Murder and Monarchy. Perspectives On Kingship, The „Dynastic Corporation“ And The Notion Of Office In Medieval And Early Modern Europe

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Decades ago, a topic like ‘murder and monarchy’ might have been understood to offer a sensational history of either court intrigue or, for those more akin to sociological parlance, of social revolutions. This is hardly anymore so. One reason for this is that both medieval and early modern historiography seem to lay much less stress on integrating their respective topics into received ideas of the road to the present. More dramatically, major assumptions, like the alleged „Germanic origins“ of monarchy or its alleged functional service to „state-building“ have become either completely undermined or have been rendered almost meaningless, given the difficulties we now encounter with terms like „state-building“ or „absolutism“. While many of the pathways to the present carefully crafted by the historiography of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century have become problematic for understanding the past, history cannot do without narratives mapping change over time. Why, however, the topic of ‘murder and monarchy’?

James Burns rightly reminded his readers in his „True Law of Kingship“ that while „republicanism“ has long been among the standard staple of interest in late medieval and early modern history, monarchy remained clearly the most important and relevant form of government in medieval and early modern Europe, and it attracts even more interest as the modernity of e.g. Florentine Civic Republicanism has become in itself a matter of considerable critical scrutiny in recent years. Within this very general scope, the way John Morrill and Philip Baker go about arguing about the fifteen months between the debates at Putney and the execution of Charles go a long way in demonstrating what kind of evidence historians hope to find in periods as muddled, difficult and chaotic as those that see the murdering of monarchs. The issue of the conference on ‘Murder and Monarchy’ was to test to what extent „monarchy“ could or would be a concept allowing us to frame around it both comparisons and narratives of change even over longer periods of time, and if so, with what ramification it could be used. In these terms, monarchy suggested itself as a helpful topic, for contemporaries from the early middle ages onwards were able to identify monarchy as the most important form of government – despite the fact that contemporaries regularly spoke of kingship, kings and kingdoms, but less often of „monarchy“. The various contributions asked about historical situations in which violent attacks on monarchs or members of the monarchical family were planned, executed, condemned or justified, and to what extent the incident of a physical attack – more often then not a gross exception to the reality of rule - sheds light on the nature of monarchy in a specific period. Indeed, the incidence of a physical assault or even formal execution of a monarch has been chosen because it provided, like hardly any other incident, occasion to reflect and discuss the nature and limits of monarchy, and it allowed – or rather forced - other members of society, primarily of the nobility, to think about their own role and duties in society.

In picking monarchy with a focus on its alleged breakdown – in itself a notion falsified by a number of papers in the conference – an attempt was made to re-examine the state of our knowledge about the working of monarchy at points in time when sources about its machinery could be assumed to flow in particular richness. As it turned out, this was indeed generally the case. The various incidences of attacks on kings or persons with royal blood did provide a focus to debate differences and similarities across cases and allowed us to ask questions and made it possible to reflect on the nature of monarchy. But the assumption of crisis and about the meaning of such crises had to be severely qualified as the conference and the debate on the various cases discussed went on. Each contribution – with the exception of the last one - carefully assessed such incidents, the argu-

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ment made about them, and the nature of the monarchy in its period. In particular the 'long haul' from the Early Middle Ages to the late Eighteenth Century Prussian Monarchy helped to put each case much more firmly in its context, as the enormous changes in the nature and meaning of physical attacks on the monarch or members of his family allowed to ask questions about the nature of change dividing the various periods assessed. In a nutshell, with one single highly significant exception, such attacks were explained as defending monarchy against individuals severely compromising its working. As monarchy became increasingly important for the its society due to the services it provided, the containment of king became increasingly important as well. As the conference proceeded, certain analytical issues kept coming up, and these will be reviewed at the end of this summary.

The contributions of Jocelyn Hillgarth and Joachim Ehlers were able not only to present king-killings, but actually the only king-killings meant to be just that. The frequency and general lack of ex post legitimisation of these acts was explained by Jocelyn Hillgarth in terms of the lack of an accepted political structure among the Visigoths and by Joachim Ehlers in terms of the necessity to establish a monarchy without competitors of Royal Blood within a single unit about to emerge. Once such a political unit is to be erected, the making of monarchy depended on the execution or political disablement (by tonsure) of competitors to the title, and that meant to establish the relative security of one line by eliminating all others. Both Professor Hillgarth and Professor Ehlers underlined the willingness of the Christian Church to even allow for murders in this process, one cleric advising to act like wolves do in order to safeguard the cubs. Hardly ever were killings explained by the idea of tyrannicide. Professor Ehlers traced the changes of this situation in later Merowingian rule and then Carolingian Rule to the gradual establishment of more secure lines of succession and a change in the attitude of the Christian church, beginning to condemn the use of killings.

