

INTRODUCTION: MONARCHISM AND ABSOLUTISM IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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I

Absolutism is a troublesome word. Arthur O. Lovejoy warned that *isms* are 'trouble-breeding and usually thought-obscuring terms, which one sometimes wishes to see expunged from the vocabulary of the philosopher and the historian altogether'. If this remark sounds harsh and reductive, Lovejoy's other consideration whereby *isms* 'are names of complexes, not of simples' could not be more appropriate to frame what has been attempted with this volume.¹ 'Absolutism' is both a problematic historiographical category and a complex 'compound' of different elements: like a great many *ism*-terms it is a later coinage.² But exploring the ways in which *isms* can be applied as well as the ways in which they fit with past terminology can be illuminating for the historian's work in understanding different sets of political ideas.

Our approach moves away from the three major views of absolutism: the 'conservative' for which it has always existed;³ the 'Marxist' for which it was an epoch between feudalism and capitalism and one contaminated by and linked to both;⁴ the 'revisionist' for which there was no absolutism and, therefore, we should not speak of it.⁵ Whereas these interpretations⁶ rest upon large-scale generalizations about historical process, ours is more modest but more concrete, namely the analysis of political thought in diverse historical contexts. This is the case precisely because we think that, while absolutism has been studied in its practical (legislative, executive, administrative) dimensions, there is need for further scholarly work on the relationship between the theories that historians wish to label 'absolutism' and the diversity of contemporary political arguments, as well as on the interplay between the languages of what may be considered 'absolutist theory' and the realities of social experience and political practice.

Accordingly, we engage with a series of pivotal questions concerning the organization of various European monarchies.

Instead of proposing an abstract and ahistorical image of absolutism as ‘a strange and dangerous beast’ that aspires ‘to rise above reality, to break out of the limitation of history, to transcend the community and the very foundation of political organization’,⁷ we examine how concrete political ‘absolutism(s)’, or forms of monarchy, were defended or criticized in various writings. Likewise, we consider the relations between monarchs and theorists in English, French, German, Neapolitan and Scandinavian contexts. In so doing, we adumbrate a complex and nuanced analysis of the experiences of ‘absolute power’ across different geographical and cultural areas of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. We are suspicious of any conventional interpretations that are based on an evolutionary model, whereby from a paternal monarchy absolutist reflection moved on to a divine right monarchy and, subsequently, to a rational and national state.⁸ As the chapter authors demonstrate, absolutist parlance and policies were partly products of Renaissance, Baroque, Catholic or Protestant thinking;⁹ they were also part and parcel of the new philosophical and scientific trends, and as such they may be considered to have actively contributed to shaping the emergence of the loosely defined ‘modern world’; but the patterns of change were complex and multi-stranded.

As well as presenting a panorama of case-studies of the European monarchist landscape in its theoretical and practical dimensions, this volume casts light on the connections between languages or theories of monarchy and other manifestations of the intellectual life of Europe: republicanism, patriotism, patriarchalism, cynicism, despotism, religious toleration and iconographic propaganda. We certainly acknowledge the continuity of certain ideas throughout time and across places,¹⁰ but stress the evidence that seemingly incompatible conceptions of kingship coexisted, and could be used, sometimes by the same writer, in defence of a particular monarch or type of monarchy. Absolutist defences of monarchy were used flexibly and eclectically; even absolutist kings had to justify themselves to a variety of audiences in a variety of ways. Thus it is hard to accept the view that once absolutism became an essential trait of kingly policymaking, then political writers ‘formulated it into maxims’ following the directives of those in power.¹¹

So, instead of asking whether royal administration was absolutist, our attention is on how thinkers across Europe defined the power and authority of monarchs. By situating theorists in their historical context, the volume will explore how certain political, social and religious events influenced their reflections. It will assess the impact that various administrative and political structures had on the theoretical configuration of sovereignty set out by thinkers within them. Likewise, it will indicate how, in turn, ideas of absolute monarchy

conditioned thinking about politics and governmental policies. While several historians claim that no ruler could have de facto absolute power and, therefore, argue that the term ‘absolutism’ does not correspond to historical reality, our interest is on the description and/or prescription of how a commonwealth and a government should function rather than on how they actually worked.

Thus, the chapter authors in this volume foreground languages, paradigms, images and metaphors that were adopted to depict kingship in modes that might be considered ‘absolutist’ according to the diverse traditions and intellectual canons thriving in the republic of letters. They show that absolutist thinkers did not all speak the same language (in part because the sometimes-absolute monarchies of England, France, Spain, Scandinavia and the Habsburg Empire were defended against different enemies and in different contexts). As a result, our work becomes in some ways that of translators who convey meaning(s) from the past through our modern interpretative frameworks. Accordingly, we endeavour to account for the important variations which informed the meanings of ‘absolute’ and how these affect scholarly definitions of ‘absolutism’. This will then serve to illustrate various *canons* of absolutist political thought as well as verify whether the category ‘monarchism(s)’ might be more suitable to describe the ideas of thinkers reflecting on absolute government (to be found in monarchies as well as in republics).

