It is an honor and a great pleasure to be asked to write about the contributions made by Jeffrey Merrick to the study of “politics” in eighteenth-century France. Thanks to Merrick’s work, we’ve come a long way in our thinking of what constitutes politics and how we evaluate political action and expression.

Several decades ago, the term “politics” conjured up images of backroom palace deals and ministerial backstabbing with a healthy dose of diplomatic cloak-and-dagger machinations. Somewhere in the middle of this was a king who, depending on his personality, was either deeply immersed in the action or woefully oblivious. (And in the eighteenth century, he seemed invariably inept.) Certainly, by the early 1970s, the study of politics had fallen into disrepute, somewhat drowned out by waves of social history. But during the 1980s, the arrival of “political culture” created a resurgent interest in and a redefinition of politics. I don’t need to go into the details of how, through its emphasis on language, the study of political culture prompted a fresh look at new forms of political expression. Jeff’s scholarship was important because it provided a re-orientation of “high politics”—that shadowy world of ministers and Crown institutions. Thus, we asked questions about how the expanding rhetoric on the “public” and “public opinion” shaped both how the absolutist state functioned and how it was perceived.

Jeff’s work on politics has influenced this transformation in a number of ways. His work on “desacralization” has helped us understand how the sacred underpinnings of absolutism began to fray in a state that was divided institutionally and ideologically. The quarrels between the Church and the parlements were particularly corrosive to the traditional understandings of sovereignty. Over the course of these combative exchanges, “sovereignty” gradually took on new meaning as the discourse of “citizenship” and “conscience” destabilized the hierarchical relationship between laity and clergy, between individuals and secular authority. Suzanne Desan speaks to Jeff’s important work on family and gender, which has helped reshape our understanding of politics, law, and private life. I want to touch briefly on another way in which Jeff has shaped my own interests: the connection between religious politics and gender.

Jeff’s opus on politics was The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century. (One of my favorite parts of the book is Jeff’s recounting of a job interview in which he recounted being asked, “What the hell does that mean?”) As this wonderfully trim volume, along with numerous articles, argues, desacralization points to a process, namely, the gradual erosion of divine right ideology within

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2 Jeffrey W. Merrick, The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990), x.
the contentious politics of the eighteenth century. In a general sense, early modern institutions and the understanding of authority were deeply enmeshed in Catholic doctrine and religious practices. As the protector of French Catholicism or Gallicanism, the king was responsible for upholding confessional uniformity, which generations of early modern French men and women deemed necessary in the aftermath of the bloody Wars of Religion. According to Merrick, “The French king served Catholicism not only through the example of his own piety but also by unsheathing the temporal sword of coercion to enforce the doctrinal decisions and disciplinary judgments of the clergy.”

During the eighteenth century, this symbiotic relationship between the sacred and the temporal would usher in decades of political “dysfunction” and ultimately weaken the institutional foundations of monarchical authority. Jeff and others have chronicled the bitter conflicts over the pesky Unigenitus, the vingtième, and the Jesuits. During much of the first half of the century, parlementary magistrates and ultramontane bishops wrangled over jurisdictional rights with respect to spiritual affairs. To justify anti-Jansenist policies such as the refusal of sacraments, ultramontane bishops argued for their “prerogatives” in determining spiritual orthodoxy and authenticity. On the other side, parlementaires countered that it was their—and the king’s—duty to protect subjects from clerical abuses that denied them their “rights,” such as communion or the last rites. And both sides claimed that they were acting in the king’s interest even as they denounced each other as “despotic” or “republican.”

And in the middle of all of this was the king. Louis XV tried to manage the dysfunction of his courts and clergy, alternately deploying laws of silence, exile, and conciliation to the satisfaction of no one. It didn’t help that [supposedly] scheming royal mistresses and effeminate ministers surrounding him became markers of royal dysfunction. Moreover, Louis XV’s actions sometimes strengthened parlementary and clerical resistance to the crown. As Jeff notes, “both parties excoriated independence and innovation, ransacked Scripture and history, invoked the constitution and the coronation in order to defend their own privileges and the French people as a whole not only against each other’s depredations but also against the misguided policies of the crown.” This tug-and-pull over who was defending the traditions of religion and law resulted in the gradual fraying of the sacred fabric of authority in the eighteenth century. The controversies “desacralized the monarchy by disrupting the conjunction of religion and politics, discrediting divine ordination, and secularizing citizenship.” Desacralization then was much more than an expression of dissatisfaction or disillusionment with an individual monarch, regardless of his ineptitude and personal flaws. It was a process of corrosion from within.

