Absolutism
L'Etat, C'Est Moi
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European Absolutism And Power Politics

Introduction

Louis XIV (1643-1715) of France is remembered best as a strong-willed monarch who reportedly once exclaimed to his fawning courtiers, "L'etat, c'est moi" (I am the state). Whether or not he really said these words, Louis has been regarded by historians as the typical absolute monarch - a symbol of his era. Similarly, historians have often referred to this period, when kings dominated their states and waged frequent dynastic wars against one another as an age of absolutism.

Absolute monarchy, admittedly, was not exactly new in Europe. Since the late medieval period, rulers had been attempting to centralize their authority at the expense of feudal nobles and the church. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, religious strife blurred political issues and somewhat restricted developing monarchies. After the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the era of disastrous religious wars, absolutism rapidly gained popularity because it promised to restore order and security.

Parallel economic developments encouraged the maturing of absolutism. As the Spanish and Portuguese overseas empires declined, the Dutch, English, and French assumed commercial and colonial leadership, bringing the European economy to a second stage of expansion. The commercial revolution, centered in northern Europe, generated great wealth and brought increasingly complex capitalistic institutions, both of which furthered the process of state-building.

When the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648, it marked a significant turning point in European history. Peace, after such prolonged religious conflict and political chaos, renewed possibilities for centralizing royal authority within European states.

The Shift In Fundamental European Values

The era after Westphalia also saw a fundamental shift in European values. Although many Europeans - both Protestant and Catholic - were still concerned about personal salvation, they were now also apprehensive about prospects in this world. Like their Renaissance predecessors, they enjoyed sensual as well as aesthetic pleasures; but they put more emphasis on profits, power, and the need for security. With the memory of war and social upheaval still fresh, they were inclined toward a belief in order, which shaped their other values.

Secularism And Classicism

Although often subtle, the new secular outlook after 1650 was revealed in many ways. Despite their many expressed religious concerns, kings now routinely used religion for secular political ends. The prevailing secularism was also evident in the elegance, frivolity, intrigue, and sexual license that characterized royal courts and the private lives of the nobility. In educated circles, secularism was demonstrated in the growing popularity of science, with its avowed materialism and its implied refutation of scripture. But even unlearned common people shared a universal boredom with religious contention, along with the prevailing desire for stable social conditions.

This yearning for stability and order was clearly demonstrated in the arts. Earlier, during Europe's era of transitional turbulence, the baroque style had symbolized flamboyant power and restless frustration. Although the forms of baroque art and architecture remained popular, they were overshadowed in this era by a return to traditional classicism. Retaining the baroque deference to power, the revived classical mode emphasized order in its discipline, formality, and balance. Classicism owed much to the aristocratic world where it flourished. It reflected the growing scientific faith in an ordered universe, and it also expressed the political values of absolute monarchs, such as Louis XIV, who sponsored many artistic endeavors. Indeed, the French court led Europe's classical revival.

Classical literature was perhaps best exemplified in the polished and elegant French dramas of Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), Jean Racine (1639-1699), and Jean-Baptiste Moliere (1622-1673). The first two were the great tragedians of the seventeenth century. They followed Aristotle's traditional rules of dramatic unity but produced works noted for psychological insights and beauty of language. Usually borrowing their plots from Greek and Roman antiquity, they often depicted heroes and hereoines as idealized portraits of contemporary courtiers. Moliere, an author of witty comedies, contrasted the artificiality of his society with the dictates of moderation and good sense. All three writers were sometimes mildly critical of established institutions, although their criticism was not direct enough to offend patrons.

A similar deference for patronage and authority was revealed in classical architecture and painting. In these areas, France also led the way. A state-sponsored culture, begun by Richelieu and Louis XIII in the French Academy, was continued by Louis XIV in academies of architecture, painting, dance, and music. The latter's palace at Versailles, with its horizontal lines, ninety-degree angles, and formal gardens, was copied all over Europe. So was the work of French court painters, such as Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), who glorified the Grand Monarch and his society in colorful portraits and panoramic scenes, emphasizing the common values of elegance and order.

The Capitalistic Ethic

The worlds of art and business, apparently so far removed from each other, shared common perspectives in this era. Traders and bankers, like most Europeans after Westphalia, felt a sense of relief and some hope for more tranquil times in the future. They could now more freely follow their own capitalistic ethic, which usually placed acquisition of profit over humane or religious concerns. This commercial secularism was also oriented toward securing order. Social upheavals obviously hurt business, and a strong state could promote prosperity in an increasingly interdependent world economy.

