

# Caste, Class and Profession in Old Regime France: the French Army and the Ségur Reform of 1781



David D. Bien

with Jay M. Smith  
and Rafe Blaufarb



*St Andrews Studies in French  
History and Culture*





## ST ANDREWS STUDIES IN FRENCH HISTORY AND CULTURE

The history and historical culture of the French-speaking world is a major field of interest among English-speaking scholars. The purpose of this series is to publish a range of shorter monographs and studies, between 25,000 and 50,000 words long, which illuminate the history of this community of peoples between the end of the Middle Ages and the late twentieth century. The series covers the full span of historical themes relating to France: from political history, through military/naval, diplomatic, religious, social, financial, cultural and intellectual history, art and architectural history, to literary culture. Titles in the series are rigorously peer-reviewed through the editorial board and external assessors, and are published as both e-books and paperbacks.

### *Editorial Board*

Dr Guy Rowlands, *University of St Andrews* (Editor-in-Chief)  
Professor Andrew Pettegree, *University of St Andrews*  
Professor Andrew Williams, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr David Culpin, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr David Evans, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr Linda Goddard, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr Bernhard Struck, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr Stephen Tyre, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr Malcolm Walsby, *University of St Andrews*  
Dr David Parrott, *University of Oxford*  
Professor Alexander Marr, *University of St Andrews/University of Southern California*  
Dr Sandy Wilkinson, *University College Dublin*  
Professor Rafe Blaufarb, *Florida State University*  
Professor Darrin McMahon, *Florida State University*  
Dr Simon Kitson, *University of London Institute in Paris*  
Professor Eric Nelson, *Missouri State University*



**Caste, Class and Profession  
in Old Regime France:  
the French Army and the  
Ségur Reform of 1781**

by  
DAVID D. BIEN

with  
Jay M. Smith  
and  
Rafe Blaufarb

St Andrews Studies in  
French History and Culture



PUBLISHED BY THE  
CENTRE FOR FRENCH HISTORY AND CULTURE  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

School of History, University of St Andrews,  
St Andrews, United Kingdom

This series is a collaboration between the following institutions :

Centre for French History and Culture,  
University of St Andrews  
<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cfhc/>

Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution,  
Florida State University  
<http://www.fsu.edu/napoleon/>

University of London Institute in Paris (ULIP),  
University of London  
<http://www.ulip.lon.ac.uk/>

Digital Research Repository,  
University of St Andrews Library  
<http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

© The authors 2010

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
permission of the Centre for French History and Culture.

First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University of St Andrews

ISBN 978-1-907548-02-4 paperback  
ISBN 978-1-907548-03-1 e-book

Front cover: engraving of a Garde de la Manche from the mid-eighteenth  
century (private collection)

# Contents

<i>Series Editor's note</i>	<i>page</i>	iii
<i>Author and contributors</i>		v
Preface		1
<i>Rafe Blaufarb</i>		
Introduction		5
Substance and subtlety in the analysis of 1789: the example of David D. Bien		
<i>Jay M. Smith</i>		
Caste, class and profession in Old Regime France: the French army and the Ségur reform of 1781		23
<i>David D. Bien</i>		





## Series Editor's Note

The central mission of the *St Andrews Studies in French History and Culture* series is to make available research that is longer than a standard article but shorter than a “normal” historical monograph, but an additional part of our self-imposed remit is to make such research accessible. The long essay presented in these pages was originally published in French in two parts by Professor David Bien back in 1974 in the prestigious pages of *Annales E.S.C.*. It has long been regretted by myself and Rafe Blaufarb that this outstanding contribution to the history of the collapse of the French absolute monarchy was only available to those with a good grasp of French, so I hope that this new publication of an English-language version, complete with additional thought-provoking contributions from two of Professor Bien's distinguished former students, will bring his messages about the nature of intra-noble strife and competing ideas of reform in the Enlightenment and the run-up to the Revolution to a much wider readership, including undergraduates and masters students, for years to come.

In only a very few places has the original article been added to – and only for the sake of clarity for an Anglophone audience – or brought up to date. This is principally the case for archival references, for, among other considerations, some institutions have altered their names and cataloguing systems since the early 1970s. This is notably the case with what is currently called as the “Service Historique de la Défense”, known the world over as the “Archives de la Guerre” or, simply, “Vincennes”.

Guy Rowlands  
*June 2010*



## Author and contributors

**David D. Bien** is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Michigan, where he taught between 1967 and 1997. A student of Franklin Ford and Crane Brinton, Bien became a specialist in eighteenth-century France, with one eye trained on the French Revolution and its complex relationship to the old regime that preceded it. Author of a widely admired book, *The Calas Affair* (Princeton University Press, 1960; expanded French version 1988), Bien made his most indelible marks as an essayist, writing powerful articles on religious belief, aristocratic attitudes, the institution of the army, state finance, old regime corporatism, and political culture. He is one of only four historians to have won on more than one occasion the annual Society for French Historical Studies' William Koren, Jr. Prize for best article in French history. In 2003 Bien was honoured by colleagues and former students with a Festschrift: *Tocqueville and Beyond: Essays on the Old Regime in Honor of David D. Bien* (Associated University Presses), edited by Robert M. Schwartz and Robert A. Schneider. David Bien lives in Ann Arbor and Paris with his wife, Peggy.

**Rafe Blaufarb** (Ph.D. University of Michigan, 1996) holds the Ben Weider Eminent Scholar Chair in Napoleonic History and is director of the Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution in the department of history at the Florida State University. He is author of several books and articles on a range of subjects: the French officer corps 1750-1820; Bonapartist refugees in the U.S.A., 1815-1835; the geopolitics of Latin American independence; and noble tax exemption in early modern Provence.

**Jay M. Smith** is John Van Seters Distinguished Term Professor of History at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. His research focuses especially on the history of the aristocracy and the political culture of the *ancien régime*. His work has appeared in the *American Historical Review*, *French Historical Studies*, and the *Journal of Modern History*, and he has written two monographs (*The Culture of Merit* and *Nobility*

*Reimagined*) and also edited a volume of essays on the eighteenth-century nobility. His book about the notorious beast of the Gévaudan is forthcoming from Harvard University Press in 2011.

# Preface

---

## *Rafe Blaufarb*

Most histories of the French Revolution have emphasized non-noble resentment of noble privilege as one of the principal elements stoking the revolutionary conflagration. Numerous honorific distinctions, such as coats-of-arms and sword-bearing, drew a visible line of demarcation between nobles and their *roturier* (commoner) compatriots. Seigniorial prerogatives, from exclusive hunting rights to the myriad of feudal exactions in money, kind, and service, burdened the peasantry. The nobility's exemption from certain kinds of taxes, while progressively diminished by Louis XIV and his successors, still angered those who paid, especially following the tax increases precipitated by the costly wars of the mid-eighteenth century. Finally, the nobility's exclusive professional privileges, which barred even non-noble elites from holding certain kinds of offices, outraged the very men of talent, education, and wealth the monarchy could ill afford to alienate. It was largely from their ranks that the revolutionary leadership would be drawn and the post-revolutionary *notabilité* composed.