What made this “dispute over words” even more corrosive was not just that “sovereignty,” “prerogatives,” and “abuse” were being defined in contradictory ways, but that it was all happening before the public. As such, the process of “desacralization” raises fascinating questions, some of which, I believe, will always compel us because they are and will remain elusive. How did the toxic nature of eighteenth-century institutional politics shape perceptions of the monarchy and the State?

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5 Merrick, The Desacralization of the French Monarchy, 76.


extent did the amorphous public, which existed beyond Versailles, the *palais de justice*, and episcopal palaces, come to regard the king as a non-sacred figure (if they ever did believe he was one)? How did different segments of the public understand the heated debates over sovereignty, constitutions, and rights? The studies by Robert Darnton, Lisa Graham, and Simon Burrows—to name a few historians—have been useful for us to think about the questions raised in Jeff’s work in various other contexts. They provide a kaleidoscopic glimpse of the impact these quarrels had.

We might also want to think about the impact of desacralization not just in terms of reception but also with respect to appropriation. My own recent work on a set of Jansenist verses, known as the *sarcelades*, suggests possible connections. Written by a down-and-out jeweler turned banker, Nicolas Jouin, these patois verses were not an actual expression of popular opinion. Rather, they provide insight as to how elites viewed popular support of Jansenism. The *sarcelades* complicate the notion that parishioners simply absorbed the teachings of Jansenist clerics propagated in Parisian pulpits and schools, an image that the *Nouvelles Eclesiastiques* certainly put forth. Instead, Jouin’s imagining of “popular” Jansenism suggests that theologians and clerics, who broadcast the “Truth” or “*la Vérité*,” referring to the Augustinian doctrine of efficacious grace, did not always have control over that message. The *sarcelades* evoke a more menacing image of interpretation. Their trenchant use of humor, sprinkled with pungent expletives, conveyed an insubordinate attitude expressed toward bishops, the Jesuits, and at times the king himself. Indeed, Nicolas Jouin’s verses appear as a celebratory acknowledgement of this growing rebelliousness.

Two of the fifteen *sarcelades* mimicked the belligerent tactics adopted by the populace’s social betters. These poems addressed the king directly and offered extensive commentary on the political standoff between Crown and parlement during the early 1730s. Significantly, the verses were entitled “Les Très-Humbles et très respecteuses remontrances des habitans du village de Sarcelles au Roi” (1732) and “Les Très-Humbles Remerciements des habitans de Sarcelles au Roi” (1733). These titles suggest that

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parlementary remonstrances, harangues, etc. provided models for expressing this disaffection, if not out-and-out resistance.

Within these sarcelades, the king was featured as an ambivalent character; his subjects deeply wanted to believe in his paternal good will but instead were confronted by the king’s seeming insensitivity and indolence. Speaking in patois, the poems’ central character, Claude Fetu, sharply reminded his sovereign of his responsibilities of protecting his subjects and the Church: “C’est aux Rois à protéger, Sire,/L’Eglise, & non à la conduire:/Et sitôt qu’ils s’en garmentont,/Les Tyrans ils en devenont.”

These verses suggest that by siding with ultramontane bishops and defending Unigenitus, the king had done the opposite. They intimiated that the king was sliding towards tyranny, an accusation that effectively delegitimized Louis XV’s authority. Despite his clear dissatisfaction, Claude Fetu did show some charity toward Louis XV, suggesting that the king had become a “dupe” of bishops and the Jesuits, especially since he had been in the cradle when Unigenitus had arrived in France. Ironically, just as the king diminished to a mere mortal, parlementary magistrates seemed to acquire superhuman traits. Without these “heroes,” the king and his crown would be lost. The parlement’s “magnificent Remonstrance” illustrated the magistrates’ love and loyalty because the courts had dared show the king the truth about those who were abusing his authority and devastating France. Claude Fetu’s arguments clearly imitated the arguments readers and listeners found in the actual remonstrances. But spoken in the voice of the menu peuple, they were aggressive from the point of authorities and elites.

