REVIEW ARTICLE

Reactions Against Church & State in 17th Century France

Review article by Nicholas Rowe for H-France, May 1998.

William Beik, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-century France: The Culture of Retribution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiii + 283 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendix, bibliography, and index. $59.95 US (cl); ISBN 0-521-57308-4. $19.95 US (pb); ISBN 0-521-57585-0.

Henry Phillips, *Church and Culture in Seventeenth-century France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. ix + 334 pp. Bibliography and index. $59.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-521-57023-9.

Cultural historians who raise questions about the relationship between institutions and individuals have broadened considerably the historiography of early modern France. Here we consider two works on 17th century France, both of which refine the questions about the aspirations of powerful institutions and the reactions of the people they affected. William Beik considers the perspective of disaffected communities as he discusses the complexity of civil unrest in urban areas, while Henry Phillips analyzes the ambitions of the Catholic Church in France.

Beik's efforts focus on urban protesters. Specifically, in his words, he explores "what they wanted, how they tried to get it, and to what extent they were able to influence a system of power that was designed to exclude them" (p. 13). Departing from the regional focus on his well-received earlier work, Beik instead focuses on cities to understand community reaction to outside pressures. The nature of these collective responses, he argues, is best understood through the anthropological concept of gesture, the various sorts of face- saving actions which individuals take to preserve their autonomy, reputation, esteem, or honor. Through perceived slights or insufficient deference, people faced challenges to their honor on a daily basis. Usually the resulting confrontation could be diffused with some reconciling action, but conflicts sometimes escalated, leading to violence. For the most part, these confrontations could take place between any two parties. However, should an offending party be an official governmental authority performing his office, the resulting gesture from the aggrieved party becomes an act of defiance against the state; the former has infringed upon the latter's autonomy. As Beik notes, people easily connected individual defiance with group rebellion. This theoretical foundation adds texture to Beik's investigation, since the various forms of gesture employed during these urban

protests, ranging from small scraps to full-blown revolts, educate the reader about urban government, relationships of power, and relationships of class. Beik's effort thus broadens the growing literature exploring social and cultural relationships in the early modern French city.

Any discussion of early modern popular protest draws upon the efforts of some established historians whose contributions comprise the standard historiography for this topic. Beik's first chapter, then, is a useful resource for those wishing to understand the riot as an historical event. One could observe, for example, the relationship between the occurrences of revolt and other factors, such as increases in grain prices and taxes, as Yves-Marie Berce has done.(1) A more sociological approach involves correlating incidents of unrest with specific objectives, such as tax opposition and price regulation, as in the case of Natalie Zemon Davis and Charles Tilly.(2) One of the better known forms of analysis, associated with George Rude, considers the sociology of the participants, while another approach based on crowd psychology, employed also by Davis, considers the riot as a group activity, with people taking actions which they would not contemplate as individuals.(3) Finally, one chiefly credits E. P. Thompson for the analysis of crowd action connected to class and class interests.(4) Although Beik employs these methodologies, he also goes beyond them to present a creative view of urban unrest allowing us to consider the vast dimensions of urban society, including class consciousness, factional rivalries, relationships between local and state authorities, and the operation of local urban politics.

Beik's efforts rest fundamentally on the interpretation of archival sources which document urban unrest in France during the 17th century. Much of the first part details urban unrest in a context many would expect: non-elites attempting to maintain precious privileges in the face of creeping absolutism. The increasing power of the state expressed itself chiefly in the imposition of higher taxes which were not welcomed by the urban populace. Beik highlights a consistent ritualized expression of displeasure by the various *menu peuple* who were most affected by these taxes. This was directed toward those responsible for tax collection, whom urban folk considered exploiters of the community.

Beik's analysis helps the reader to understand the sociology behind this ritual of state action and popular reaction. Chapters 2 and 3 particularly demonstrate that a riot is not a wildly irrational response appearing out of nowhere, but rather is the culmination of persistent violations of personal and collective dignity over time. Beik's sympathy for the *menu peuple* provides context for primary sources which deal unsympathetically with them, and the literature of the riot and of more subtle sociological analyses serve him well here. Not only does this work help the reader to

understand the causes of urban riots, but it shows the ritual, meaning, and the rationality behind specific actions taking place during unrest.

Having introduced the instigators of unrest, Beik presents those other actors in the drama of the riot: the authorities charged with maintaining the king's peace. The analysis asserts that the role of magistrates, while clear at first glance, was often confounded by the personal interests of the individuals holding such positions. For example, though they technically and indirectly functioned as the local representation of state authority, magistrates were still members of the local community, and as such could be the focus of reprisals if they put down an uprising too vigorously, or chose to intervene in a manner which the local populace found too objectionable. In addition, local elites often had their own reasons for resisting directives from Paris, and could perform their function with bad grace. The position of local elites and their relationships with local populace was therefore a complex matter.

