). In this [current] period of crisis for the “French model,” this rapid plunge into the sources of our Statist origins has more to say about “French identity” than most rhetorical discourses.

The author obliges us by calling into question many long-established certitudes about the State and French society, shared spaces still very present in the political debate [of today’s

France]. Collins reminds us first of all that the monarchy was not the slow, linear, gradual “absolutist” construction that one imagines, running from Philip Augustus (d. 1223) to Louis XIV, but it had in contrast known from the disaster of Poitiers in 1356 [when the king was captured in battle by the English], up to the Fronde [a series of revolts between 1648 and 1653, when Louis XIV was still an adolescent, and his mother and a royal favorite, Cardinal Mazarin, ruled France], traits that our author calls a “republican monarchy,” giving pride of place to the “Public Good,” that of the community, over the State, in calling forth the traditions of the Ciceronian *res publica*. Considerable place is given to the electoral process, that of the Estates General, of course, but also that of a variety of institutions, notably urban ones, but even religious ones (the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges in 1438 instituted election of bishops) [the canons of the cathedral were supposed to elect the bishop; after 1516, the king named the bishops]. The tenure of royal officials was also guaranteed (their dismissal was forbidden after a law of 1467). There is a tie – which will displease today’s “liberals” – between the republican spirit and the guarantee of employment for public agents. [In France, “liberal” means someone who supports American-style free market capitalism.] It was, in contrast, real liberals, like Tocqueville or Laboulaye [the guy who came up with the idea of the Statue of Liberty], who demanded in the 19th century a legal status of public office to protect them [public officials] from all arbitrariness, specifically that of the imperial regime. [A reference to the government of the so-called Second Empire of Napoleon III, between 1852 and 1870.] This path leads our American to criticize a famous historical school, that of Cambridge, which has totally neglected France in what it calls the rise of a Machiavellian “classical Republicanism”, in the American Revolution. [The Machiavelli of *The Discourses*, who was a prominent sources of “republican” thinking in the 17th and 18th centuries: one member of the Cambridge School, John Pocock, wrote a famous book calling that period *The Machiavellian Moment*] A quarrel among Anglo-Saxon erudites in perspective ...

But the most interesting part of this essay is the brilliant deconstruction of the two classic paradigms of Ancien Régime France: the absolutism of the State and the immobility of the society. I do not have sufficient space to evoke the stimulating reflections demonstrating that the France of Louis XIV was, contrary to the thesis of Pierre Goubert, just as nomadic as that of the “rurbains” of today. [It’s a new word, impossible to define in one word: it refers to a large group – about 20% of the population in France today – who live in a semi-rural or rural space but commute to work in a city.] It [Louis’ France] had nothing immobile about it. But, even more eloquently, the author demonstrates that speaking of the absolutism of Louis XIV is nonsense. The arbitrary decisions of Obama, launching drone strikes against American citizens in Yemen or in Iraq, this historian (and remember, he’s an American) tells us, do not make him an absolutist president. “Even our liberal democratic systems take decisions of dubious legality.” Louis XIV-Obama, the same struggle? As I’ve already said, this iconoclastic essay obliges us to leave our certitudes.

In the epoch of Louis XIV, France turned away from the “republican monarchy”, our author admits; it abandoned the discourse of the “Public Good” to speak of the “Good of the State,” thus consecrating the monarchical State. Circumstances led to the abandonment of Ciceronian rhetoric [focused on the *res publica*] for that of Tacitus, apologist for Emperors. Reacting against the Fronde, Louis XIV chose order over liberty. **“Repose and liberty seem to me impossible: one must choose,”** wrote Rousseau in his *Considerations on Poland*. [Here the reviewer makes an error: Rousseau said incompatible, not impossible.] Precisely at the same time, at the other extreme of Europe, Poland made the opposite choice from the France of Louis XIV. Like our people of good conscience today, the palatine [chief officer] of Posnania [a region in western Poland], grandfather of Louis XV’s wife, declared, “I prefer liberty and its dangers to peaceful servitude.” Lovely phrase. Result: Poland collapsed into powerlessness and, at the end of the 18th century, it was wiped off the map. In these times of idle discussions about the laws allowing the stripping of nationality [France is debated such a law right now, permitting the removal of citizenship from those convicted of terrorism], the lessons of the past perhaps merit being meditated upon.

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