This very brief description of the sarcelades provides an example of how we can continue investigating the process of desacralization. Taken as a whole, Jouin’s poems suggest a cultural landscape in which material deprivation was fused with spiritual disaffection. The verses remind us that the erosion of authority was not taking place in a series of parallel crises, alternate universes that would collide only on the eve of the Revolution. Rather, as Dale Van Kley’s study of the Damiens Affair has shown, individuals and social and institutional groups experienced dissatisfaction or even disillusionment in the context of multiple events and developments. I would argue that exploring the points or moments where different crises in the Old Regime converged would add to our continued thinking about desacralization and more generally, eighteenth-century anxieties regarding power. Indeed, Jeff’s work powerfully suggests these possibilities as he has examined the ways in which the king’s paternal image was wearing down at the same time as the religious foundation of absolutism was cracking.

The sarcelades, expressed as harangues and remonstrances, represent a form of political engagement. Political participation, whatever form it takes, leads us to think about citizenship, and Jeff has done much to help us think about the transition of French subjects into citizens. His work has shed light on how the early modern subject’s civic existence depended on his or her adherence to the Catholic faith, with the clergy acting as gatekeepers by officially recording births, marriages, and deaths. However, as Jeff reminds us, while the Church and the king policed external forms of conformity, “conscience, strictly speaking, eluded secular scrutiny.” It was in the name of conscience that Jansenists resisted...

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13 “Harangue au Roi,” 442.

14 “Harangue au Roi,” 447.

15 “Remontrances,” 61.

16 “Remerciements,” 92.


papal and royal rulings that challenged their beliefs. Moreover, as we know, in the wake of *Unigenitus*, the parlement of Paris defended Jansenists, imagined and real, who refused to accept the bull on the basis of conscience. Stripped down, the legal arguments, often launched via the *appel comme d'abus*, concluded that the clergy had no right to deny subjects the sacraments. “Their arguments effectively transformed the sacramental signs of conformity in conscience, sheltered from abusive scrutiny not only by its very nature but also by the king’s justice.”  

However, the use of conscience as a tool for resisting ecclesiastical authority was not restricted to eighteenth-century *parlementaires*. The place of “conscience” in Jansenist controversies allows us to see how narratives of interiority were brought before the public and how they became politicized and secularized. Significantly, conscience was also an equally important vehicle for private individuals who defied clerical and secular authority. For example, Daniella Kostroun has shown how the Port-Royal nuns did not hesitate to put up a fight against authorities, justifying their resistance in the name of conscience, a pattern I found in my own work on Jansenist nuns.  

For example, during the 1730s, sister Marie-Thérèse, a Jansenist Carmelite exiled from her convent in Lectoure, could not refrain from arguing about spiritual matters with the nuns in her new convent in Montauban. She declared, “I could not keep quiet without wounding my conscience.”  

And in a confrontation over a royally appointed mother superior, a Franciscan nun in Beauvais told a king’s officer, “the King is not above God… and the power of the King does not extend over our souls.”  

The word “conscience” was not uttered here but certainly was implied.

In the eighteenth century, the act of speaking out of conscience was to place one’s self above clerical authority. Conscience was what prompted the twenty-one year old Catherine Cadière to denounce her Jesuit confessor Jean-Baptiste Girard for seduction (or spiritual incest), abortion, Quietism, and witchcraft. (I am referring to the *cause célèbre* that took place in 1731 that captivated France and much of Europe.) According to Cadière, Girard had used his authority in the confession to seduce her mind of the Parlement of Paris in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51:3 (July-Sept. 1990): 453-460.


22 Choudhury, “Gendered Models,” 34.


and her body. Girard, and not God, had induced Cadière into a mystical state and debauched her by admonishing her that she had no other task than “to abandon herself absolutely to the will of our good God” and to accept whatever happened as a “silent victim.”