Of the many exclusionary measures implemented during the eighteenth century, none was more inflammatory than the infamous Ségur *règlement* of 1781. Requiring those seeking officer commissions in the military to provide documentary evidence of four generations of unbroken, paternal noble descent, it was widely denounced in 1789 in the *cahiers de doléances* of the Third Estate and played a critical role in generating mass support for the ideal of individual meritocracy – incarnated by the phrase “careers open to talent.” Given the centrality of the Ségur *règlement* to the revolutionary attack on the nobility's professional prerogatives, it is understandable that historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries interpreted it in much the same way as contemporaries had – that is, as a measure aimed at excluding *roturiers* from the officer corps. Until the early 1970s, this view remained unquestioned.

In 1974, however, the French journal *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* published an article by the American historian David D. Bien – appearing here in English for the first time – challenging

this universally-accepted interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Starting with the insight that, had the Ségur *règlement* been designed to exclude *roturiers*, simple proof of noble status (rather than four-generations of noble ancestry) would have provided a sufficient barrier, Bien offered a fundamental reinterpretation of the measure. Rather than targeting *roturiers*, he demonstrated, the regulation was directed against new nobles who had acquired their status in the relatively recent past through the purchase of ennobling office. The regulation thus offered evidence for substantial internal conflict within the nobility between different kinds of nobles, he concluded, not for hostility between the nobility and Third Estate. This finding weakened one of the main pillars of traditional interpretations – Marxist and non-Marxist alike – of 1789: the centrality of conflict between nobles and non-nobles to the outbreak of the Revolution.

Bien's work was greeted with enthusiasm, especially by the influential French historian François Furet. Eager to attack Marxist interpretations of the Revolution, which tended to emphasize conflict between the revolutionary bourgeoisie and feudal aristocracy, Furet cited an early, unpublished draft of Bien's article in his own seminal 1971 essay, "Le catechisme de la Révolution française."<sup>2</sup> And it was Furet who encouraged Bien to publish it in the *Annales* in 1974, where it appeared in two parts because of its length. Indeed, it remains the longest article ever published by that prestigious journal.

With its publication Bien's article has been associated with what became known in the 1970s as "revisionism", with the publication of important articles by Furet attacking the Marxist interpretation then dominant in France. It is important to note, however, that Bien's article was not shaped by Furet's argument for it already existed in a (shorter) draft form in 1966, several years before Furet's first blasts against Marxist orthodoxy. Moreover, Bien's target was not the same as Furet's. While the Marxist interpretation associated with the work of Lefebvre, Soboul, and other members of the historical community around the French Revolution chair at the Sorbonne had long been dominant in France, this had hardly been the case in the Cold War United States. Rather, post-war American scholarship on the French Revolution was framed by ideas about social

---

<sup>1</sup> "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l'exemple de l'armée," *Annales: E.S.C.*, 29 (1974), 23-48 & 505-34.

<sup>2</sup> Furet came across the draft in 1967, while visiting Princeton. Bien had taught there in the 1960s, before he took a position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

stratification that leading historians such as R.R. Palmer, Franklin Ford, and Elinor Barber drew upon. It was this liberal orthodoxy, an orthodoxy that treated the American Dream as a universal social truth, as well as several features of Marxism, that Bien had sought to question in his article.

In the wave of historiographical essays on “revisionism” that began to appear in the 1970s, the intellectual filiation of Bien’s article was generally overlooked. Listed as one of the seminal writings of that movement, it was assumed that Bien’s main concern had been to take issue with the Marxist orthodoxy and its emphasis on bourgeois-noble class conflict. In raising serious doubts about one of the key pieces of evidence for the existence of such conflict on the eve of the Revolution, the Ségur *règlement*, Bien’s article did indeed provide potent support to the revisionist offensive. But to consider only its destructive impact on the Marxist orthodoxy risks overlooking the article’s broader contribution to the understanding of early modern France – a contribution which transcends the Marxist-revisionist debate and makes the article just as valuable today as it was when first published 35 years ago. This consisted in a penetrating analysis of the relationship between venality of ennobling office, state finance, and noble identity. Bien would go on to develop his thoughts in a series of influential articles published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> But the key insights behind these pieces may be found in embryo in his 1974 article, “La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l'exemple de l'armée”. By laying bare the inner workings of Old Regime social mobility and carefully tracing their effects, it constitutes essential

---

<sup>3</sup> Notably, “The secrétaires du roi: absolutism, corps, and privilege under the ancien régime,” in A. Cremer (ed.), *Vom ancien régime zur französischen Revolution. Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Göttingen, 1978), pp. 153-68; “The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979), 68-98; “Offices, Corps, and a System of State Credit: the Uses of Privilege under the Ancien Régime,” in Keith Michael Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol.1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 89-114; “Manufacturing Nobles: the Chancelleries in France to 1789,” *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989), 445-86; “Old Regime Origins of Democratic Liberty,” in Dale Van Kley (ed.), *The French Idea of Freedom: the Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789* (Stanford, 1994), pp. 23-71; and “Property in office under the ancien régime. The case of the stockbrokers,” in John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds.), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London and New York, 1996), pp.481-94.

reading for anyone seeking to understand the dynamics of this superficially familiar, yet so alien, society.



## Introduction

### Substance and subtlety in the analysis of 1789: the example of David D. Bien

---

*Jay M. Smith*

If there were an index that measured influence-exerted per word, David D. Bien's "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: L'exemple de l'armée" (hereafter, "La réaction aristocratique") would rank high on a list of the most influential historical scholarship of the last half-century. In the wide field of *ancien régime* and Revolutionary French history, perhaps only George V. Taylor's methodical dissection of the myth of a rising and capitalistic bourgeoisie, published in the *American Historical Review* in 1967, packed the same analytical punch, and with the same powerful effect, as the Bien article of 1974.<sup>1</sup> Within a decade after its appearance in the French journal *Annales*, "La réaction aristocratique" had come to be recognized as one of the foundation stones for the new interpretive edifice that was then incorporating the most dynamic scholarly work on the eighteenth century. In the introduction to her own influential 1984 book, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Lynn Hunt cited Bien's crucial analysis of recruitment and promotion in the army as one of three essential studies – along with the article by Taylor and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret's iconoclastic synthesis, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* – that provided the empirical ammunition for the final assault on the traditional "social interpretation" of the coming of the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup> After absorbing the lessons contained in these instant

---

<sup>1</sup> George V. Taylor, "Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967), 469-496; David D. Bien, "La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: L'exemple de l'armée," *Annales E.S.C.* 29 (1974), 23-48 & 505-534.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 5, n. 8; Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La noblesse au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: de la*

classics, Hunt explained, no self-respecting specialist of the period could blithely assert that the Revolution had been precipitated by the kind of class frictions predicted by Marxist models and casually invoked as explanatory devices by generations of historians.

