Febvre once wrote that those living before René Descartes differed fundamentally from those who have lived since; he warned historians not to apply to earlier times “the well-ordered world in which every object and every being has perfectly marked boundaries.” Unlike our predecessors, we believe that things are “this or that, not this and that at the same time.”¹ Febvre’s warning comes immediately to mind on reading Smith’s intriguing study of the idea of merit in Old Regime France, which will be of great value to those interested in cultural definitions of “merit” or “talent,” or those looking for a new perspective on the rise of the modern state.

Smith sets out to prove three hypotheses: (1) the critical role of a culture of royal service in the rise of the French state, (2) the centrality of the reign of Louis XIV in the transition from one set of cultural assumptions of state service to another, and (3) the late eighteenth-century dissonance between a redefined “merit” and the nobility’s contradictory attitudes toward the privileges of birth. Smith begins with his most interesting work, relying on a close reading of the fascinating family histories written for many important nobles in the early seventeenth century. Specialists of that period will not be surprised to read about the “this and that” quality of the nobility’s attitude toward merit, but others will profit from Smith’s meticulous presentation of the centrality of “merit” to noble self-consciousness. Nobility was expressed through deeds that reflected a man’s inner “merit,” derived from his ancestry. Smith’s seventeenth-century evidence, in this respect, indicates a strong continuity with earlier beliefs.

Smith implies a shift in a central element of this belief system under Louis XIII, because nobles had less chance to express merit by deeds performed beneath the “sovereign’s gaze.” He focuses a little too heavily on Louis’ mediocre court, as well as on the importance of Cardinal Richelieu as patron (of arts and politics). Louis XIII, like his father, participated extensively in military affairs. He regularly commanded armies in the field, thus offering his nobility extensive opportunities to reveal their abilities under the “sovereign’s gaze.”

Smith rightly stresses the accessibility offered by the revived court: Louis XIV responded to a strong need of his nobility by making his person available to them. Smith’s hypothesis that Louis felt a consonance between his own person and the state is less convincing. Louis knew perfectly well that he was not the state: The marquis de Dangeau even reported that the king’s last words were, “I am going but the state will remain.” Smith takes Febvre’s Cartesian dividing line too literally. Al-

though he sought to know as much as possible about every detail of
government, Louis XIV noted to his son that “there is a certain detail
to which our occupations and even our dignity do not permit us to
descend.” He was also well aware of the limits of his gaze in seeking
those best suited for high position: “Neither you nor I, my son, will be
able to go searching for these positions whom distance or their
obscurity (both physical and social) hide from our sight, whatever ability
they might have.”

Louis still lived in a pre-Cartesian world of a
universal, yet limited, vision (and of an absolute, but limited, monarchy).
The chapters about the eighteenth century suggest that the
state’s/sovereign’s gaze of Louis XIV split into its two respective parts.
By the late eighteenth century, what mattered increasingly was the gaze
of the more anonymous state administration itself: Bureaucrats judged
the merit of individuals and reported it to state ministers. We would
recognize it as talent for the task at hand. In this regard, Smith makes
two important points. First, the split between the king and the state
grew enormously during the eighteenth century, especially with the
accession of the feeble Louis XVI. Second, the idea of a simplistic split
between a value system promulgated by the public sphere outside the
state and one supported by the state itself makes no sense. As Smith
shows in his analysis of army reforms, the state was one of the chief
promulgators of the culture of merit.

One may quarrel with some of the elements of Smith’s theory about
the evolution of the sovereign’s gaze and the “modality” of service, and
of their determinative function in the elaboration of a modern state in
France, but one cannot deny the importance of Smith’s contribution to
the debates about the political culture of the Old Regime.

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Imágenes de la diversidad: el mundo urbano en la Corona de Castilla (S.
XVI–XVIII). Edited by José Ignacio Fortea Pérez (Santander, Universidad
Ptas. 2,400

This collection of sixteen articles makes an important contribution to
our understanding of fifteenth- to nineteenth-century Castilian urban
reality. The chapters are rich in information, ideas, and research ques-
tions. Using a great variety of archival, literary, and visual sources, the
authors provide windows on the complex plurality of social and cultural
environments that shaped the actions of the various urban inhabitants
who vied for space in the municipalities on the basis of often conflicting
economic and institutional roles, solidarity groups, and interpretive

2 Louis XIV (presented by Pierre Goubert), Mémoires pour l'instruction du dauphin (Paris,
1991), 54.