

interest to specialists in all related fields. *Truth in Many Tongues* will be necessary reading for any study of language and religious conversion in premodern European and colonial contexts.

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France before 1789: The Unraveling of an Absolutist Regime. Jon Elster.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. xii + 264 pp. \$39.95.

Jon Elster's study of early modern France attempts to describe the environment from which its new revolutionary constitutional order would eventually emerge. His preface describes the book as "a long footnote to Tocqueville" in that it explores, from the perspective of a social scientist studying human nature, the kinds of political structures that circumscribed human activity and why actors behaved the way they did. The book focuses on institutions, psychology, and their interactions. The introduction offers a model for choice making and analyzes the mechanisms that govern such choices. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss "the psychology of the main social groups" from the perspectives of, first, "motivation" and, second, "information and beliefs." Chapter 4 focuses on administrative and judicial institutions and chapter 5 on representative assemblies. The concluding chapter makes observations on nine different themes deriving from the text, including topics such as "exemptions and exceptions," "conspiracy theories and agency-bias," and "passive resistance."

"The purpose of this book," in the author's words, "is to present the main features of this prodigiously complex social system" in order "to show how they worked in practice" (2). Many historians of early modern European political culture have spent careers trying to achieve this goal. It would have been miraculous for Elster to have accomplished this in a book that relies entirely on secondary sources and well-known published primary sources, especially without having cited some of the most important recent scholarship on early modern French society by the likes of James Collins, Jonathan Dewald, Stephen Miller, Daniel Roche, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal. The latter's absence is bewildering due to the natural affinity between Elster's focus on choice theory and the central role of choice within Rosenthal's new institutional economics approach.

A useful element of this work is its identification of many features of early modern political culture in terms that are comparable. For example, he describes "destabilizing mechanisms" such as how partial relief from oppression generated increased grievances about ongoing oppression, or the way in which social homogenization weakened forces in society that had previously contributed to social cohesion. One of the book's main

weaknesses is its persistent refusal to discuss religious belief or other cultural norms and their relationship to political and social institutions.

Elster thinks that contingencies played a key role in eighteenth-century political developments; hence his focus on choice, rooted in methodological individualism. His “general model of choice” (15) gives an important role to desires, beliefs, and emotions—this renders his decision not to discuss religious belief or assumptions about political legitimacy all the more baffling. Rather than historicizing these problems, Elster takes for granted a number of transhistorical claims about human nature, psychology, and cognition. On this basis he discusses collective action as expressed through social movements and decision-making bodies. His discussion of the psychology of social groups (such as “intendants”) relies on the assumption that group members’ interests were uniform. He takes up the issue of *préséance* as a key problem in political culture but does not recognize the juridical and/or jurisdictional dimension of this theme (which has been ably analyzed by Giora Sternberg, uncited here). To discuss the psychology of the nobility as a social group while eschewing cultural context creates problems for the author, as does the failure to acknowledge the considerable overlap between “sword” and “robe” nobles and their eventual merger into a state nobility, as Collins has shown. On another level, how could one hope to make claims about the psychology of the peasantry across the entirety of France? His discussion of urban commoners stresses their emotional reactions, even arguing that “there was no potential for organized *political* action” among such groups. This fails to account for recent work on popular politics highlighting the specifically juridical motivations and goals of popular political action.

Chapters 4 and 5 are useful as summaries of some of the key themes in recent work on governmental institutions in early modern France, from the royal administration to judicial bodies to representative assemblies. By this point in the book, though, the author’s argument has gotten lost. Elster seems caught between wanting to describe a society and wanting to say something about why members of that society made the choices that they did. This reviewer’s impression is that significant components of that society are either not discussed or flattened out in ways that impede our understanding, making it more difficult to pinpoint why early modern actors did what they did.

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Katholiek in de Republiek: De belevingswereld van een religieuze minderheid 1570–1750. Carolina Lenarduzzi.
Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2019. 476 pp. €28.50.

In her book, Carolina Lenarduzzi, a trained jurist who received her PhD in 2018 from Leiden University, analyzes the experience of individual Catholics as a religious