Produced just as the great “revisionist” wave of the 1960s and 1970s was cresting, Bien’s contribution to the debate was immediately hailed as one of the crowning achievements of scholarship carried out in the revisionist vein. Assisted by a small team of graduate student researchers, Bien had marshaled a wealth of evidence to buttress his argument, and the *Annales* article delivered an empirical body blow to the standing orthodoxy. The author’s friend and colleague François Furet, who had solicited the piece for *Annales*, quickly recognized the value of the evidence and argument contained in the Bien article, and he incorporated its findings, as well as those of a related but unpublished piece by Bien, into his pivotal work of 1978, *Penser la Révolution française*. Bien’s incisive and counter-intuitive findings about the thought and behavior of the nobility of the *ancien régime* informed Furet’s own continuing attack on the so-called Marxist “catechism” of the Revolution’s origins and meaning.<sup>3</sup> Within just a few short years after its publication, the wide ripple effects of the Bien article began to appear in scholarly journals all across Europe and North America.<sup>4</sup> Because of the great force

---

*féodalité aux Lumières* (Paris, 1976), tr. by William Doyle as *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: from Feudalism to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1985). The first salvoes against the orthodox “social interpretation” had been fired in the early 1960s, most notably in Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (London, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Published in English as François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, tr. by Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981), see especially p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Richard L. Kagan, “Law Students and Legal Careers in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Past & Present* 68 (1975), 38-72, especially 67; Rolf Reichardt, “Bevölkerung und Gesellschaft Frankreichs im 18. Jahrhundert: Neue Wege und Ergebnisse der Sozialhistorischen Forschung, 1950-1976,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 4 (1977), 154-221, especially 200; Carlo Capra, “La nobiltà europea prima della Rivoluzione,” *Studi Storici* 18 (1977), 117-138, especially 136; Joseph I. Shulim, “The Continuing Controversy over the Etiology and Nature of the French Revolution,” *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire* 16 (1981), 357-378, especially 361; Melvin Edelstein, “La noblesse et le monopole des fonctions publiques en 1789,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 54 (1982), 440-443, especially 442. Discussion of Bien’s treatment of continuity and change even crept into an article devoted neither to

of the revisionist tidal wave that had washed across the landscape by the late 1970s, the Bien article quickly achieved canonical status – and an enduring identity as one of the “relatively small range of classic texts” that made up what Colin Jones would irreverently but accurately come to call the “New Revisionist Orthodoxy.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, canonical works are more often cited than discussed.<sup>6</sup> That condition especially pertains to works published in foreign languages. For that reason alone, the appearance of David D. Bien’s “La réaction aristocratique” in the language of its original composition provides cause for celebration. By making the article

---

France nor to the eighteenth century but rather to the philosophy of history: see John D. Heyl, “Kuhn, Rostow, and Palmer: The Problem of Purposeful Change in the Sixties,” *The Historian* 44 (1982), 299-313, especially 311.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Jones, “Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change,” in Colin Lucas (ed.), *Rewriting the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 69-118, especially n. 6.

<sup>6</sup> The authors cited here certainly read “La réaction aristocratique” with care, but over time the *Annales* article, along with its influential companion piece, “The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution,” *Past & Present* 85 (1979), 68-98, came to be invoked more than discussed. Their well-known theses functioned as stand-ins for revisionism *tout court*. Among the many works that have used Bien’s argument to capture and convey the new revisionist paradigm of the 1960s and 1970s – sometimes as a shorthand reference, sometimes with accompanying discussion – see the following: Antoine de Baecque, “Le Discours Anti-Noble (1787-1792) aux origines d’un slogan: ‘Le peuple contre les gross’,” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 36 (1989), 3-28, especially 10; John Bosher, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1988), p. 108; Jack Goldstone, “Reinterpreting the French Revolution,” *Theory and Society* 13 (1984), 697-713, especially 699; William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 18-19; Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, ed. by Timothy Tackett, tr. by R. R. Palmer (Princeton, 2005), p. xxiv, n. 20; Hudson Meadwell, “Exchange Relations between Lords and Peasants,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 28 (1987), 3-49, especially 16; John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Penn., 1996), pp. 166-167; Michael P. Fitzsimmons, “New Light on the Aristocratic Reaction in France,” *French History* 10 (1996), 418-431, especially 418. In his *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford, 2009), William Doyle took one further step. Bien’s findings have become such a part of the conventional wisdom about the society of the *ancien régime* that Doyle could recite Bien’s argument without actually citing the article. See his chapter on “Aristocracy Ascendant,” p. 13.

available in English for the first time, this edition in the *St Andrews Studies in French History and Culture* series offers the prospect of introducing the text to large numbers of undergraduates and other Anglophone readers who have long been prevented from savoring its riches. Just as important, the occasion of the article's re-publication offers specialists of French history a perfect excuse to re-read a classic work whose historiographical importance is widely acknowledged but now generally taken for granted. To provide a framework for genuine retrospective appreciation, and to help non-specialists get their bearings, the last section of this introduction will give some rough indication of the article's powerful impact on scholarship devoted to the nobility, the army, and social stratification over the past thirty-plus years. But to enhance what already promises to be a pleasurable reading experience, and to highlight one of the more under-appreciated ingredients that went into the making of this scholarly monument, I shall begin by drawing attention to the rhetorical mastery that characterizes this article from the first page to the last.

The form of the article's presentation added greatly to its persuasive power. From the vantage point of the "post-revisionist" era of the twenty-first century, decisively shaped by the "linguistic turn" in Revolutionary scholarship, appreciative reconsideration of Bien's writing style – economical, modest, understated – enables a reassessment of the legacy of revisionism itself. A proper introduction to the masterpiece thus requires that attention be given to the language and structure of "La réaction aristocratique."

To make the reader receptive to his evidence and argument, in the first section of his article Bien employed a simple rhetorical formula. He sketched the broad outlines of the existing interpretive framework – the standard social interpretation of the Revolution that emphasized class conflict between a newly self-conscious bourgeoisie and a decadent but powerful and grasping aristocracy – and he then posed a series of short but fundamental questions about the accuracy of that framework. In the first pages of the article Bien especially stressed the broad coherence and plausibility of the traditional explanation for the coming of the Revolution. As Bien recapped the narrative provided through the orthodox social interpretation, its appeal to an intuitive logic concerning the rise and fall of historical forces, and its ability to assimilate a wide variety of fragmented and impressionistic evidence from the period, seemed to account both for its durability and for the failure of previous historians to test its assumptions against documented realities.

The prevailing narrative of the time had a consistency and power that made it easy to grasp and, better yet, morally appealing to inhabitants of the modern world. An aristocracy put on the defensive by the domineering Louis XIV in the later seventeenth century was said to have rebounded in the eighteenth century by protecting its class interests systematically and aggressively. While squeezing peasants harder on their landed estates, nobles imposed formal or tacit genealogical requirements that made offices in the magistracy, the church and the army the preserve of the nobility. They also cleverly solidified their control over a royal administration that Louis XIV had once staffed with financiers and wealthy commoners. By the second half of the eighteenth century the new social reality had become clear: “Everywhere the ubiquitous aristocrat squeezed out *roturiers* [commoners].” When army reformers, in 1781, restricted access to the officer corps to all who did not boast four generations of nobility, they provided, according to the orthodox tradition of interpretation, “the classic, archetypical case of the aristocratic reaction.”