By the seventeenth century, particularly after mid-century, this economy depended upon the exchange of bulk commodities, rather than imported gold and silver. Eastern Europe and the Baltic supplied grains, timber, fish, and naval stores. Western Europe supplied manufactures for its outlying regions and for overseas trade. Dutch, English, and French merchant-bankers controlled shipping and credit. Plantation agriculture in the tropics, particularly the cultivation of Caribbean sugar, produced the greatest profits from overseas commerce. The African slave trade, along with its many supporting industries, also became an integral part of the intercontinental system.

The New World economy widened European horizons while contributing to European wealth. New foods, such as potatoes, yams, lima beans, tapioca, and peanuts became part of the European diet. Tropical plantation crops, such as rice, coffee, tea, cocoa, and sugar ceased to be luxuries. Production from European industries, particularly metals, coal, and textiles, also increased noticeably. Although the European economy slowed considerably in the seventeenth century, some profits remained enormous, particularly in eastern Europe and on tropical plantations, where production depended on serfs and slave labor. Lagging wages in western Europe produced similar advantages for capitalists, who remained in a most favorable economic position.

Such conditions contributed directly to the development of capitalistic institutions. As the volume of business rose, great public banks, chartered by governments, replaced earlier family banks like the Fuggers of Augsburg. The Bank of Amsterdam (1609) and the Bank of England (1694) are typical examples. Such banks, holding public revenues and creating credit by issuing notes, made large amounts of capital available for favored enterprises. Another method of concentrating capital came with joint-stock companies, such as the Dutch and English East India Companies, which could pool the resources of many investors. In the late seventeenth century, exchanges for buying and selling stock were becoming common, as were maritime insurance companies. Lloyd's of London, the most famous of these, began operations about 1688 and is still in business. Such capitalistic institutions regularized business and helped justify materialistic values in the popular mind.

They also fitted into the emerging state systems. The new capitalism depended upon overseas trade, which, in turn, required government protection or subsidy. Government policies affected money, credit, and capital accumulation. If capitalists needed government, governments also needed them. Powerful states were increasingly expensive, and overseas trade was a vital source of revenue. Capitalists could often help monarchs acquire foreign credit. Military force and bureaucratic organization, so important to rising states, often depended on capitalistic support. This tacit partnership between kings and capitalists produced a system known as mercantilism. It was most typical of France, but all absolute regimes were conditioned by the integrated European economy. Consequently, both profit and power were compatible subordinates to order in the European value system.

Philosophical Justifications For Absolutism

The prevailing respect for power was most clearly revealed in theoretical justifications for absolute monarchy. In the past, defenders of royal authority had employed the idea of "divine right" in claiming that kings were agents of God's will. This religious argument for absolutism was still quite common during the period, but it was supplemented by new secular appeals to scientific principles.

Bishop Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704), a prominent French churchman and the tutor of Louis XIV's son, produced a classic statement of divine right theory. In Politics Drawn from Scriptures, Bossuet declared:

> the person of the king is sacred, and to attack him in any way is sacrilege ... the royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself .... Kings should be guarded as holy things, and whosoever neglects to protect them is worthy of death .... the royal power is absolute ... the prince need render accounts of his acts to no one ... Where the word of a king is, there is power ... Without this absolute authority the king could neither do good or repress evil ^1

[Footnote 1: Quoted in James Harvey Robinson, Readings in European History, 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1906), vol. 1, pp. 273-275.]

The most penetrating and influential secular justification for absolutism came from the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), whose famous political treatise, Leviathan, appeared in 1651. The French religious wars, the Thirty Years' War, and the English civil war of the 1640s inclined Hobbes to view order as the primary social good and anarchy as the greatest social disaster. Unlike Bossuet, he did not see God as the source of political authority. According to Hobbes, people created governments as protection against themselves, because they were naturally "brutish," "nasty," "selfish," and as cruel as wolves. Having been forced by human nature to surrender their freedoms to the state, people had no rights under government except obedience. The resulting sovereign state could take any form, but according to Hobbes, monarchy was the most effective in maintaining order and security. Any ruler, no matter how bad, was preferable to anarchy. Monarchs were therefore legitimately entitled to absolute authority, limited only by their own deficiencies and by the power of other states. ^2

[Footnote 2: Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), pp. 106-170.]