By presenting a fresco of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European monarchist thought, this project should lay the foundations for future work comparable to that achieved in the study of republicanism.¹²

II

As far as the state of the art of this highly contentious subject is concerned, it is not surprising to find sundry studies dedicated to the notion of ‘political absolutism’ as the form of governance of the regimes of Charles I of England, Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV of France, the Russian Tsars, Christian V of Denmark, Charles XII of Sweden and of some small states in the Italian peninsula.¹³ Scholars from a large spectrum of fields have given elaborate accounts of how these states functioned in early modern Europe: from administrative and juridical factors to more political elements related to authority; from propaganda through arts and literature to diplomacy; from royal displays of superior cultural taste and manifestations of religious glory to court ceremonials; from war-policies to commerce. Yet, as James Daly remarked, these contributions often refer to these states as regimes ‘where the king has more power than twentieth-century scholars think a seventeenth-century king ought to have had.’¹⁴ Likewise, John Miller observed that even the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* ‘baldly equates “absolutism” with “despotism”, although theorists of absolutism were usually careful

to distinguish between the two.¹⁵ For this reason, our project addresses Miller's criticism according to which absolutism 'is a term which historians are liable to use without attempting to define or explain it'.¹⁶

Thus, Julian Franklin argued that absolutism 'is the idea that the ruler, however much he may be responsible to God for observation of the higher law, does not require the consent of any other human agent in making public policy'.¹⁷ By contrast, James Collins has recently rejected Franklin's view which considers 'absolutism' as a legitimate term to describe the 'important change, above all in ideology' which occurred 'during the last quarter of the sixteenth century in France' and which for Franklin corresponded to the birth of absolutism.¹⁸ Collins adopts the expression 'monarchical state' instead of the too-loosely used 'absolutism'.¹⁹ In fact, to define the latter – Collins points out – is 'a task surprisingly few authors have attempted'. In this respect, Fanny Cosandey and Robert Descimon call to task Yves-Marie Bercé, in his *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme (1598–1661)*, in terms that apply to almost all historians who have worked on the subject: 'one searches in vain for a definition of that which is in the process of being so dramatically born'. Referring to the works of Cosandey and Descimon and of John Hurt, Collins reminds us that 'absolutism was not as absolute as all that' and that 'few historians today believe that there was anything very 'absolute' about what was once reflexively called the absolute monarchy'.²⁰ Yet such a perspective runs the risk of neglecting the fact that in political parlance theorists argued in favour of absolute government and supreme power. They often referred to 'absolute' in the sense of both superior and independent. This cannot be ignored: we need to understand what early modern thinkers meant by 'absolute government' and the degree to which it coheres with our sense of 'absolutism'.

If oversimplifications, such as the assertion that late sixteenth-century French political discourses of kingly sovereignty were 'ecstatic nonsense', deeply condition the study of absolutism,²¹ no less misleading is the idea of absolutism as 'myth' put forward by Nicholas Henshall.²² Likewise, to maintain that 'extreme absolutists ... based their fundamental theory of kingship simply upon the personal divine right of the reigning monarch' means to ignore a variegated gamut of other perspectives through which kingship was thought in early modern European parlance.²³ If for David Parker 'absolutism was always in the making, but never made',²⁴ and was 'no more than a conservative philosophy' aimed to affirm royal authority in a world confronted by rapid change, it is true that absolute monarchy constituted 'a vast discourse endowed with historical effectiveness'.²⁵ Such a discursive mode did not simply convey the idea of a display of authority,²⁶ but it enunciated a proper system of government.²⁷ While several commentators have looked at absolutism as 'an essentially negative term' which explains more about what it was not than about what it was,²⁸ our purpose

is precisely to establish a bit more clearly what absolutism means and what it is; that is, what thinkers thought absolute power was and meant.²⁹

Confronted by this cauldron of divergent interpretations, the historian aims to tease out the presence and status of some recurrent conceptual features. Accordingly, to facilitate our task we might start with Johann Sommerville's definition of absolutism as a theory arguing that 'the ruler in any state holds sovereign authority, cannot be actively resisted, can change existing constitutional arrangements in a case of necessity (though he ought otherwise to maintain them), and should be obeyed by his subjects provided that his commands are not contrary to those of God and nature.'³⁰ This, however, is essentially a definition of a theory of *sovereignty*. The chapters below suggest that there is a contextual element as well, that theories historians are willing to label 'absolutist' usually functioned in particular contexts as attempts to elevate the (personal) authority of a monarch over other institutions. In that sense, a theory of absolutism is the application of a theory of sovereignty to the institution of monarchy, and can be distinguished from more impersonal theories of state sovereignty (though the two can be combined).

III

This volume is structured in a thematic way. Each section focuses on a few major interpretative categories in order to give a complex and innovative picture of the multiple threads informing absolutist and monarchist political discourse across Europe between the late Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. This method should help to untangle the richness of topics and the complexity of meanings emerging from the works analysed. In this respect, we hope to have provided new coordinates with which to map out the territory of early modern absolutism. Through its chronological frame, our collection suggests patterns of both change and continuity informing the paradigm of absolute monarchical power and its interactions with government across Europe.