History’s pendulum inevitably swung back, however, and the aristocratic reaction inspired a reaction of its own. All who had suffered from the aristocrats’ single-minded efforts to achieve exclusive control over positions of power, standing, and prestige “discovered a solidarity among themselves in 1789.” The nobles’ coordinated move against the interests of commoners provoked a backlash that mutated into a full-scale revolution against privilege, one that finally led to the abolition of nobility itself. “Thus had a unified, aggressive, and exclusivist aristocracy, monopolizing all the places that mattered, prepared its own destruction.”

In his opening pages Bien highlighted the apparent intellectual coherence of the traditional social interpretation of the Revolution and also pointed the way toward the critique that was to come. He showed that the traditional interpretation took for granted the existence of two bounded social classes, both characterized by homogeneity of outlook. The commoners who discovered “solidarity” on the eve of the Revolution evidently found themselves in opposition to an aristocracy that defensively protected the interests of its class. No matter their differences in wealth, position, and status, nobles “were merged into a single, determined, and assertive body,” and their behavior was said to reflect that underlying social reality. As the 1780s drew to a close, two mutually hostile classes – rendered in “the sociologists’ categories” as the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie – marched ineluctably toward the conflict that would transfer the reins of social and economic leadership to a triumphant middle class.

Bien boldly set forth to challenge this orthodox view, but he tucked his devastating statement of dissent within a set of deceptively limited questions. Focusing on the army's so-called Ségur *règlement* of 1781, that quintessential expression of the alleged aristocratic reaction of the eighteenth century, Bien proposed to examine the evidence for the motivations behind the ruling. "How should we understand the army's behavior?" Did the reformers who designed and implemented this restrictive recruitment policy really act on the basis of their interests as aristocrats? "In this crucial instance, does the supposed model of broad class behavior fit the facts? Does it fit at all?" Readers would ultimately discover answers to these questions in the article's potent empirical findings. To maximize their impact, however, Bien took care to present himself as a capable and disinterested prospector who was leading the reader into rich and unmined deposits of evidence. The modest formulation of his basic query was seductive. Bien inspired confidence because he described with admirable clarity the task at hand, he eschewed polemics, and he signaled to the reader that he himself remained open to discovery. The author merely wanted to know whether the behavior of army reformers had been dictated by their class position as aristocrats. "This is the problem that we shall want to consider as closely as possible."

Throughout "La réaction aristocratique" Bien maintained this appealingly straightforward critical approach – one defined by a combination of painstaking analysis and inspiring intellectual modesty, crystallized in lapidary prose. The evidence he compiled and assessed would prove overwhelming, but he consistently projected a posture of wry and relentless inquisitiveness, and he addressed the limitations of his sources, and of the conclusions that were to be derived from them, at regular intervals. Slowly but surely, however, the interlocking pieces of his jigsaw puzzle yielded a composition with clear, unmistakable forms.

The traditional social interpretation had held that the army's tendency toward aristocratic exclusiveness grew steadily over the course of the century. "Access for *roturiers* had once been much easier, it is said." Did the evidence really bear out that assumption? Records were incomplete and discontinuous, and the scarcity of statistical evidence had induced previous historians to generalize from individual cases whose typicality was simply assumed rather than established. Methodical, patient analysis of all available evidence would surely lead to more accurate results. "The picture that can be pieced together from other sources is quite suggestive." Bien simulated the feel of a treasure hunt, and readers found themselves happily following the expert in charge of the sensor.

Typical was his introduction of a valuable and previously unconsulted army personnel register: “For the mid-eighteenth century, another piece of evidence, limited and uncertain though it is, helps a little.”

Deep into his detailed reconstruction of the social origins and career paths of military officers across the eighteenth century, Bien issues an interim report. “At this point, then, several things seem certain.” Specifically, he had found that the officer corps, contrary to conventional wisdom, had been overwhelmingly noble throughout the entire period under consideration. Commoners made up no more than about five percent of the total number of officers throughout the eighteenth century. The army’s Ségur *règlement*, then, could not have been aimed at commoners, who had never been present in large numbers. An understanding of the motivations that fueled the restrictive reforms of 1781 clearly required a wider consideration of the cultural currents and social tensions specific to the last decades of the *ancien régime*.

The details of Bien’s perceptive and imaginative reading of the qualitative sources surrounding the deliberations that led to the Ségur reform need not be shared here. The careful construction of his elegant argument should be experienced rather than recapped. Suffice it to say that Bien argued persuasively that the reforming noblemen of the officer corps had especially taken aim at other nobles – nobles of recent vintage who, because of their family backgrounds and the professional and social milieus from which they emerged, seemed unsuited to military life. The presence of *these* undesirables had been increasing, and their soft and dilettantish character seemed inconsistent with the professional needs of the corps. Whatever its impact on public opinion, or later interpretations of the *ancien régime*, the Ségur *règlement* mainly expressed a deepening rift within the nobility itself. The reform favored nobles with longer genealogies over those of recent lineage, and its purpose was to build and perpetuate a culture of military professionalism that reformers linked, rightly or wrongly, to family traditions. “The army, wanting to close itself off, thought that it could reform only by becoming more self-perpetuating, internally regulated, corporatist.”

The social origins of the Ségur *règlement* thus pointed strongly toward the heterogeneity, rather than the homogeneity, of the eighteenth-century nobility. Far from being united in an uncomplicated aristocratic outlook rooted in common experiences, the various sectors of the nobility eyed one another with suspicion and scorn. “Below the top-most levels association in a common point of view did not come automatically or easily to nobles before 1789.” The implications of Bien’s analysis for the

reigning social interpretation of the Revolution were clear. If the Ségur *règlement* had indeed represented the “classic” form of aristocratic thought and intention on the eve of the Revolution, historians’ narrative of Revolutionary origins should not place emphasis on simmering animosity between a declining nobility and an emergent bourgeoisie. Specialists of the period would need to widen their analytical frame if they wished to understand and explain the conflicts that precipitated revolutionary changes in French social structure.

Bien’s evidence was powerful, and his judicious assessment of that evidence lent great authority to his findings, which Furet and others quickly added to an arsenal designed to obliterate the twin bogeys of class and class conflict. But “La réaction aristocratique,” despite its status as a canonical “revisionist” text, should be remembered for something all too easily forgotten in the wake of the historiographical polemics of the 1970s and 1980s, namely, its author’s resistance to doctrinaire pronouncements of any kind. Humility, openness to differing points of view, and an ingratiating intellectual generosity defined Bien’s article right through to its final conclusions. Note the tone with which he opened his report of the meaning of his findings: “It would be a mistake to over-state conclusions, and my thoughts are tentative.... Nonetheless, several suggestions for ways of thinking about problems of development before and in the French Revolution come to mind.” In this article, as in so much of his published work, Bien proposed “ways of thinking about problems,” new routes of inquiry that, however fresh and fruitful, always remained susceptible to further refinement as “more and other kinds of evidence” came to light.