Absolutism As A System

Unlimited royal authority, as advocated by Bossuet and Hobbes, was the main characteristic of absolutism. It was demonstrated most obviously in political organization but also served to integrate into government most economic, religious, and social institutions. In this section, we will preview this general pattern of absolutism before assessing its development within specific European states.

Government And Religion Under Absolutism

Theoretically, the ruler made all major decisions in a typical absolute state. Although this was not actually possible, chief ministers were responsible directly to the monarch, and all of their actions were taken in the sovereign's name. The monarch was officially the supreme lawgiver, the chief judge, the commander of all military forces, and the head of all administration. Central councils and committees discussed policy, but these bodies were strictly advisory and concerned primarily with administrative matter. All authority originated in orders coming down from the top and going out to the provinces from the royal capital.

In conducting foreign policy, monarchs identified their personal dynastic interests with those of their countries. They usually considered the acquisition of foreign territory to be legitimate and pursued their objectives in a competitive game of power politics with other monarchs. This competition required a large military establishment, sometimes involving naval forces. Rulers sought to form alliances against the most dominant foreign state, giving little consideration to moral or religious principles. A concern for the "balance of power" exemplified the new secular spirit in foreign relations.

Local government was a concern to all aspiring absolute monarchs. Wherever possible, they replaced traditional local authorities, usually feudal nobles, with royal governors from other places. Where that could not be done, local nobles were rewarded so they would support the crown. Sometimes, new nobles were created and old land grants reassigned. Town governments were often brought under royal authority through contacts between urban guildsmen and the king's middle-class servants. Using such means as monopoly grants, political favors, or bribery, monarchs extended their control over local law and revenues.

Organized religion remained important under absolutism but lost its independence of government. Instead of dominating politics, as they had done earlier, churches - Protestant and Catholic alike - now tended to become government agencies. Even in Catholic countries, such as France, the king exerted more political control over the church than did the pope. Although this had been true of earlier secular rulers, they had faced much more religious opposition. After Westphalia, monarchs could deliberately use their clergies as government servants, to enlist and hold popular support. Such controlled churches exerted tremendous influence in support of absolute monarchies, not only in the formal services but also in their social and educational functions.

Mercantilism In The Structure Of Absolutism

In typical absolute monarchies, the regulation of state churches was accompanied by a system of national economic regulations known as mercantilism. Although it had originated earlier, with the emergence of modern states, mercantilism was not adopted generally by European governments until the late seventeenth century. The expansion of overseas trade, expenses incurred in religious and dynastic wars, and the depression of the middle 1600s accentuated the trend toward mercantilism as states hoped to promote prosperity and increase their revenues.

The system attempted to apply the capitalistic principle of profit-seeking in the management of national economies. "Bullionism" was the fundamental maxim of mercantilist theory. Proponents of bullionism sought to increase precious metals within a country by achieving a "favorable balance of trade," in which the monetary value of exports exceeded the value of imports. The result, in a sense, was a national profit. This became purchasing power in the world market, an advantage shared most directly by the government and favored merchants.

Mercantilists believed state regulation of the economy to be absolutely necessary for effecting a favorable balance. Absolute monarchies used subsidies, chartered monopolies, taxes, tarriffs, harbor tolls, and direct legal prohibitions in order to encourage exports and limit imports. For the same purpose, state enterprises were given advantages over private competitors. Governments standardized industrial production, regulated wages, set prices, and otherwise encouraged or restricted consumer purchases. Governments also built roads, canals, and docks to facilitate commerce.

Because mercantilists viewed the world market in terms of competing states, they emphasized the importance of colonial expansion. They regarded colonies as favored markets for home products and as sources of cheap raw materials. Colonial foreign trade and industries were controlled to prevent competition with the parent countries. In pursuing such policies, absolute states needed strong military and naval forces to acquire colonies, police them, and protect them from foreign rivals. Thus mercantilist policies often extended beyond commercial competition to international conflict.

Class Structure Under Absolutism

The class structures of absolute monarchies were marked by clear distinctions, precisely defined by law. Hereditary feudal aristocrats lost status unless they acquired an official appointment from the monarch. Such state nobles owed their privileges to their political service rather than birth. They often came from merchant families; indeed, the state often sold titles to wealthy commoners to provide income for the monarch. State nobles served in public administration, inthe army, the church, or as attendants at court, where they accented the royal magnificence. They usually received tax exemptions, pensions, titles, and honors. Their legal rights, dress, and way of life differed markedly from even wealthy non-nobles.