The volume is structured around four themes, all of them demanding more examination than they have received so far. Firstly, new light is shed on the trajectory and texture of 'absolutism', and on its existence, in specific national milieus (often in comparative mode);³¹ secondly, 'absolutism' is analysed in conjunction with other *isms* scarcely evaluated in the scholarship (cynicism, patriotism,³² cameralism, jurisdictionalism); thirdly, full attention to the terminology employed in early modern political literature sets out new considerations on 'monarchism' and 'absolutism' and, at the same time, provides an overdue critique of the vocabulary of the historian of political thought; lastly, the issue of absolute power is approached through a close study of less-known aspects of both the theory and the activity pursued by some important philosophers

(Pufendorf, Rousseau, Hobbes, Bayle, Diderot).³³ Though these are very broad areas of research, a constant of our work is to address them by unearthing what individual thinkers in specific contexts said about absolute sovereignty, monarchical power, parliamentary authority and other related concepts.

In Part I we concentrate on the ideological and theoretical conflict that shaped the explosive political dynamics of early modern England. Providing an account of the discourse of virtuous monarchy, Janet Coleman's chapter works well as introduction to the issues treated in our volume. Her presentation of ideas of kingship elaborated in the fourteenth century under Richard II illustrates the important role of princely virtues both with regard to the normative moment of theory and in relation to the practical 'agenda of the highest nobility'. Coleman's comprehensive analysis reveals the multifarious range of sources employed to paint a fresco of virtuous kingship which suited the texture of the English '*respublica*' made up of king and kingdom. Focusing on the case of the so-called Appellant Lords (1388) and Richard II's subsequent royal conduct, Coleman then unveils a developing image of monarchical power at the centre of which stood 'royal self-exaltation', which is thought to have derived from the civil law tradition widespread on the continent rather than from the theorized practice of common law in England. This process – which entailed 'conflict about princely vices and virtues' – was certainly not re-enacted until the time of Charles I's Personal Rule (1629–40). Possibly influenced by the theories of Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* (1277–80), Richard II came to embody the role of exclusive and supreme law-giver. However, such a version of political power was still far from that most extreme expression of it which was eventually set out in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). It is thus crucial to recognize that until then kingly sovereignty was seen as inextricably linked to 'counsel' and 'assent to the specific content of sovereign law': the overriding goal was 'to remove the vices of despotic sovereignty' (tyranny) 'and not to remove monarchy *per se*'. The enemy was 'the arbitrary abuse or domination of citizens or subjects by anyone in public office whatsoever'. The shift – Coleman concludes – occurred 'with historical contingencies' in the seventeenth century.

And it is to the period of the Civil War and the subsequent Restoration of the Stuarts that both Edward Vallance and Gaby Mahlberg turn. Vallance does so by considering the interesting figure of Robert Sheringham (1604–77), an ambiguous royalist whose academic career and political work serve the historian 'to think more of royalism and absolutism as flexible and contingent responses to particular circumstances, rather than as fixed identities or ideologies'. Casting doubt on the received scholarly view of Sheringham as an "ardent" or "strong" royalist', Vallance underlines how his *The Kings Supremacy Asserted* (1660) did not attract Charles II's sympathy but, actually, made more than one (royalist) eyebrow rise. Sheringham's close ties with exiled Presbyterians in the Netherlands

did not help his credentials as a true royalist either. As for his work's absolutism, Vallance concludes that, given Sheringham's recurrent use of the common law paradigm and his distinction between the absolute sovereignty of the English monarchy and the limited scope of the authority of the monarch, it was the product of 'either a constitutionalist absolutist or an absolutist constitutionalist'. Thus, the fascinating example of Sheringham shows how a more fluid approach to political identities and historiographical categories might make us 'profitably see "absolutism" not as a distinct form of royalism but also as a "radical" or more extreme variation from common ideological materials'. The difference is one of 'accent or tone' rather than one of 'language'.

On her part, Mahlberg persuasively highlights the importance of patriarchalism throughout the seventeenth century in England. In particular, Mahlberg explains why patriarchalist doctrines were the principal target of many republican theorists. 'Anti-patriarchalism' features as an element of continuity between the earlier and later parts of the century: attacks on the likes of Robert Filmer occurred not just in the 1640s and 1680s, but also in the often neglected 1660s. Key players of this trend were Algernon Sidney (1623–83) and Henry Neville (1619–94), whose writings – the *Court Maxims* (1664) and *The Isles of Pines* (1668), respectively – rejected 'hereditary, patriarchal power' and not monarchy tout court. These were motivated by republican abhorrence of a form of government in which the ruler was 'unaccountable to the people'. Dismissing all arguments founded on fatherhood as the legitimizing force behind kingship, Sidney accused 'the hereditary system' of privileging 'the good of one family over that of a nation'. As for Neville, Mahlberg's interesting thesis is that the republican theorist demolished all claims of absolute royal prerogative in favour of a power-structure regulated by 'four councils appointed by Parliament', so that 'accountability towards the electorate would be granted and popular sovereignty exercised'. Such a 'radical approach to the royal prerogative' meant that anyone could become king irrespective of their political or religious affiliation because for Neville the ruler was no more than a 'principal magistrate'. What this was intended to bring about – Mahlberg concludes – was a transformation of 'the English monarchy into a "monarchical republic" ... in which a King would only ever have executive powers'. In contrast to the patriarchalist model, the one proposed by these republicans corresponded to 'a legal monarchy'.