Bien and his “La réaction aristocratique” in fact represented a variant of French Revolutionary “revisionism” that was fated to be subsumed under and effaced by the “New Revisionist Orthodoxy” later cited by Jones. Bien saw no urgent need to expunge class from historians’ critical vocabulary, nor did he wish to consign to the trash heap the venerable interpretive tradition with which he found fault. His concluding remarks showed an admirable spirit of conciliation. “It is surely not true to say that there was no bourgeoisie, or that the categories of *roturier* and noble did not matter. Of course they did, and in many of the ways that have long been assumed.” Bien simply recognized that the evidence reflecting social identity under the *ancien régime* was complex and multi-layered, and that proper interpretation of that evidence demanded a subtlety of perception, a sensitivity to context, and a mistrust of certitude that the pre-packaged categories of aristocracy and bourgeoisie ruled out by definition. Bien’s own reading of the Ségur *règlement* and the context



surrounding it indicated that divisions between occupations – the lines that separated the emerging “professions” – mattered as much or more to the military nobles of pre-Revolutionary France than the legal divisions of estate or class. “Both things, of course, were real: broad divisions of wealth, legal status, and privilege, the background of class conflict, also mattered. But if, in the effort to understand development from at least the mid-eighteenth century, we combine too frequently, too soon, and too continuously the occupational categories into the larger ones of class, we are likely to distort the historical process.”

Bien’s call for greater subtlety of analysis, and for interpretations more faithful to the historical process, did not entail the preemptive exclusion of terms and concepts that might enable the historian to make sense of the past as it had been experienced. For Bien such closing down of analytical possibilities would have been unimaginable. Class, bourgeoisie, economic base: he could certainly imagine scenarios in which these and related notions would illuminate historical realities, so long as the evidence yielded the category and not the other way around. Bien would certainly never have thought to repudiate “social” interpretation in favor of “political” interpretation, or vice versa. His credo was really quite simple, and applicable to all genres of analysis: reject the many temptations of teleology. (“[It] is always too easy to apply categories for analysis taken from one period to others where they do not fit.”) Indeed, his aversion to teleological readings of historical evidence would eventually lead him to criticize Furet’s famed rendition of the origins of the Reign of Terror.<sup>7</sup> The Furetian interpretation of the Revolution’s course had grown from a focus on politics and discourse that had proven to be as inflexible, and as insensitive to the complexities of context, as Marxists’ former focus on class and class conflict. Rigidity was always unhelpful, whatever the circumstances of its application.

To understand the lasting influence of “La réaction aristocratique,” then, one needs to recall the form, and not only the empirical content, of the great article. The Bien piece shook to its foundations an orthodox interpretation of the social origins of the French Revolution, and it thereby shaped a generation of scholarship on the nobility, the military, and the social structure of the *ancien régime*. But for historians of the eighteenth century, the article remains vital and powerful

---

<sup>7</sup> David D. Bien, “François Furet, the Terror, and 1789,” *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990), 777-783.

– even in spite of the fading relevance of once-heated debates over the social origins of the Revolution. The lasting power of “La réaction aristocratique” owes less to its association with a form of revisionist dogma, with which Bien himself was never entirely comfortable, than to the infinitely expandable method of inquiry it modeled.<sup>8</sup> That method, based on an instinctive suspicion of overarching narratives and an exquisite appreciation for what historical subjects actually meant to say through their words and deeds, proved to be eminently transposable to other problems. Bien’s method, instead of leading to door-closing answers, endlessly turned up new questions.<sup>9</sup> Historians of France have been inspired by the fruitful simplicity of Bien’s relentless questioning for thirty years and more.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> I once heard him say, with only a slight hint of irritation: “People talk about ‘revisionism.’ I’ve never known what that is.”

<sup>9</sup> At a 1997 symposium in Bien’s honor, held in Ann Arbor, this basic point was made with more panache by Dale K. Van Kley: “A Word of Appreciation on the Occasion of his Retirement for David D. Bien. By an informal Student, a Neighbor in Michigan, a professional Colleague, and above all a Friend.” My thanks to Professor Van Kley for allowing me to paraphrase his paper.

<sup>10</sup> Bien’s work on the army – and his perception of older nobles’ resentment of newer nobles within that institution – soon led him to examine more closely the phenomenon of venality of office (a practice that facilitated the creation of new nobles). Recognizing its broad implications for the social order, and for the system of state finance of which it became such a vital part, Bien opened new avenues of inquiry into the connections between credit operations, the culture of corporate institutions, and the process of political change in the eighteenth century. This distinct and important tradition of analysis, which added much fuel for the revisionist focus on “politics” in the 1980s and 1990s, was also informed by the conclusions Bien reached in “La réaction aristocratique.” See, for example, David D. Bien, “Offices, Corps, and a System of State Credit: the Uses of Privilege under the Ancien Régime,” in Keith Michael Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 89-114; and “Manufacturing Nobles: the Chancelleries in France to 1789,” *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989), 445-486; Gail Bossenga, *The Politics of Privilege: Old Regime and Revolution in Lille* (Cambridge, 1991); Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France: Liberté, Egalité, Fiscalité* (Cambridge, 2000). Bien’s recognition of the key importance of “profession” as an organizing concept and marker of identity has not had quite the impact that it should have had, but recent examinations of the problematic category of the “bourgeoisie” have stressed the rising importance of professional consciousness in the eighteenth century. See both

Within the subfield of French military history, Bien's findings about the social origins of officers and the recruitment patterns that governed entry and promotion in the ranks of infantry, cavalry, and dragoon regiments have gone essentially unchallenged, even if some would still prefer to describe the army's restrictive impulses as inescapably "aristocratic" in nature.<sup>11</sup> Bien's questions continue to find new permutations, however, in the now considerable body of literature devoted to military institutions and the underlying assumptions and mechanisms central to their operation. By taking seriously the eighteenth century's military reformers, and by revealing some of the unexpected and intriguingly complex ideas that guided their actions, Bien helped to establish "a 'new,' socially oriented military history for eighteenth-century France," a scholarly agenda that has also made an impact on research in adjoining fields.<sup>12</sup>

The work of the French army's reforming commissions has continued to attract interest, and the resonance of the subject provides perhaps the most obvious sign of the lingering influence of "La réaction aristocratique." In articles that connect the work of Ségur's committee in

---

Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); and Christine Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status: A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park, Pa., 2000).

<sup>11</sup> In the magisterial anthology *Histoire Militaire de la France*, Jean Chagniot cited Bien's article in his essay on the relationship between the army and society at the end of the *ancien régime*, and he even echoed several of Bien's themes – Enlightenment's steady infiltration of the officer corps, the building concern for professionalization. But he still thought it appropriate to claim that "under Louis XVI, the aristocratic reaction was unleashed in the army." See Chagniot, "Les rapports entre l'armée et la société à la fin de l'Ancien Régime," in Jean Delmas (ed.), *Histoire Militaire de la France: De 1715 à 1871* (Paris, 1992), pp. 103-128, especially p. 118. For a more recent account of pre-Revolutionary political culture that situates the movement for military reform within the broad and messy parameters of a noble *prise de conscience*, see Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: the Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2005), especially pp. 193-221.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Hochedlinger, "Mars Ennobled: the Ascent of the Military and the Creation of a Military Nobility in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Austria," *German History* 17 (1999), 141-176, especially 141. Hochedlinger specifically cites Bien as the exemplary figure behind the "new" history in France. Also see, for example, Anna Maria Rao, "Esercito e società a Napoli nelle riforme del secondo Settecento" *Studi Storici* 28 (1987), 623-677.