In contrast, commoners, including middle-class townspeople, paid most of the taxes required by frequent wars and extravagant royal courts. Peasant landholders usually owed fees and labor dues to local aristocrats. The poorest peasants in western Europe were hired laborers or vagabonds; in eastern Europe, they were serfs. Slavery was rare in western Europe, but provided a major labor force on overseas plantations.

[See Noble And Peasant: The oppression of the peasantry is the subject of this engraving, which compares the noble and the peasant to the spider and the fly. The poor peasant brings all he has to the rich noble, who sits ready to receive all the produce. From J. Lagniet, Recueil de Proverbes, 1657-63]

While tightening legal class distinctions, absolute monarchies also further downgraded the status of women. The Reformation had offered some opportunities for self-expression among women, and before 1650 many women had assumed temporary positions of leadership. The situation changed after Westphalia. Although a number of queens and regents were able to rule as absolute monarchs, most aristocratic women could find recognition only as Catholic nuns, writers, artists, salon hostesses, court gossips, or royal mistresses, the latter gaining official status in this era. The status of commoner women did not fall as much or as quickly, but the advent of early capitalism and the decline of domestic economies was already excluding them from many industries and enterprises in the latter seventeenth century.

The Gravitational Pull Of French Absolutism

The popular image of Louis XIV as the Sun King symbolized his position in France but also implied that French absolutism exerted a magnetic influence upon other European states. Like all such symbolism, the idea was only partially true. As much as it was a response to French example, absolutism was accepted because it promised efficiency and security, the greatest political needs of the time. Yet French wealth and power certainly generated European admiration and imitation of the French example.

Typical Satellites Of France

Among the most obvious satellites of the French sun were numerous German principalities of the Holy Roman Empire. By the Treaty of Westphalia, more than 300 were recognized as sovereign states. Without serious responsibilities to the emperor and with treasuries filled by confiscated church properties, their petty rulers struggled to increase their personal powers and play the exciting game of international diplomacy. Many sought French alliances against

the Habsburg emperor; those who could traveled in France and attended Louis' court. Subsequently, many a German palace became a miniature Versailles. Even the tiniest states were likely to have standing armies, state churches, court officials, and economic regulations. The ultimate deference to the French model was shown by the Elector of Brandenburg; although sincerely loyal to his wife, he copied Louis XIV by taking an official mistress, displaying her at court functions without requiring her to perform other duties usually associated with the position.

The era of the Sun King also witnessed an upsurge of absolutism in Scandinavia. After an earlier aristocratic reaction against both monarchies, Frederick III (1648-1670) in Denmark and Charles XI (1660-1697) in Sweden broke the power of the nobles and created structures similar to the French model. In 1661 Frederick forced the assembled high nobility to accept him as their hereditary king. Four years later, he proclaimed his exclusive right to issue laws. A similar upheaval in Sweden in 1680 allowed Charles to achieve financial independence by seizing the nobles' lands. These beginnings were followed by the development of thoroughly centralized administrations in both kingdoms. Sweden, particularly, resembled France with its standing army, navy, national church, and mercantilist economy. Although Swedish royal absolutism was overthrown by the nobles in 1718, the Danish system remained into the nineteenth century.

States In Irregular Orbits

Unlike the Sandinavian and German states, most European governments resembled Louis' system more in the way they developed rather than in their specific institutions. As agricultural economies became commercialized, restricting the developing interests of monarchs and commoners, rulers sought to ignore their feudal councils and exercise unlimited authority. Some states in this period had not yet developed as far in this direction as had France; others were already finding absolutism at least partially outmoded. All felt the magnetic pull of French absolutism, but their responses varied according to their traditions and local conditions.

The process is well illustrated by a time lag in the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies. United by Spanish force in 1580 and divided again by a Portuguese revolt in 1640, the two kingdoms were first weakened by economic decay and then nearly destroyed by the Thirty Years' War and their own mutual conflicts, which lasted until Spain accepted Portuguese independence in 1668. Conditions deteriorated further under the half-mad Alfonso VI (1656-1668) in Portugal and the feeble-minded Charles II (1665-1700) in Spain.