When one considers the larger revolts of the 17th century, particularly under Louis XIV, this complexity, which Beik highlights, grows still larger. Chapter 7 challenges the image of order projected by Louis XIV's absolutism and the mythology arising from it. Beik thus becomes the latest to show how unrest was a matter of course, rather than the exception, during the splendid century. The archival evidence he employs shows that there were few years without some major grievance in an urban area.

This well-written work carries considerable potential for use in the classroom. While it is a sophisticated piece of scholarship, it will also demonstrate for students the complexities of absolutism in the 17th and early 18th centuries. In particular, it undermines the myth of total domestic harmony which Louis XIV was said to enjoy during his long reign. Our understanding of absolutist polity will be enhanced by Beik's analysis and presentation of the *menu peuple*, who made convincing political statements in a system which did not allow for their formal political participation. Part of what makes the work convincing is Beik's ability to let the archival sources speak for themselves, giving voice to the *menu peuple* who were directly affected by the tax policies of the crown, or the ulterior motives of the elite and the powerful. At the same time, Beik also presents a compelling analysis which demonstrates the inherent rationality of most riot and unrest.

Despite the overall strength of Beik's work, it is not without weaknesses. While the earlier parts of the book generally consider the riot as a popular attempt to resist the growing influence of the state, the latter chapters demonstrate that human behavior, as usual, does not fit into precise categories. Here, Beik takes the work in a different direction to demonstrate how revolt could also be an expression of factional struggles among local elites. The distinction which Beik makes between unrest aimed at

curbing the influence of the crown, and protest which occurs in relation to factional disputes and designs by local elites is entirely valid. However, these latter discussions of elitist factionalism and machinations are less persuasive. Up to this point, the book's chief emphasis stresses the urban riot as an expression of state resistance, and Beik's sociological analysis of gesture serves this argument well. The idea of gesture also explains the actions of the elites in factional disputes, but it does not adequately explain the activities of non-elites in this same context. Beik's nuanced reading of his sources and the diligence and integrity of his analysis demonstrate that not all unrest was simply a matter of popular protest against the crown. Other dynamics could be at work. This matter is important to consider, and one wonders whether the motivations of parties in factional disputes should be treated in another volume where the emphasis is not so strongly on anti-state resistance.

Beik shows how the 17th century French negotiated their relationships with various institutions of power. Conversely, Henry Phillips invites us to consider how effectively an institution of power, in this case, the Catholic Church, extended its influence within 17th century French society. Employing the metaphor of space and boundaries, Phillips shows how the Church saw itself as "a totalizing force" within the space it controlled, and how, in the wake of the Counter-Reformation and the clerical reforms established by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), it set about trying to become the principal arbiter of all cultural, intellectual, social, and especially theological life in France. The Church wanted to achieve this goal to fulfil its major purpose. As Phillips terms it, "The business of the Church was... deepening the faith of those who already possessed it, and converting those who did not" (p. 5). The question that Phillips asks in his broad survey is whether the Church succeeded in its aims.

Phillips' analysis reflects the influence of Michel Foucault, particularly in the discussions of power and the attempts by an institution to impose and enforce a standard of orthodoxy upon all cultural activity. The various ways in which the Church attempted to impose its standards on various areas of French cultural activity, especially intellectual activities, form the organizing structure of this work. In the chapter titled "The Spaces of Belief", Phillips assesses how well the French church was able to impose its standard of religious orthodoxy in areas which were supposedly under its control. In short, before the Church could seek to impose its dominance over places resisting its authority, it had to get its own house, or "space" in order. This meant regulating the sanctity of the priesthood, regulating how the church participated in society as a whole, and regulating cultural expressions of the laity. Rural society in particular engaged in rituals which the church considered deviant and presented a substantial challenge to the attempts to impose Tridentine reforms. Jean Delumeau's work in this regard is helpful in understanding this alternative space of belief.(5)

Establishing orthodoxy was an obvious goal the Church needed to achieve if it was to advance its cultural presence. It also sought to accomplish this objective by enhancing its representation within French society. Whether it was by the physical representation of churches and other buildings, by the artistic representation of theater and art, or by the intellectual representation through its role in education, the Church desired ubiquity in French society. Phillips is his most compelling when he discusses a Church determined to fill all of French social space. Through these types of representation, the efforts of the church reached not only the elites, but also popular society and the illiterate. In addition, he shows a Church which used education not only to ground the belief of the faithful, but also to advance into secular space by its views of domestic life and culture in general.

The influence of anthropological perspectives in historical inquiry is another hallmark of this work. These perspectives are present especially in historical studies that try to uncover how a group, a nation, or a society identifies itself. Forming this identity is achieved not only by articulating what characteristics a group has, but also what it does not have; as Peter Sahlins noted, creation of the self defines the "other", the collective term for those not of the group.(6) From the perspective of the Church, the attempts to define its orthodoxy within French society and culture also created an oppositional view, what Phillips calls the space of dissent. This analysis allows Phillips to consider the better known ways in which the aims of the Church were frustrated: Gallican autonomy, the decline of Aristotelian-based science in favor of rational approaches, and the debate between the traditions of Thomist synthesis and Augustinianism, that is to say between the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, based on the synthesis between faith and reason, and stressing an individual's free will, as opposed to the idea of predestination arising from the theology of St. Augustine. The latter conflict, the basis of the Jansenist controversy, would prove especially damaging to the reputation of Catholicism in France. These internal disputes show how the church was unable to establish homogeneity within its own space.