1781 to that of both predecessors and successors in the 1780s, Rafe Blaufarb and Christophe Dehaut have demonstrated a consistency of personnel, ideas, and objectives across the reformist era of the 1780s, effectively reaffirming Bien's argument about the fundamental professionalism of the men behind the Ségur *règlement*.<sup>13</sup> The impact of Bien's analysis of the army's exclusiveness is also evident, in more indirect ways, in the broad field of what might be called the cultural history of military institutions. To understand motivations and intentions, historians of the period have worked to penetrate the attitudes and mentalities of soldiers and officers, as well as the social and institutional worlds they inhabited. This work has generally proceeded from the assumption, made axiomatic by Bien, that in order to understand the thinking of historical actors, one must begin by taking seriously what they actually had to say, even if the logic of their arguments is less than transparent to the historian's critical eye.

This appreciative and open-minded engagement with the sources has proven to be especially fruitful in analyses of the forms of self-representation typical of army officers. The concept of merit – that is, the bundle of terms through which individuals and their superiors define, understand, and represent “deservedness” for position – had always been central to processes of appointment and promotion, but the subject had rarely been explored critically before Bien set the example with his pathbreaking articles of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>14</sup> The mysteries behind the meanings and mechanisms of merit inspired not one but three dissertations in French history in the 1990s, and the subject continues to generate new questions.<sup>15</sup> Recent work on the military has explored from a

---

<sup>13</sup> Christophe Dehaut, “Le Comité de la Guerre (1781-1784): une institution méconnue de la fin d’Ancien Régime,” *Revue Historique* 302 (2000), 869-894; Rafe Blaufarb, “Le Conseil de la Guerre (1787-1789): aspects sociaux de la réforme militaire après l’édit de Ségur,” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 43 (1996), 446-463.

<sup>14</sup> The *Annales* article was the centerpiece of a sort of trilogy on military culture that included “The Army in the French Enlightenment;” and “Military Education in Eighteenth-Century France: Technical and Non-Technical Determinants,” in Monte D. Wright and Lawrence J. Paszek (ed.s), *Science, Technology, and Warfare* (Washington, D.C., 1969), pp. 51-59.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Michael Smith, “The Culture of Merit in Old Regime France: Royal Service and the ‘Old’ Nobility, 1600-1789” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1990); Rafe Blaufarb, “Aristocratic Professionalism in the Age of Democratic Revolution: The French Officer Corps, 1750-1815” (unpublished

variety of angles the qualities that seem to have been cultivated, demanded, desired, or rewarded by military institutions from the end of the reign of Louis XIV through the Napoleonic wars. Three stimulating articles on this subject – all inspired directly or indirectly by the work of Bien, and all produced by young scholars who have creatively searched for gold in the rich veins he first prospected – recently appeared within months of each other.<sup>16</sup> Each of the authors took for granted the army’s immersion in wider currents of thought and social criticism in the eighteenth century, and they all showed reformers engaging and appropriating ideas and concepts that gained new or revived importance in the culture of the Enlightenment. By breaking down analytical dichotomies that once consigned the aristocracy and its institutions to the “traditional” or “declining” side of the historical register, these historians of military values have helped to place the military back at the center of historical inquiry for the *ancien régime* and Revolutionary eras. More important, they have burnished one of the most important legacies of the Bien article: the instinctive rejection of teleology.

The value of Bien’s lessons has extended well beyond the concerns of military historians *per se*, however. Beginning in the 1970s,

---

Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996); Nira I. Kaplan, “A Changing Culture of Merit: French Competitive Examinations and the Politics of Selection, 1750-1820” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1999). Two of these dissertations were later revised for publication: Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France* (Ann Arbor, 1996); Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750-1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (Manchester, 2002). For some of the widening reverberations see Ken Alder, *Engineering the Revolution: Arms and Enlightenment in France, 1763-1815* (Princeton, 1997); and John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940* (Princeton, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Valeria Pansini, “Pour une histoire concrète du talent: les sélections méritocratiques et le coup d’œil du topographe,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 354 (2008), 5-27; Julia Osman, “Ancient Warriors on Modern Soil: French Military Reform and American Military Images in Eighteenth-Century France,” *French History* 22 (2008), 175-196; Christy Pichichero, “Le soldat sensible: Military Psychology and Social Egalitarianism in the French Army,” *French Historical Studies* 31 (2008), 553-580. See also David C. O’Brien, “Traditional Virtues, Feudal Ties, and Royal Guards: the Culture of Service in the Eighteenth-Century *Maison Militaire du Roi*,” *French History* 17 (2003), 19-47.

and continuing for a generation, historians of early modern France from the period of the Wars of Religion through the High Enlightenment undertook a thorough reevaluation of received wisdom about the nobility as an institution. On this broad subject, too, a traditional thesis about a declining and crisis-ridden aristocracy had produced careless generalizations and an overly teleological portrait of an ascendant power, the absolutist state, in contrast to which the once-powerful feudal nobility necessarily looked weak, reactive, and parasitical. The methodical empirical research and counter-intuitive hypothesizing that had marked French Revolutionary “revisionism” from the late 1960s carried over into the work of the revisionist historians of French absolutism, and Bien’s “La réaction aristocratique” (as well as Robert Forster’s *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century*) proved to be an inspiring example to students of nobility in all periods.<sup>17</sup>

The wealth of scholarship on nobility that owes an intellectual debt to Bien’s research is impressive. Ralph Giesey and Samuel Gibiat on inheritance and patterns of mobility; Robert Descimon, Ellery Schalk and Valérie Piétri on genealogy, legal proofs, and the evolution of noble identity; Mark Motley on the education of courtiers; Harold Ellis on the ideology of the “reactionary” political theorist Boulainvilliers; Michel Figeac on the plural nobilities of Aquitaine; John Shovlin on nobility and its role in political economy; Mathieu Maraud on the social and cultural “permeability” of the Parisian nobility; Jonathan Dewald and Robert Schwartz on the evolving practice of lordship: all have drawn upon Bien’s work and have carried forward his against-the-grain critical instincts while producing a greatly revised picture of the early modern French aristocracy.<sup>18</sup> The nobility that has emerged from this decades-long

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1960).