The nobilities, having exploited these misfortunes to regain their dominant position in both countries, could not be easily dislodged. Not until the 1680s in Portugal did Pedro II (1683-1706) successfully eliminate the Cortes (assembly of feudal estates) and restore royal authority. With new wealth from Brazilian gold and diamond strikes, John V (1706-1750) centralized the administration, perfected mercantilism, and extended control over the church. In Spain, similar developments accompanied the War of the Spanish Succession and the grant to Louis XIV's Bourbon grandson, Philip V (1700-1746), of the Spanish crown. Philip brought to Spain a corps of French advisors, including the Princess des Ursins, a friend of de Maintenon's and a spy for Louis XIV. Philip then followed French precedents by imposing centralized ministries, local intendants, and economic regulations upon the country.

Aristocratic limits on absolutism, so evident in the declining kingdoms of Portugal and Spain, were even more typical of the Habsburg monarchy in eastern Europe. The Thirty Years' War had diverted Habsburg attention from the Holy Roman Empire to lands under the family's direct control. By 1700, they held the Archduchy of Austria, a few adjacent German areas, the Kingdom of Bohemia, and the Kingdom of Hungary, recently conquered from the Turks. This was a very large domain, stretching from Saxony in the north to the Ottoman Empire in the southeast. It was strong enough to play a leading role in the continental wars against Louis XIV after the 1670s.

Leopold I (1657-1705) was primarily responsible for strengthening the Austrian imperial monarchy during this period. In long wars with the French and the Turks, Leopold modernized the army, not only increasing its numbers but also instilling professionalism and loyalty in its officers. He created central administrative councils, giving each responsibility for an arm of the imperial government or a local area. He staffed these high administrative positions with court nobles, rewarded and honored like those in France. Other new nobles, given lands in the home provinces, became political tools for subordinating the local estates. Leopold suppressed Protestantism in Bohemia and Austria and kept his own Catholic church under firm control. In 1687, the Habsburgs were accepted as hereditary monarchs in Hungary, a status they had already achieved in Austria and Bohemia.

In the eighteenth century, Maria Theresia (1740-1780) faced Leopold's problems all over again. When she inherited her throne at the age of twenty-two, her realm was threatened by Prussia and lacking both money and military forces. In the years after Leopold's time, the nobles had regained much of their former power and were again building their own dominions at the expense of the monarchy. Maria was a religious and compassionate woman, known as "Her Motherly Majesty," but she put aside this gentle image to hasten much needed internal reforms. Count Haugwitz, her reforming minister, rigidly enforced new laws which brought provincial areas under more effective royal control.

Despite its glitter and outward trappings, the Austrian Habsburg monarchy was not a truly absolute monarchy. The economy was almost entirely agricultural and therefore dependent upon serf labor. This perpetuated the power of the nobles and diminished revenues available to the state. In addition, subjects of the monarchy comprised a mixture of nationalities and languages - German, Czech, Magyar, Croatian, and Italian, to name only a few. Without real unity, the various Habsburg areas stubbornly persisted in their localism. Even the reforms of Leopold and Maria Theresia left royal authority existing more in name than in fact. Imposed on still functioning medieval institutions, it resulted in a strange combination of absolutism and feudalism.

While Habsburg absolutism wavered in an irregular orbit, Poland was in no orbit at all. Local trade and industry were even more insignificant in its economy; the peasants were more depressed; and land-controlling lesser nobles - some 8 percent of the population - grew wealthy in supplying grain for western merchants. Nobles avoided military service and most taxes; they were lords and masters of their serfs. More than fifty local assemblies dominated their areas, admitting no outside jurisdiction. The national Diet (council), which was elected by the local bodies, chose a king without real authority. In effect, Poland was fifty small, independent feudal estates.

Western Maritime States

Although impressed by French absolutism, the agricultural states of eastern Europe were not yet capable of applying it. At the other extreme, England and Holland rejected the system, partially beause they had outgrown it. Yet both states felt the pull toward absolutism in their internal politics.

The Dutch Republic, in the seventeenth century, was a confusing mixture of medievalism and modernity. Its central government was a federation of seven nearly independent states. The stadtholder, as chief executive, led the military forces but had no control of budget or revenues. Neither did the States General, the legislative body, which could act only as a council of ambassadors from the provinces. These were governed by local estates, which limited the authority of their own executives. The main difference between this system and Poland's was the political weakness of the aristocracy. Although rural nobles were strong in some provincial assemblies, the cities, particularly those in the province of Holland, provided revenues that maintained the government. Thus wealthy bankers and merchants, who dominated the major town councils, held the real power.

