

Peter Burke

The Fabrication of Louis XIV



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with one main project in mind: to write at least the rough draft of a book, about which I had been thinking for nearly a decade. The book, provisionally entitled *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, deals with the image of Louis projected in the media of his day, French and foreign. At that time the media for the presentation of rulers included not only gossip, manuscript and print, but paintings, statues and buildings (most obviously Versailles), together with such mechanically reproducible forms as medals, engravings and tapestries. The image-making was extremely self-conscious, especially on the part of the king's advisers, and his advisers' adviser (notably Charles Perrault, best known today, as he would doubtless be appalled to discover for his version of *Little Red Riding Hood*).

Despite the distraction of the events occurring a mile or two down the road at the time of writing, I managed to complete the draft, doubtless at the price of paying less attention to the news than most of my fellow-fellows. The book in its still unrevised form has twelve chapters which attempt to combine an analytical with a chronological framework. The aim is to discuss who was saying what to whom by means of these images of the 'sun king', and how the images (whether flattering or insulting) were

interpreted in the period. Since Louis reigned for some seventy years, it was obviously necessary to study the development of his 'image' over time, from the ambitious young man of the 1660s to the experienced but weary old man of the 1710s. The presentation of certain key events, such as the invasion of the Dutch Republic in 1672 and the outlawing of Protestantism in 1685, is discussed in particular detail.

I am temperamentally incapable of working on one project at a time, and so alternated writing about Louis with revising the previous book (a study of twentieth-century French historians, to be published late in 1990) and thinking about the next one, a study of the uses for historians of social (including cultural) theory.

A number of college-colleagues in history, anthropology, art and literature turned out to be ideal people with whom to exchange ideas and information, and as a result of such exchanges I am now involved in a joint project with anthropologists and linguists. A year in Germany was also an invaluable opportunity to meet colleagues in other universities, in Berlin and elsewhere. Particularly useful for me were the invitations to give a paper at a conference on Aby Warburg (organised by art historians in Hamburg), and to lecture on historical anthropology at the University of Konstanz (to the Fachgruppe Literaturgeschichte). The extraordinary book-fetching facilities provided by the college allowed me to discover the importance of the recent German literature in my various fields of interest (much of it little known and virtually impossible to find in British libraries).

All the same, it is the ivory-tower function of the college which I consider the most valuable. A room in the college, from which only trees, birds and squirrels are visible, is a perfect setting in which to write.