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Giesey, “Rules of Inheritance and Strategies of Mobility in Prerevolutionary France,” *American Historical Review* 82 (1977), 271-289; Samuel Gibiat, *Hiérarchies sociales et ennoblissement: les commissaires des guerres de la Maison du Roi au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2006); Robert Descimon, “Elites parisiennes entre XVe et XVIIe siècle: Du bon usage du Cabinet des Titres,” *Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des Chartes* 155 (1997), 607-644; and “The Birth of the Nobility of the Robe: Dignity versus Privilege in the Parlement of Paris, 1500-1700,” in Michael Wolfe (ed.), *Changing Identities in Early Modern France* (Durham, N.C., 1997), pp. 95-123; Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton, 1985); Valérie Piétri, “Bonne renommée ou actes authentiques: la noblesse doit faire ses

process of reconsideration has the look of a resilient and adaptable but diverse and contentious social group, fully attuned to the world around it and navigating through sea changes with the skill and confidence one would expect of a thriving elite. Far from resisting change reflexively out of fear, nobles embraced ideas, practices, and reforms that enabled them to retain or reclaim social and political preeminence even as history's ground shifted beneath their feet. Jonathan Dewald even provocatively anointed the *noblesse* as the originators of modernity itself.<sup>19</sup>

David D. Bien helped to topple an entrenched orthodoxy, and the impact he made within the raging historiographical debates of the 1970s largely explains the wide and lasting renown of “La réaction aristocratique.” But among historians of aristocracies, elites, and nobilities – and not only those of France – the critical perspectives deployed in his pivotal *Annales* article continue to resonate.<sup>20</sup> Bien's article established a bridge between social and cultural history by putting into practice an unpretentious but powerful mode of analysis, one that has aged exceptionally well. Bien never presented himself as a methodological trend-setter, and he would have refused to be boxed in had anyone tried to

---

preuves (Provence, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles),” *Genèses* 74 (2009), 5-24; Mark Motley, *Becoming a French Aristocrat: the Education of the Court Nobility, 1580-1715* (Princeton, 1990); Harold A. Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1988); Michel Figeac, *L'Automne des gentilshommes: noblesse d'Aquitaine, noblesse française au siècle des Lumières* (Paris, 2002); John Shovlin, “Toward a Reinterpretation of Revolutionary Anti-Nobility: the Political Economy of Honor in the Old Regime,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000), 35-66; Mathieu Maraud, *La noblesse de Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2000); Jonathan Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre, 1398-1789: Lordship, Community, and Capitalism in Early Modern France* (Berkeley, 1987); Robert M. Schwartz, “The Noble Profession of Seigneur in Eighteenth-Century Burgundy,” in Jay M. Smith (ed.), *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches* (University Park, Penn., 2006), pp. 77-109. To this list could be added my own work on the development of a distinctly aristocratic patriotism between the 1680s and 1740s (see Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*) as well as most of the essays in the recent edited volume, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570-1715* (Berkeley, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Although he does not cite “La réaction aristocratique” or any specific publications by Bien, Dror Wahrman – to give one example – sought Bien's input for his *Imagining the Middle Class: the Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

apply a label to his method. To his way of thinking, his approach to sources and problems had all the theoretical sophistication of common sense. Nevertheless, in his attention to “the native’s point of view,” his sensitivity to the relationship between individual actors and the reigning structures that condition their thoughts and actions, and his inclination to see worldviews as complicated codes in need of dissecting, he clearly anticipated both the “new cultural history” and the application of Geertzian thick description to historical analysis.<sup>21</sup> Working within a framework (or *problématique*) recognizable to all social historians of the 1960s and 1970s, he experimented with techniques that would become dominant in the 1980s and still remain at the forefront of the historical discipline to this day.

He might be offended by the idea, but glimmerings of a vaguely post-structuralist sensibility are not hard to discern in Bien’s subversive analysis from 1974. The word “deconstruction” carries critical connotations that Bien himself would almost certainly resist. One can imagine him asking: must hidden contradictions *always* trump coherence? And can discourse *never* say what it seems to say? Any term that potentially leads to the prejudging of evidence is unlikely to find favor with the historian who began his career immersed in the eighteenth-century experience of religious persecution.<sup>22</sup> Still, the deconstructionist impulses that lie behind historians’ new attention to the problem of “identity” – impulses ubiquitous in recent work on nobles and other elites – clearly include “La réaction aristocratique” in their intellectual ancestry. The desire to access subjectivity, the focus on the multiple sources of selfhood, the awareness of the relational nature of identity formation, the close attention to the meanings of key words in a social vocabulary, the distrust of ascribed categories: these were all present and well developed in Bien’s trailblazing essay. In his close and sensitive analysis of military thought and practice in the eighteenth century, Bien pioneered “ways of thinking about problems” that would long outlive the specific debates that “La réaction aristocratique” happened to engage. Packed inside the

---

<sup>21</sup> Clifford Geertz, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28 (1974), 26-45.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to *The Calas Affair* (Princeton, 1960), see “Religious Persecution in the French Enlightenment,” *Church History* 30 (1961), 325-333; “Catholic Magistrates and Protestant Marriage in the French Enlightenment,” *French Historical Studies* 2 (1962), 409-429.



disarming plain-spokenness of the article's presentation lay an innovative methodology used with penetrating intelligence and sensible restraint.

Fertile insights, when combined with a portable model of analysis, produce timeless scholarship. The everlasting value of the argument and style of "La réaction aristocratique" befits the rare openness of mind and intellectual generosity consistently displayed by its author, who is no doubt pleased to see conversation continue. Bien's article helped to open new perspectives on the origins of the French Revolution, the history of the nobility, the relationship between ideas and social structure, the surprising vitality of corporate institutions under the *ancien régime*, and the meaning and importance of "profession" in the eighteenth century. Its introduction to a new generation of Anglophone readers insures that the critical explorations it launched will continue to find new and unexpected avenues in the years to come.



**Caste, class and profession  
in Old Regime France:  
the French army and the  
Ségur reform of 1781**

*David D. Bien*

## Acknowledgements (2010)

---

This study is the expansion of a paper prepared first in 1966 for the criticism of a working group of historians from various eastern American universities, specializing in the study of aristocracies. The time to assemble the additional scattered data and to write the initial version of this article during the academic year 1972-73 was provided by the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities (Grant H5426), and by the Hudson Research Professorship of the University of Michigan. The research in France has been supported by grants from the Rackham School of Graduate Studies of the University of Michigan, the National Endowment for the Humanities, S.S.R.C., and A.C.L.S.. I received helpful criticism and observations from the Institute's social science seminar, directed by Carl Kaysen, and from my colleagues at Michigan, John Bowditch and John Shy. I have found stimulation in the researches on close, related topics for their undergraduate or M.A. theses by former students: Lutz Berkner, Lenard Berlanstein, Stephan Fishelman, Marcia Dildine Young. At various times research assistants helped enormously; they are Jacques Chevalier, Mme. Bernard Favre, Sharon Hilt Lasker, Charles Mathews, Elizabeth Muenger, Robert M. Schwartz, Judith Silver, and Ann Tenenbaum Toohey. In France the late François Furet solicited and introduced this with other papers that appeared in the *Annales E.S.C.*, under the heading "Ancien Régime et Révolution: Réinterprétations," in 1974. Two long-standing friends, André Burguière (then Secrétaire de la Rédaction of the *Annales*) and Olivier Zunz (at the time a member of the Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan), were indispensable in ways each knows in turning a very long paper into print. I thank them all.