This first series of chapters unfolds the problematic nature of all definitions of absolutism, monarchism, royalism. Coleman, Vallance and Mahlberg rightly call for attention to the changing nature of ideas in context and as such they invite historians to adopt a more flexible approach to the study of these ideas. And it is precisely following this suggestion that in Part III Johann P. Sommerville intervenes in the debate by urging scholars to reflect in new ways on the relation between absolutist 'practice' and absolutist 'theory'. This means to

embrace neither '[t]he traditional view of absolutism as a matter of modernization, centralization, and bureaucratization' nor 'the modern model of absolutism as social collaboration'. In particular, Sommerville underscores that there was no strict connection and/or parallel development between 'absolutism' and 'state-building'. Against the grain of more recent historiography, he then contests the notion of a 'monarchical republic' as an impossibility in seventeenth-century England. He points out that, even though local affairs might have been left to the inhabitants of smaller territorial units such as (English) counties or to (French) 'provincial estates,' sovereignty remained indivisible (with the king as authoritarian decision-maker) just like absolutists had claimed it ought to be. And yet this does not signify – as often suggested – that absolutist theorists wanted to erase 'the powers of the nobility,' abolish 'representative assemblies' or militarize the state. In fact, in authors like Hobbes, Bodin, Filmer, Le Bret and Bossuet the idea of the absolute power of the ruler coexisted with the mixed administration of life in the polity. Thus, if Sommerville thinks it plausible to group together under the single rubric of 'absolutism' all thinkers who 'endorsed the idea of absolute and indivisible sovereignty,' Cesare Cuttica relies on this perspective to take a step further.

Cuttica chooses three works from the historically decisive 1630s to show the multifaceted texture of the language of absolutism. Focusing on the strongly absolutist treatises of Robert Filmer (1588–1653), Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac (c. 1597–1654) and Cardin Le Bret (1558–1655), Cuttica traces the theoretical lineaments of three different models of absolute power: 'patriarchalist,' 'Machiavellian' and 'Hobbesian'. At the centre of this theoretical triptych in which the king was portrayed as the irresistible *primum mobile* of the state stood the notions of fatherhood, prudence and supremely indivisible sovereignty. Rejecting parliamentary, republican and Jesuit theories of authority and liberty, Filmer, Balzac and Le Bret carved out a picture of the absolute monarch where *pouvoir* and *vouloir* coincided. Aware of the arbitrary nature of the terminology here advanced, Cuttica analyses these authors' notions of kingship as the expression of different goals and alternative configurations of governance at a time of monarchical consolidation in England and France. Insisting on the plurality of theoretical paradigms, metaphors and sources employed by Filmer, Balzac and Le Bret, Cuttica aims at stimulating new reflections on the scholarly necessity to identify a spectrum of flexible categories which may make sense of the composite galaxy referred to as 'absolutist discourse'. His provocative approach is guided by the principle that history as discursive knowledge is the perennial quest for meaning: the study of *Patriarcha* (1632), *Le Prince* (1631) and *De la Souveraineté du Roy* (1632) contributes to cast light on what absolute rule meant to some theorists living through the changing monarchy of Charles I and Louis XIII.

Similarly focused on 'political vocabulary', or more precisely, political 'words' and 'concepts', Glenn Burgess strikingly elucidates 'a number of themes' emerging from work carried out on the much-debated category of 'commonwealth' in early modern England. Addressing the important question of the interplay of words and meanings, words and their use in specific milieux and that of the role of 'conceptual histories' in relation to the 'fields of application' of words (e.g. their genre), Burgess underlines that more attention should be paid to 'absolute monarchy'. In particular, his chapter shows how in the seventeenth century 'the English socio-political vocabulary' saw a major development in that 'commonwealth' went from indicating a polity in general to embodying the highly ideological meaning of anti-absolute. In brief, the neutral 'commonwealth' assumed a more republican connotation in that it opposed all idea of monarchy. From the opponents of Charles I's regime to John Toland (1717), monarchy became the antithesis of a durable and true commonwealth. If it is certainly necessary to adopt caution in establishing the moments at which terminological and conceptual shifts happened, Burgess nonetheless suggests that it was indeed in the 1640s that 'polemical manipulation' of absolute monarchy went hand-in-hand with 'the changing language of commonwealth'. This meant that 'absolute' was no longer considered as synonymous with 'complete, true or pure monarchy', but it became, instead, identified with arbitrary rule and mere tyranny. Hence the decisive split in political parlance: good and limited 'mixed monarchy' versus evil and tyrannical 'arbitrary monarchy'. The boundary marking legitimate monarchical government and tyranny was now drawn on the equation of 'absolute' with 'arbitrary', which in turn implied separation from the only accepted form of 'mixed' monarchy. From Henry Parker to John Milton via Samuel Rutherford one thing was clear: a pivotal transformation had produced the emergence of 'republican language' from that of 'commonwealth' and, at the same time, this meant that no true commonwealth could be a monarchy anymore. Part and parcel of this process, Burgess pungently warns, is that 'those in pursuit of absolutism' are left with the fact that 'there still was no language in which "absolutism" could be *positively* advanced'.

