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The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration

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A generation ago a new view of French absolutism became the accepted orthodoxy. According to this view, the king ruled by collaborating with socially powerful elites — at court, in Paris and in the provinces. Government was characterized by compromise, negotiation, and sharing of

resources in a manner which maintained and supported hierarchical differences. This approach replaced an older formulation dating all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville, according to which the Bourbon monarchs had laid the foundations for the modern state by reducing the nobility to obedience and beginning a process of national unification. The dominant paradigm thus shifted from a centralizing, modernizing monarch to a king maintaining and defending a traditional society.

While the social, collaborative model still prevails, cracks are appearing in this edifice. Most recent studies are questioning aspects of the interpretation, and one recent author, John...

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