Professor Genet took up in the High Middle Ages and explained the growth of a highly sophisticated armament of defence mechanisms for the monarchy, in particular anointing the king. The person of the king began to be lifted clearly above other members of the nobility – although of course linked to them via various networks of kin. The incidence of physical attacks became rare exceptions. In one Neapolitan case, a man who had been charged and found guilty for an attack on a royal successor – not even an anointed king – was attacked by the crowd and killed, a sign of the new nature of legitimacy that monarchy had achieved. As the framework of monarchy had changed so significantly that king killing for the sake of monarchy had been effectively outlawed, new ways had to be found to remove persons who had endangered the institution by their various actions. Possibly it does not come as an accident that the 12th century, as the anointed king became untouchable, saw one of the earliest arguments taking up the classical terminology of kingship and tyranny and transforming it into a vocabulary allowing actions against the person pretending to be king – but not against king or even monarchy. Conal Condren explained in his paper on the casuistry of tyranny and office how actions against persons acting as kings were explained in terms of their loss of office. As kings had been made virtually untouchable, the casuistry of tyranny allowed defending monarchy against tyrants, for it removed the person of the tyrant from the protection of the armament of monarchy that Professor Genet had described. It allowed the defense of the institution of monarchy and the untouchable nature of the person of the king by presenting arguments about the removal of those who had been chosen, at one moment, to be king, but who had allegedly never had or had lost the office.

However, in every actual circumstance, this exercise, though conceptually highly developed as time went on, proved to be extremely difficult and dangerous. Against this situation, Neithard Bulst and Christine Carpenter examined the very different cases of England and France during the fifteenth century. In both cases, society needed kingship and did its utmost to protect it, but for a number of sometimes-accidental reasons, this protection did not always work. As Christine Carpenter explained in her paper, the removal of a per-

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son once instituted as king was only contemplated, let alone attempted under the most desperate of circumstances. Indeed, as she reminded us, noblemen in fourteenth and fifteenth century England were quite willing to hope that even the worst king could still be amended in his actions and only as a very last resort did men resort to actually removing a man once made king. So important had the office of king become, that it could not be allowed to be mishandled, but it could not be allowed to be endangered either. The problem of the importance of monarchy and the actual ability of a given king to deliver had led to an impasse without solution. To Christine Carpenter, English fifteenth century society preferred to pretend no violent removals had taken place rather then to celebrate those removals it was forced to survive. Neithard Bulsts paper served as proof how strong and untouchable monarchy had begun, but also, the impasse described above could play out in very different ways. Despite the fact that the king, Charles VI, was seriously ill and unable to exercise government for considerable lengths of time, removal of the king never was an option. In contrast, the vocabulary of tyranny was turned by the competitors for political control within the 'dynastic corporation' against each other. Monarchy had become so entrenched that even with an entirely inept monarch the actual power struggle was removed to the competition not for kingship, but for advising government during a weakness of the king, and the killing was only contemplated for members of the higher nobility.

All agreed that the reformation and new nature of the divisiveness of religious issues contributed both to the strength of monarchy, but also to entirely new problems in the relationship of king and society. James Burns argued that in Scotland, the late – medieval history of these relations was re-written to devise an account that in its most radical expressions allowed society a right to punish its king, should he turn tyrant. Though Buchanan's account of this possibility was based on the casuistry of office delineated by Conal Condren, it presented a willingness to act and even to face the possibility of a minority; this boldness was clearly absent from either the English or French case. The specific religious tension between Mary Stuart and her kingdom underlined how destructive the new religious divisiveness could actually become. In contrast, French monarchy, being hardest hit by confessional strife, entered the seventeenth century with its medieval framework of sacredness firmly re-invigorated. English monarchs, in particular during the Restoration, made a similar effort, but Glenn Burgess' contribution reminded us how radical and uncompromising at this point English Republicanism could become. It thus reminded us as well that – in particular since the seventeenth century – a legitimacy based on an uncompromising reassertion of divine right arguments could lead into severe problems of legitimacy during the enlightenment and also about the divisiveness of the Republicanism entertained by men like John Cook. In his recent appraisal of Cromwell's attitude toward the execution of Charles I, John Morrill described Cromwell as „at once a bitter opponent of Charles, a reluctant regicide, and a firm monarchist". This qualification of Cromwell's sense of his role and of the duties going with it go a long way in demonstrating what kind of evidence historians hope to find in periods as muddled, difficult and chaotic as those that see the murdering of monarchs. It also characterises well the debates that the conference entertained when discussing the various examples of the cases presented to it. The apparent paradox, of course, must not be seen as the problem that the proceedings increasingly laid bare. For to Cromwell, a traitor had been punished. How to defend monarchy in the face of inept kings – kings actually threaten its true face – remained a core problem for the societies concerned. In a number of debates, the issue of main ministers or favourites that could be sacrificed if royal politics had gone awry began to figure increasingly large, in particular for the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Prof. Bély traced the development of monarchy in France after the assassination of Henry III. He described how most groups in society had a firm interest in re-building a strong monarchy, if for very different reasons. In particular, he showed how favourite ministers served as scapegoats for attacks on royal politics and thus effectively helped to support the monarchy itself, a development that characte-