Moving forward chronologically, Part II offers a distinct portrayal of philosophical questions related to monarchy. Together with confirming the interdisciplinary approach of the volume, this section also illustrates its geographic and contextual richness (stretching from Denmark-Norway to Naples via Prussia). John Christian Laursen addresses the fascinating issue of how ideas of 'cynic kingship' were articulated in 'the Age of Enlightenment'. Through an insightful account of cynicism from antiquity up to the early modern era, Laursen shows the interplay between philosophy and kingship. Diogenes Laertius, Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus and the Emperor Julian feature as central characters in Laursen's tale of how cynic principles such as 'self-control and moral pre-

eminence' played a role in defining political virtues. As self-control and moral nobility made a slave superior to an evil and vicious tyrant, so self-abnegation, self-sufficiency and freedom were traits that all great monarchs possessed. Focusing on Enlightened German-speaking culture, Laursen examines a series of cases where 'cynic kingship' was put into practice. The most prominent of these was Johann Friedrich Struensee, Prime Minister of Denmark (1770–2), who lifted all proscriptions on freedom of the press to enable the practice of what Laursen names 'cynic *parrhesia*'. Struensee is thus depicted as a vivid example of cynicism at work in both intellectual publications and 'ruling style': he was both a new Diogenes of Sinope and a pursuer of 'the cynic policies attributed to Cyrus and Julian as cynic kings'. Through the late eighteenth-century examples of Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813) and Carl Friedrich Bahrdt (1740–92, 'the Prussian Diogenes'), Laursen then explores the 'Enlightened absolutism' fashion in which rulership was depicted, connects it again to 'cynic kingship' and offers other sides from which to consider absolute government.

Continuing to investigate the core of 'enlightened monarchy', László Kontler presents the important work of Joseph von Sonnenfels (1733–1817) in eighteenth-century Habsburg Austria as the 'scientific study of the state' which was to serve as a 'precondition of good administration'. Kontler applies Michel Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' as opposed to sovereignty to 'the phenomenon and literature of social discipline through *Polizey*'. Thus, Sonnenfels is taken as an enlightened '*philosophe*' whose 'contribution to the "governmentalization of the state"' was based on a 'cogent analysis of the conditions for the (good) "government of things"'. Further evidence of the fruitful mutual influence between theory and practice, Sonnenfels's professorial activity as scientist of the state meant to provide 'Austria's administrative system' with 'a permanent set of principles' guiding the political enterprise of governing. In the 1760s Maria Theresa's government became thus the recipient of the newly trained graduates who formed the ranks of state bureaucrats. Linking patriotism and rationality as pivots of monarchical government, Sonnenfels reacted to Montesquieu's well-known claim that only republics could prompt in people civic virtue and patriotic feelings. Sonnenfels's 'decision-making' monarchy guaranteed prosperity and safety (*Polizey*) through a very empirical approach to problems in the polity. This 'public safety'-based structure was founded on a balance of forces where the estates were replaced by the individual citizen and economic rationality was 'accompanied' by 'moral improvement'. This gave a novel – more modern – face to monarchy. Such a situation created the mutual collaboration of an enlightened state-apparatus guaranteeing 'convenience and safety' with an 'enlightened citizenry' patriotically engaged to abide by the laws and loyal to the government representing the fatherland.

If Kontler's insightful chapter delineates the shifting representation of patriotism in conjunction with monarchical government, Henrik Horstbøll concentrates on the prominent role of patriotism and publicity as legitimating elements of 'the politics of absolutism' in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway. The central figures whose ideas are here taken as the best illustration of this process are Jens Schielderup Sneedorff (1724–64), Andreas Schytte (1726–77) and Frederik Sneedorff (1760–92). The former 'combined patriotism and political theory': his *On Civil Government* (1757) 'was a refutation of Locke's position' based on the contention that 'monarchism was essentially absolute'. Sneedorff's model was founded on 'a mutual relationship of trust and confidence' between the King and his assembly. This 'original gothic form of government' was then transformed into an 'absolutism guided by public opinion'. As Horstbøll points out, if the goal of this political arrangement was the accomplishment of the common good, for Sneedorff its 'preconditions' were 'a patriotic public sphere, publicity and debate'. Sneedorff's successor at the Noble Academy in Sorø, Schytte, proposed a discourse of cameralism at the centre of which stood the construction of a government-apparatus 'for the benefit of the whole nation'. Schytte applied the motto '[t]he rule of knowledge creates determination and courage' to the code of both men of letters and rulers of the state. However, freedom of the press was not automatically conducive to public good: the experiment carried out by the King's physician-turned-Cabinet Minister Johan Friedrich Struensee (1770–2) proved just this. Absolutism could not be led by public opinion because this engendered conflict and selfishness instead of the much-coveted patriotism. In the climate of monarchical crisis of the 1780s Frederick Sneedorff (Jens Schielderup Sneedorff's son) developed what Horstbøll defines as 'a modern science of history and statistics' aimed at theorizing on 'what was being administrated'. Devoting his intellectual energies to unveiling 'the most important State Revolutions of the last three Centuries', Sneedorff announced that the principal historical traits of this period were 'liberty, enlightenment and commerce'. Inspired by the American Revolution, he delineated a philosophical map where freedom (of the press), tolerance and political secularization were the epicentre, while absolute monarchy rooted in religion and in a dominating church lay outside the borders. With a constitutionalist monarchy in mind, Sneedorff the younger not only moved on from his father's *Danish* 'justification of absolutism', but set out an 'implicit [*American*] criticism' of it.