Not everyone embraced the Church's effort to make itself ubiquitous in French society. Within western Christianity, the church of Rome competed with Protestantism. Under the Edict of Nantes, the crown supported an autonomous space for Protestant Christianity for the better part of the 17th century, much to the distaste of the Roman Church. In his assessment of Huguenot society, Phillips sides with Elizabeth Labrousse in downplaying how segregated Protestants were in a Catholic-dominated society.(7) Huguenots occupied many important social roles, especially in the legal and mercantile professions. As Phillips points out, they were also strong supporters of the absolutist state, reasoning that a strong monarchy was the best guarantor of their privileges against the Catholic majority; certainly they were inherently supporters of Gallican autonomy from the Holy See. Thus, until the Edict

was revoked in 1685 Protestantism was actually a source of support for the state. Nevertheless, the presence of this "heresy" made it a space for Catholic reconquest. Jansenism also constituted a place of opposition within Christianity, and even more so coming from within the Catholic tradition. However, as Phillips asserts, challenges to the attempts at cultural hegemony also came from outside the culture of belief. We see this chiefly with the idea of *libertinage*, which not only articulated behavior well outside Church norms, but also denoted a resistance to uncritical belief in Church doctrine. Like the *libertins*, atheists in the seventeenth century demonstrated alternatives to belief. Their refusal to conform to Church orthodoxy was chiefly due to their inability to assent to intellectual foundations of belief. Finally, Phillips includes deism as part of this culture of unbelief. Although deists did not deny the existence of God, they opposed the imposition of moral orthodoxy by any authority. Human reason alone was sufficient to inform ethics, and the Church was not the indispensable institution for conveying morals. As it was, the attempts of the Church to control the dissemination of ideas from these hostile spaces revealed the futility of its aspirations. It had to rely upon the state's power of censorship to stem the flow of ideas which threatened not only the extension of its influence into French society, but also its privileged place in areas where it already enjoyed a significant presence.

To cover the full scope of the objectives of the French Catholic Church in one volume is an ambitious and difficult task. Indeed, the success of this history is not only its broad comprehension, but also its considerable cohesion. It should surprise few that Phillips owes Foucault considerable intellectual debt, particularly as he tries to analyze how the activities of the French church were designed to assume total control over all aspects of French social and cultural life. In this sense, Phillips's efforts constitute the most recent attempt at discussion of the church as a cultural institution, following the leads of Lebrun, Taveneaux, and Briggs.(8) He also introduces some recent debates to the reader, including those concerning the tensions between the ecclesiastical and secular aspects of Gallicanism, further developed by Dale Van Kley in his most recent work(9), the struggle of the Church to control the world of print, and its ability to impose orthodoxy over popular culture. Although the discussion grows detailed in spots, this work is a welcome addition to the literature, and would serve well as a text for advanced students.

The Catholic Church and royal government were committed to extending their power and presence in French society. Phillips and Beik demonstrate that life for both the small and the great in France was a series of efforts intended to resist the encroachment of these institutions upon individual life. Phillips synthesizes the recent good scholarship on the French Church. In particular, he shows the various ways in which the Church wanted to control French society. Although Phillips attempts to show how both the great and the small were touched by the ambitions of the Church,

his work is more of an intellectual history, and focuses mostly on the way in which literate elites were affected, and how they resisted. Thus, Beik complements Phillips well by considering the urban lower classes in his analysis of urban revolts. While Phillips considers an institution that was a subject of power, Beik weighs things from the perspective of those who were the object of various manifestations of state power. He shows us that urban revolt was an extension of individual efforts to maintain social honor and respect, and that revolt was an established way of resisting efforts to infringe upon one's social dignity. Taken together, these works provide a unique perspective of the two most influential French institutions during the 17th century.

Notes:
1. Yves-Marie Berce, *History of Peasant Revolts: The Social Origins of Rebellion in Early Modern France*, trans. Amanda Whitmore (Ithaca, 1990).
2. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975); Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).
3. George Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959); Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*.
4. E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, vol. 50 (February 1971).
5. Jean Delumeau, *Fear in the West* (Paris, 1978).
6. Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 271.
7. Elizabeth Labrousse, *'Une foi, une loi, une roi?': la revocation de l'Edit de Nantes* (Paris, 1985).
8. See F. Lebrun, ed., *Histoire des Catholiques en France* (Paris, 1980); R. Taveneaux, *Le Catholicisme dans la France classique, 1619-1715*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1980); and Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tensions in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989).
9. Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: >From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, 1996). See the H-France review, August 1997.

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