

Introduction to James B. Collins, “Resistance and Order in Early Modern France.”

Michael P. Breen, Reed College

In the last thirty years, the so-called “Revisionist” model of Absolutism has become the new orthodoxy for describing the workings of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century monarchy. As William Beik, one of revisionism’s key architects, has put it, “the dominant paradigm [has] shifted from a centralizing, modernizing monarch to a king maintaining and defending a traditional society.” In Beik’s apt description, the “social collaboration” model of absolutism portrays monarchs as exercising their power “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.”¹

Along with Beik’s *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc*, one of the most important and influential works in the development of the “social collaboration” model of absolutism in the mid-1980s was Sharon Kettering’s *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France*.² Drawing on the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists to recast and revitalize Roland Mousnier’s overly-simplified notion of *fidelité*, Kettering articulated a powerful model of how personal allegiances and vertical solidarities worked within the framework of ancien regime state and society. Together, Beik and Kettering’s research, along with the work of other scholars, including Roger Mettam, Al Hamscher, David Parker, Sarah Hanley, and James B. Collins, transformed the study of state and society under the ancien regime and greatly influenced the work of a rising generation of early modern French historians.

Until her unexpected and untimely passing August 2010, Sharon Kettering remained an active and influential historian of early modern French history. Her continued interest in the implications of personal loyalty and political allegiance, as well as the informal exercise of power and influence, can be seen in her final book, *Power and Reputation at the Court of Louis XIII: The Career of Charles d’Albret, Duc de Luynes, 1578-1621*.³ She was also a driving force behind the DC-Baltimore Area Old Regime Group and a generous mentor, adviser, and confidante to a host of younger scholars.

¹ William Beik, “The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration,” *Past and Present* 188 (Aug. 2005): 195-224, 195.

² William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³ Sharon Kettering, *Power and Reputation at the Court of Louis XIII: The Career of Charles d’Albret, Duc de Luynes, 1578-1621* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

The paper that follows is an expanded and revised version of comments delivered by Jim Collins during a roundtable held in honor of Sharon Kettering and her work at the 2011 meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in Charleston, South Carolina. In it, Collins explains how the “social collaborationist” model of absolutism can best be understood as resulting from a productive tension between the scholarship of Beik and Kettering. The former, in his words, “brought social history to politics” while the latter “brought politics to social history.” He traces how Beik’s work, informed by a Marxist vision of the social history of class conflict, and Kettering’s, drawn from a Rightist vision of political solidarities in Mousnier’s *société des orders*, converged and, in the process, transcended the Right/Left splits that characterized the field in France. When it comes to the history of the “revisionist model” of absolutism, Collins argues, “the real pairing is Bill and Sharon: they marked the break” and together laid the foundations for a radically new understanding of the so-called “absolute monarchy.”