From this northern discourse, Girolamo Imbruglia brings us to the southern shores of Europe by exploring the theory of 'Jansenist jurisdictionalism' in late eighteenth-century Neapolitan politics. Through the works of Pietro Giannone (1676–1748) and Antonio Genovesi (1713–69), and the political activity of the minister Bernardo Tanucci (1698–1783), Imbruglia underscores that this political doctrine attempted – failing – to bring closer 'Enlightenment culture and

the policy of absolute governments'. The main issue at stake here was the highly tense relationship between state and Church. In fact, the goal of people like Giannone was to engage 'in fighting Roman interference, feudal independence and in promoting its own [the state's] consolidation and [infusing] new energies in economy and culture'. This was the time following independence for the Kingdom of Naples (1734) and the ascent to power of Charles III of Spain. Such a phase coincided with a new historical and political horizon which included the 'formation of a conscience of the "Neapolitan nation"'. Thanks to Tanucci, a 'religion of sovereignty' developed, but one that – as Imbruglia points out – did not have much in common with Montesquieu's philosophy. The new course for Neapolitan thought occurred with the Enlightenment-imbued Genovesi, whose strongly anti-papalist and anti-Jesuit works redefined the issue of sovereignty in ways which made him depart from Giannone. Thus, he articulated 'a new concept of politics' which linked monarchical government not with jurisdictionalism but with the more European law of nature paradigm. Now centred on the office of the King's Advocate, the Neapolitan reign saw political discussion take a radical approach with Genovesi's *Meditations on Economic Instructions* (1768–9) whereby '[s]overeignty extended not only to territories and people, but also to people's times and actions, especially if public'. Hence – following the lesson of Paolo Sarpi – Genovesi argued that to prevent 'the theocratic will of Rome' it was indispensable that the state maintained total control over 'dogmas and discipline'. Behind his steadfast defence of the state's legislative autonomy against all clerical and feudal authority was the conviction that 'jurisdictionalism' was 'weak in theory and, consequently, in practice', and that, therefore, 'only the law of nature was authentic' and useful. In so doing, Genovesi also rejected Spanish and Austrian monarchical absolutism in favour of what Imbruglia calls French (Voltaire-inspired) 'Genovesi's republicanism'. The latter had as central motif 'the civil freedom of citizens'.

The final section (Part IV) can be described as a twofold perspective on absolutism and despotism, sovereign power and its representations. The former has to do with a philosophical analysis of sovereignty through the work of Pufendorf, Rousseau and Hobbes. The latter is informed by a study of iconographic evidence of which two chronologically separate examples from France give a flavour. Thus, in his exhaustive piece Michael Seidler sets forth a stimulating reading of Pufendorf's 'academic dissertations' (from his teaching spells at Heidelberg in the period 1661–8 and Lund in 1668–76) and his theory of the state. Rejecting any easy label of Pufendorf as Hobbes's disciple and/or absolutist champion, Seidler argues that he was 'a sovereignty theorist' who emphasized 'strong and unified political authority' without renouncing the need to examine 'alternative constitutional forms wherein sovereignty can be exercised'. Pufendorf did so in a flexible way; one which considered experience. Moreover, Seidler insists on the

notion of 'system' as the key to understanding the German philosopher's principles. In Pufendorf, systems reasoning constituted the best terrain from which to formulate central questions on the nature of the 'security' problem in relation to human interaction. The often-ignored dissertations – Seidler argues – provide a less essentialist interpretation of Pufendorf's thought, especially of his absolutism. If Pufendorf joined Bodin and Hobbes in maintaining 'the necessity of supreme, undivided sovereignty' so as to keep under control the selfish and irrational behaviours of man, he distinguished between 'supreme' and 'absolute' sovereignty in that the former indicated 'unaccountability to any other authority in the same or higher orders', whereas the latter was 'unrestricted prerogative or discretionary power'. In this sense, any type of government could be potentially absolutist. Excluding all theories of divine right, Pufendorf stressed human intervention as the decisive element in establishing forms of government. This would guarantee – pace Hobbes – the limited organization of monarchy thanks to fundamental laws and councils the king had to consult. On the whole, Seidler persuasively shows how for Pufendorf 'ruling is a circumstantial, improvisational skill and not the instantiation of ideal or universal form'. For this reason, as well as for his preferring 'monstrosity' (and 'composition') to 'mixture' and for his recognition of 'the discrepant mutuality of sovereignty and systems solutions underlying all forms of human governance', Seidler concludes that Pufendorf considered it vital to pay 'more attention to the concrete details of history' than 'to abstract philosophy'.