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rised other monarchies of the time as well. It is at this level of violence committed on the level of a safety screen around the prince that also German history could provide some examples. Finally, the contribution of Thomas Biskup brought us the most successful modern monarchy of all – if only in retrospective terms. The very different issues of legitimacy that began to play a role in late eighteenth century Berlin made it clear to what extent this monarchy had developed its own theoretical defense. The entirely different nature of legal legitimacy and popular propaganda of those German princes turned monarchs after 1700 helps us to understand, within the framework for the making of modern medieval history at Berlin and Munich, some of the concerns of nineteenth century medievalists when writing about Monarchy, not least the issue of the Germanic origins of leadership.

To try and cover such a long time-span as from the early middle ages to the later eighteenth century undoubtedly produced problems of its own, and the results of the conference consist very much in the formulation of more precise questions that can now be asked about the working of any one example in comparison with other, different cases in mind. As the proceedings ended, its debates and contributions had helped to draw an analytical map against which monarchy in different periods might be understood more clearly in terms of the interaction of four different issues.

1 The terminology of legitimacy and the casuistry of office. That monarchical rule was necessary and indeed thought to be specifically effective in reaching goals indispensable for society – as delivering justice, defense and true religion – was shared and underscored by a vocabulary inherited from antiquity, but made increasingly more sophisticated during the medieval and early modern period (Condren). It distinguished monarchy from villains and protected the one by allowing the elimination of the other. Against these terms, only the Visigothic and Early Merovingian period saw the killing of kings (Hillgarth, Ehlers), later periods only the defence against tyrants or the execution of traitors for the defence of society. In particular the highly elaborate armament of the annointment of kings removed the king successfully from the vicissitudes of violent conflict that the nobility still faced. Only the specific circumstances of the first fall of the Stuart Monarchy saw pamphlets and opinions that questioned monarchy itself. On the whole, contemporaries were busy defending their monarchy against excessive kings (Carpenter, Bulst, Genet, Bély), and only very rarely and after going to great lengths in order to avoid the act were prepared to replace them. Depending on circumstances, monarchy could become too important to let a weak king have its way. The unfortunate connection between legitimacy and the 'natural selection' of kings in hereditary monarchy kept haunting the societies dependant on the functioning of kingship. Given this background, the differences between England and France in the fifteenth century stimulated much debate.

2 One way to deal with the problem of the importance of monarchy – and the sanctity of the men in office – on the one hand and the incidence of excessive or inept kings on the other was the development of mechanisms of constraint against wrongdoings by kings short of removal. The vocabulary of council and the manifold institutional safeguards, some of them enshrined in law, were parts and parcel of an increasingly institutional setting intended to steer monarchy in the direction it was meant to work.

3 The 'dynastic corporation'. The networks of family and kinship, the number of contenders produced in any one situation and their relation to each other proved to be a highly important and sensitive issue at any moment in time. To actually eradicate suitable contenders was one of the main ways of securing power for the Merovingians. And vice versa, the lack of suitable contenders could have grave consequences once the man in office had to be removed for other reasons. The nature of the 'dynastic corporation' and the nature of its embeddedness in society, that is the availability of possible contenders and their role in society, was probably one of the most decisive conditions for the actual working of monarchy itself.

4 Links to and communication with society. Court and office, spoils and lands were distributed by monarchs. Monarchy was not least

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meant to be a means to guarantee that distribution without to much interference by one's direct competitors – that was surely the perspective of the nobility. The issue to what extent monarchy delivered these services or proved to be acting in the „favour“ of only a few – in itself a highly a highly questionable description and part of the casuistry of good and bad government – kept appearing in a number of papers and debates. The role of officeholders and favourites as the involuntary protection for monarchy in that they could be sacrificed to allow a rapid change of politics – was also discussed when various cases were considered.

The nature of monarchy, its services for society in matters of justice, defence, and church and the impact on society in terms of the redistribution of resources (taxation, offices, spoils of war) has to be seen as a major analytical issue in understanding the services for society and the appreciation of society for it. It were these services which were, by nineteenth century historiography, taken out of their context and projected unto modern principles such as the people, the nation, and an ideology of 'leadership'. In redressing this imbalance since the 1920s, but in particular since the 1970s, the importance and evaluation of monarchy must not be lost to sight. Rather, the immense range of changes within the institution needs first to be examined – if through extraordinary events – in order to better understand the long-term changes in the working of this institution.

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