Cadière’s own descriptions of her relationship with Girard and her mystical outpourings suggest a tension between acquiescence and resistance. For example, when Girard insisted that Catherine disrobe as a form of mortification, she fainted, only to wake in a complete daze and in disarray (and naked). Like Madame de Tourvel some fifty years later in Choderlos Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Cadière “withdrew” from the seduction by mentally escaping into unconsciousness. But Cadière’s resistance also took on more active forms. Cadière noted that in his efforts to seduce her, Girard admonished her to banish her scruples and her fears, which suggests that the penitent had, in fact, expressed doubts about her director’s commands. And during the dramatic confrontation between the two before the parlement of Provence on October 4, 1731, Cadière claimed that, despite her ecstasies and obsessions, she continued to take communion frequently at Girard’s bidding. However, she did not do so with, in her words, “a free conscience.”

I would argue that Cadière’s use of the term “conscience” and especially, “free conscience,” signaled a model of interiority that challenged the hierarchical relationship at the center of the confessor/penitent relationship. In its entry “conscience,” the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* provides a set of commonly used phrases, including “director of conscience.” This term indicates that the accepted understanding of conscience, or “interior light or interior sentiment,” necessarily involved the clergy who acted as watchdogs over the consciences of the faithful. According to Cadière’s supporters, Jean-Baptiste Girard had deliberately led his penitent down an immoral path under the guise of mysticism, which was, in fact, at odds with her conscience. Thus, Cadière’s conscience connoted an autonomous self that possessed its own moral compass struggling against spiritual misdirection.

Catherine Cadière and sister Marie-Thérèse illustrate how individual subjects manipulated the rhetoric of conscience to carve out a sphere of autonomy. I would argue that examining the debates surrounding conscience bridges together the study of politics and the growing scholarship on subjectivity (here I am
thinking of Dena Goodman’s work on letters and Charly Coleman’s work on the self). An individual who speaks in the name of conscience in essence takes a public stance. He or she does so because of an impulse from within. Interiority gives authenticity to this public stance. It is a moment in which the subjective self is made transparent before the public. Conscience was then about individual political action as much as it was about political gamesmanship.

The consideration of conscience is just one example of how Jeff has helped us consider the various ways in which eighteenth-century politics was connected to the realm of the private, whether it was within the domestic arena or interiority. As Jeff notes in his essay “Gender in Pre-Revolutionary Political Culture,” “religion, history, and family constituted ideological sites of contestation in which momentous disputes about private and public order and disorder were played out within the framework of durable and flexible traditions.” Thus, bishops and mothers superiors could be bad mothers and fathers. At the same time, certain feminine virtues—humility and simplicity—were characteristics associated with the ideal believer who then morphed into the citizen whose rights were threatened by clerical abuse. Such fluctuating gender constructions and the vulnerability of patriarchal ideology thus reflected changing ideas about family and political legitimacy, as well as competing theological visions of the Church.

In the end, I find myself coming back to Jeff’s work over and over again precisely because he invites us to rethink categories that were once considered unconnected: gender, family, politics, and religion. It is this kind of inquiry that has transformed how we study politics in the eighteenth century. As the last several minutes have indicated, Jeff has been an influential person in my own scholarship. Jeff was the organizer and commentator for my first conference paper as a graduate student, given in the intimidating world of ASECS teeming with scholars working on the various Samuels—Johnson, Richardson, etc. To be honest, I don’t remember exactly what Jeff said about my paper. But what remains with me is his generosity and encouragement, and his efforts to push my thinking to the next level. (In fact, Jennifer Jones had a similar experience when Jeff delivered the comment for her first conference paper.) For me, it was a pattern that persisted after I got a job and struggled away at my first book. Jeff’s feedback, which came in various forms, kept me going, helping me see the merit of my ideas when I felt overwhelmed in those pre-tenure days. I so appreciated how he engaged with my efforts to think about feminine rule, religion, and politics. I have one last, brief anecdote that illustrates how Jeff has added so much to the study of French history. At the SFHS meeting at Rutgers in 2008, I confessed to Jeff that I could not seem to escape the Jansenists, to which he replied “aren’t they fun?” I’m still thinking that one through.

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