Focusing on two other big names in the history of political thinking, Ioannis Evrigenis offers a novel outlook on Rousseau's criticism of Hobbes's state of nature as inaccurate since men in their pristine condition were described as if they had been social. In consequence, the Hobbesian view of society was erroneous to the extent that 'Hobbism and despotism' became 'synonymous'. In practice, this criticism served Rousseau to contest Hobbes's idea of absolute sovereignty. Concentrating on the *Elements of Law* (1640), Evrigenis convincingly shows that Hobbes's engagement with the issue of the state of nature began already in chapter 13 of book 1 (and not in the following one, as scholars always claim) where he separated 'mathematics and dogma'. In other terms, mathematicians represented the antithesis of disorder, that very same disorder which affected the savage peoples of America. This picture, however, proved too unconvincing and, in fact, did not appear in *Leviathan* (1651). Not everything good derived from the work of mathematicians. Likewise, something positive stemmed from disagreement concerning interests. As *Leviathan* showed, the gap between reason and passion was not as deep as Hobbes had initially established. Sovereignty, which rested absolute in the individual in the state of nature, passed on 'to the power whose task is to keep "all in awe"', creating 'a world of order approximating that of the mathematicians' instead of one where chaos reigned. To Hobbes's

presentation of the state of nature Rousseau responded by pointing out that the English philosopher's 'conception of self-preservation' was 'too expansive', namely too social. For Rousseau – Evrigenis contends – Hobbes's initial natural condition of desolation was not so much original, as 'post-political' in that it described a despotic setting into which people were forced when 'no overarching authority could control them'. Thus, if Rousseau followed Hobbes in declaring that sovereignty was 'absolute' (but also 'inalienable'), he distinguished between 'the sovereign and the government' in order to avoid a situation in which absolutism turned into 'totalitarianism'. This corresponded not just to a catastrophic scenario but to an even worse set of circumstances than that applied by Hobbes to the original state of nature: this was so because entailed in it there was degeneration, a process involving 'an excess of corruption'.

To further confirm the interdisciplinarity of our work, the last two contributions address the important iconographic dimension attached to monarchical discourse and absolutist propaganda. On her part, Luisa Simonutti looks at Pierre Bayle's *Dissertation concernant le livre d'Etienne Junius Brutus, imprimé l'an 1579*, a critical comment on the (in)famous *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, to cast light on Bayle's combining 'the question of political obedience and that of toleration'. Targeting the Jesuits as propagators of both regicide and intolerance, Bayle the 'politique' fused – in what Simonutti defines as an 'apparent oxymoron' – 'defence of absolutism' with 'universal toleration'. Relying on the well-known anti-League *Satyre Ménippée* (1594), Bayle used the *Dictionnaire's* entry 'Bernard de Montaignard' not only to attack all fanatics who defended the killing of kings, but also to expound the 'distinction between absolute and arbitrary power'. The *Satyre Ménippée* was greatly popular in 'Baroque France' as well as in 'Bayle's Holland'. It stood for all that which opposed popish power and Spanish attempts to ruin Europe through imperial expansion. As such the work attracted much attention for a long time to come. Among the most interesting testimonies to its importance, Simonutti singles out the illustration of the frontispiece of the *Satyre* by the engraver Bernard Picart, commissioned in 1706 and appearing in an edition by the Huguenot printer exiled from Amsterdam Henri Desbordes. Picart declared that the plate had to be accompanied by an *Explication de la Satyre Ménippée* so as to clarify the content and give an interpretation of it – a task accomplished by Prosper Marchand. According to Simonutti, the image should be taken as a clear representation of the *politique* doctrines and of their significance for late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Huguenots. Providing a detailed description of the images in the frontispiece, Simonutti offers a penetrating analysis of the complex symbolism attached to both ideology and events surrounding the tragic years of activism of the League. This same spirit of anti-religious zeal and conciliation animated Bayle's *Dissertation* on Brutus. Here he claimed the political need to maintain peace in the state and

guarantee freedom of conscience in society. Hence disobedience to the ruler was never condoned. Depicting sovereignty as 'single and indivisible power', Bayle concluded that, since religion could not give privileged access to truth and man's soul was fundamentally ignorant, it was necessary to embrace 'universal toleration'. The political regime that could best assure this settlement was an absolute one. This polity had all the antidotes to prevent the scenario so vividly illustrated in the frontispiece of the *Satyre Ménippée*.

That iconographic means had the force to convey powerful political meanings is certainly no news. How they did so is a question that is sometimes left unanswered. Such is not the case with Tim Hochstrasser's chapter where the *politicization* of sculpture under Empress Catherine II of Russia is richly captured both through Diderot's opinions on monarchy and thanks to the analysis of an important statue. Hochstrasser concentrates on Diderot's activity (1770s) as facilitator of Etienne-Maurice Falconet's famous monument to Peter the Great – *the Bronze Horseman* – and also on his ideas of how absolute monarchy 'might and should be publicly represented in sculptural form, whether realistic or allegorical'. Commissioned by Catherine in 1766, the *Bronze Horseman* had to represent the 'enduring' imperial effort pursued by Peter with the aim of celebrating the glory of Russia and St Petersburg, which the Empress was now revitalizing. Intent to portray herself as legitimate heir to Peter, Catherine dismissed as 'lifeless and unedifying' an already existing statue of Peter 'in Roman garb and on horseback' by Rastrelli, architect of the Winter Palace. Such a statue did not fit in with her grander purposes. Thus, aware of the highly significant need to represent authority publicly, Diderot saw in Falconet the artist whose work could best 'promote Catherine's international persona as a patron of the arts' in what was an attempt to enhance monarchy through cultural support. As the Empress's 'client-representative in Paris', Diderot played a crucial part on this stage. As for Falconet, his design turned out to be 'the most original and daring of those submitted' as it presented an image of Peter which dispensed with allegory and with the conventional Greek and Roman models in favour of a more simply recognizable figure of powerful governor of the nation. However, the sculptor's creation did not find the Empress and the *philosophe* on the same wavelength. In fact, Diderot did not approve of Falconet's lack of an allegorical message. On his part, the artist replied by proclaiming that Peter had to be represented 'as a builder, a legislator, a benefactor of his country' as much as 'a great military leader or a conqueror'. To make sense of Diderot's ideas in this matter, Hochstrasser sheds light on the neglected letters the two friends exchanged between 1765 and 1767. Here the philosopher advocated the importance of the judgement of posterity as the central factor to be taken into consideration when artistic work was concerned. Moreover, Diderot argued that, should Falconet's approach be adopted, the exemplary ethical message emanating from ancient