Even in this political environment, absolutism was a political force. As successful military leaders, the Dutch stadtholders appealed to popular loyalties. The House of Orange supplied so many successive stadtholders that the office became virtually hereditary in the family. By the 1640s, stadtholders were addressed as "your highness" and intermarried with European royalty, including the English Stuarts. They created a political machine that controlled some provincial systems. Arguing for efficiency, they gained the right to name their councilors as working ministers. From 1618 to 1647 and again from 1672 to 1703, monarchists controlled the state. In the latter period, William III built a highly efficient army and centralized administration.

The Dutch state outdistanced contemporary monarchies in creating the first northern European empire overseas. Between 1609 and 1630, while at war with Spain and Portugal, the Dutch navy broke Spanish sea power, drove the Portuguese from the Spice Islands of Southeast Asia, and dominated the carrying trade of Europe. In this same period, the republic acquired Java, western Sumatra, the spice-producing Moluccas of Indonesia, and part of Ceylon. The Dutch East India Company took over most European commerce with ports between the Cape of Good Hope and Japan. Elsewhere, the Dutch acquired the Portuguese West African slaving stations, conquered most of Brazil, and established New Amsterdam (present-day New York City and the Hudson River valley) in North America. Dutch commercial and colonial predominance ended after 1650, but the Dutch Asian empire lasted into the twentieth century.

As Dutch commercial and imperial fortunes declined, England became the main rival of France for colonial supremacy. The two nations were already traditional enemies and different in many respects. While France was perfecting a model absolute monarchy, England was subordinating its kings to Parliament. Before 1688, however, England also felt the strong attraction of French absolutism.

The period from 1660 to 1688 was marked by increasingly severe struggles between English kings and Parliament. England had earlier been torn by fanatic religious controversy, political revolution, bloody civil war, the beheading of a king, and rigid military dictatorship. Almost everyone welcomed the new ruler, Charles II (1660-1685), called back from exile in France and restored to the throne, with his lavish court and his mistresses. But Charles, the cleverest politician of the Stuart line, exploited this common desire for normality to violate the terms of his restoration, which bound him to rule in cooperation with Parliament.

Charles almost succeeded in becoming an absolute monarch. With the help of his favorite sister, Henrietta Anne, who had married Louis XIV's brother, Charles negotiated the secret Treaty of Dover, which bound him to further English Catholicism and aid France in war against Holland. In return, Charles received subsidies from France that made him independent of Parliament. He then used all of his deceit and cunning to create a political machine. This

precipitated a political crisis, forcing him to back down. Ultimately, he dismissed four Parliaments. After 1681, Charles governed without Parliament, taking advantage of a strong desire among the propertied classes to avoid another civil war.

Charles' brother James II (1685-1688) proved to be a more determined absolutist. Like Charles, he was an admirer of Louis XIV and a known Catholic. His wife, Mary of Modena, had been persuaded by the pope to marry James as a holy commitment to save England for Rome. Having been repeatedly insulted by Protestants at Charles' court, she was now determined to accomplish her mission. James was quite willing to cooperate. Early in his reign, he suppressed an anti-Catholic rebellion in southwest England. With his confidence thus buttressed, he attempted to dominate the courts, maintain a standing army, take over local government, and turn the English church back to Catholicism. Most of this was done in defiance of the law while Parliament was not in session.

In 1688, after James had unsuccessfully tried to control parliamentary elections, the country was roused to near revolt by the birth of a royal prince, who might perpetuate a Catholic dynasty. A group of aristocrats met and offered the crown to the former heir, Mary Stuart, the Protestant daughter of James by an earlier marriage. Mary accepted the offer with the provision that her husband, William of Orange, be co-ruler. William landed with an efficient Dutch army, defeated James, and forced him into exile. This "Glorious Revolution" pushed England in the direction of limited monarchy.

After 1688, England turned away from French-styled absolutism but continued to follow mercantilist principles in building a worldwide empire. By enforcing the Navigation Act of 1651 and other similar laws passed under Charles, England sought to regulate foreign trade and exploit colonial economies.