sculpture would go missing. Images were harbingers of virtues and prompted people to imitate good actions. Without 'a rigid and exact allegory', no clear political point could be conveyed. This was indeed too big a risk for Diderot, who considered statues politically vital for those in power, especially at a time when – as Hochstrasser observes – the need to speak to the people was conditioned by the new utilitarian spirit.

IV

Having travelled from medieval England to eighteenth-century Prussia through Enlightenment France and Naples, and from the vocabulary of indivisible, inalienable, hereditary sovereignty to descriptions of the monarch as constitutional artisan of a complex administrative apparatus, one underlying feature of our discourse has been the focus on *perceptions* (namely on what theorists wrote and described, and on what they expressed in a *normative* way according to their theoretical, ideological, doctrinal goals). Reality might not have necessarily corresponded to their designs, but what we are interested in is precisely such designs, projects, configurations of political society and government, power and authority, sovereignty and liberty. The point to which our work draws attention concerns the conceptual sphere, especially in conjunction with the idea of sovereignty and within it to the modality(ies) of power. In other terms, ideas serve(d) to think or reshape institutions, polities, systems of government. Intellectual categories helped societies to reflect on their organization and life. Therefore, concepts have to be seen as having the function of legitimizing actions. We need to investigate how they formed and how they then began to influence reality; in a word, we need to consider how they gave meanings to different narratives of politics.

The stimulating discussions that ensued from the conference papers highlighted the need for further work on the notion of 'arbitrary' as connected to absolutism; on the role of religion within the early modern absolute state; on the importance of (the concept of) safety for monarchists across the ideological and contextual spectrum. Moreover, as Alan Cromartie pointed out in his intervention, it is essential to unveil both continuity and change with regard to monarchical government throughout the period under scrutiny. Thus, while insistence on the duty of the monarch to pursue the common good remained constant, shifts occurred in respect of royal virtues, which became narrower and less focused on the individual persona of the ruler. On his part, the other discussant at the conference, Dario Castiglione, observed that the 'ghost' lurking behind the project is republicanism. This is to say that, when discussing absolutism, monarchism and despotism, it is inevitable to engage with 'republican ideology' in its variegated colours and nuances. In addition, Castiglione pertinently asked whether we can do without the *isms* or whether, with the right dose

of caution, we can still employ them as helpful interpretative tools to clarify the thinking of the past. Both Cromartie and Castiglione suggested that, when posing our questions, at least four 'levels' be taken into consideration: the political philosophy of the commonwealth (with particular attention to theoretical and rhetorical aspects); the organization of the polity (of the monarchy) with the intertwined dimensions of theory and practice; the societal factor, especially the class element; the political culture permeating the structure of the state and the frequent anti-absolutist discourse. Finally, it has been underlined that, in treating these issues, one needs to bring to light not just the dichotomy reason-passions, but also that between substantive rationality and instrumental rationality (well delineated by the concept of *arbitrium*).³⁴

By studying this wide spectrum of thinkers and doctrines, we hope to have addressed at least some of the important points raised above and also to have fostered fresh debate concerning the nature of political theory in early modern Europe. What we can confidently say is that our volume opens up new ground for research in that it analyses absolutism and monarchical discourse in relation to republicanism (especially, its conflict with it); patriarchalism; patriotism; liberty (e.g. intellectual liberty); property (protection of subjects' property); the state of nature; scientific developments; toleration; and iconographic propaganda. Moreover, this book reads absolutism in combination with the humanist project in that it placed at the centre of its reflection man with his rationality and will. In this respect, it treats an array of topics beyond the too frequent focus just on divine right and sacral monarchy; and this also encourages an increasingly post-theological approach to theories of (absolute) kingship.

By proceeding in this way, we have provided new insights into how absolutists *and* monarchists spoke. This has, in turn, revealed a discourse made of a plurality of languages: Machiavellian, Tacitean, Bodinian, patriarchalist, patriotic, constitutional, royalist, cynic, Hobbesian, Enlightened. Despite presenting some divergent views on the nature of the *isms* here explored, our work delineates with clarity the trajectories and the evolutions of certain ideas through time in a range of politically changing realities. Besides dismissing all interpretations of absolutist parlance as the expression of monolithic and oppressive societies, we hope to have provided a series of analytical templates enabling historians to deal with the perennial problem of defining and redefining political thought on monarchy in early modern Europe. Thus, while twenty-four years ago Richard Bonney could assert that it was 'difficult to envisage that ... the writing of political biography and the editing of primary sources will produce a definitive reassessment of absolutism,'³⁵ we think that the time to try other routes has arrived: the definitive will always remain elusive, but we may understand things better by following up on the interdisciplinary and multi-geographical efforts that this volume has put forward.