# I      **The closing of the French nobility and the Ségur law**

---

If the “causes” of the French Revolution continue to evoke lively discussion and dispute, one cause that many historians can accept is that a new aggressiveness by the nobility in the decades before 1789 contributed heavily to that great event. Some who wish to see the Revolution as “bourgeois” call the aristocratic reaction that preceded it “feudal”; others who define the Revolution as essentially “democratic” stress matters of law, politics, and citizenship, but they too find a prior “aristocratic resurgence.” Approaches vary, and there are real and interesting differences on many questions concerning the nobility. But at one point they come together: an increasingly activist nobility took the offensive before 1789 to protect their ideas and interests, and in so doing that class helped to generate the forces that overturned it. Whether squeezing peasants locally, or operating nationally behind a façade of constitutional argument, sometimes turning the high-sounding vocabulary of the Enlightenment against the state, nobles were concerned to defend both themselves and the whole hierarchical legal and social order that guaranteed their own preeminence and material position. However much they might differ in wealth and functions, *grands seigneurs* and *hobereaux*, *robe* and sword, nearly all shared a common point of view in opposition to other groups and were merged into a single, determined, and assertive body. Some historians would say that the defense of seigniorial rights was essential in holding together the nobility; others might find that tax exemptions or the privileges of aristocratic corporations mattered more. But for most, it is the privileges and interests that united nobles, more than the lesser ones that divided them, that seem controlling and operative in the background of revolution.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In French the writings are too numerous to specify, but the names of Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul are of course very important. In English the best and fullest statements of the legal, institutional, and constitutional developments in social context are Franklin L. Ford, *Robe and Sword: the Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: a Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, vol. 1 *The Challenge* (Princeton, 1959).

In this view of things, a second, closely related development is often thought really a particular expression of the first: the resurgent and aggressive nobles began systematically to exclude from positions of power and prestige in state and church the non-nobles, or *roturiers*. A numerous and threatened nobility, undermined earlier in its political and economic interests by Louis XIV's centralizing state, would take no more chances. Increasingly, to defend themselves, they infiltrated all the important places in the controlling institutions. The power vacuum after the Grand Monarch's death made easy their invasion. On the one hand, they entrenched themselves in institutions that could speak for them individually and collectively, especially the *parlements* and the provincial estates. And, on the other hand, they also moved into the central royal administration, and thereby sapped the strength of the one body that had once been dedicated to a policy of cutting down or even destroying their privileges. A Machault, Maupeou, Turgot, or Calonne might try to attack or to transform aristocratic and corporatist institutions, but their efforts were episodic, brief, and ineffective. Revived and modernized aristocratic ideas in support of the traditional hierarchical order were closely linked to a narrowly aristocratic recruitment of personnel for important institutions.

Historians have increasingly drawn on the sociologists' categories for understanding social stratification and the significance of rapid or slow movement by individuals within the system, and in this instance they could refer to impressive literary evidence for important change during the eighteenth century. Toward 1700 it had seemingly been easy for new men of little birth but much wealth to move into positions of importance and high social rank. For the duc de Saint-Simon the age of Louis XIV was "the long reign of the vile bourgeoisie!" La Bruyère and others agreed. But by 1789 the situation was apparently reversed, for then and later many observers remembered and remarked on the narrow exclusivism of aristocrats who were blocking the access of those same bourgeois to the positions of power and prestige. The traditional elite evidently shut itself off from receiving new blood. In the army officer corps, sovereign courts, high royal administration, episcopacy, nobles closed ranks to keep out the *parvenu*. Everywhere the ubiquitous aristocrat squeezed out *roturiers*.

Bracketed in this way, the eighteenth century may be seen to have prepared the whole overturn in the political, social, and legal order. The awesome and bitter struggles of the French Revolution at the upper levels in society were between the insiders and outsiders, the established and the excluded. Insiders were sons of nobles who filled their places because

their fathers had done so, and because the law and custom recognized birth alone as the source of rights and privileges. Outsiders were non-nobles, men of experience and talent who had everything that was needed to rise and to perform well in social and political functions. All that those who were left out lacked was the proper noble ancestry. Excluded by the accident of birth alone, frustrated in their personal hopes and angry, they discovered a solidarity among themselves in 1789. The massive revolutionary struggle generated a heat in which was forged a new order where all men were legally equal as citizens. Now birth was irrelevant, and no one could be kept from the place to which his talents gave him a right. Thus had a unified, aggressive, and exclusivist aristocracy, monopolizing all the places that mattered, prepared its own destruction.<sup>2</sup>

The landmarks along the road to democratic revolution were many, but among them the so-called Ségur “law” was perhaps the most notorious. This was the regulation that from 1781 governed the entry of officers into the army. The maréchal de Ségur, then Minister of War, set his name to the famous, or infamous, restriction that appeared to close off forever access to officerships by talented and ambitious *roturiers*. By its

---

<sup>2</sup> The argument about growing noble exclusivism is as old as the Revolution itself, but it became prominent again in recent decades. In the United States Elinor G. Barber, trained in sociology as well as history, applied sociologists’ categories of social stratification in a very interesting book, *The Bourgeoisie in 18<sup>th</sup> century France* (Princeton, 1955). The argument that social mobility slowed importantly late in the century has a place in the books by Ford and Palmer. In the United States where a tradition expressed in the saying, “three generations from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves,” approves mobility by individuals, there has been a lively interest in the problem. In France, François Bluche, Roland Mousnier and others mentioned below worked on aspects of the question. For the state of the question today [1974], see the articles by François Furet, “Le catéchisme de la Révolution française,” *Annales E.S.C.* 26 (1971), especially 272-76 ; and by Guy Lemarchand, “Sur la société française en 1789,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 19 (1972), especially 79-83. If I understand M. Lemarchand correctly, for some Marxist historians the idea that ennoblement continued at a high rate throughout the century would imply the creation of what he calls “élites mixtes” that do not easily fit the concept of a “bourgeois” Revolution. In recent years there have been studies, cited in M. Furet’s article, that suggest continuing openness of recruitment to the nobility. To the references in that article should be added now Gilbert Shapiro and Philip Dawson’s “Social Mobility and Political Radicalism: the Case of the French Revolution of 1789” in W.O. Aydelotte, A.G. Bogue and R.W. Fogel (ed.s), *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History* (Princeton, 1972).

terms the new *règlement* demanded that an aspiring *sous-lieutenant* present to the royal genealogist documentary evidence to establish his pedigree as noble for four degrees, or generations, on his paternal side. To wear the uniform and to share in the dignity and high prestige that army officers enjoyed, one now needed at least a father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who had themselves been nobles. Other institutions often recruited rather narrowly from the nobility – among all the bishops only one was a *roturier* at the end of the *ancien régime*. A few – the *parlements* of Aix, Grenoble, Nancy, Rennes, and Toulouse – even demanded proofs of *noblesse* for entry. But the several hundred officers in *parlements* that were technically closed to *roturiers* pale in significance beside the 8,000 or so military officerships. It was in the army where nobles acted most conspicuously to dramatize their broad determination to seal off their estate and to prevent penetration into it by new men. Its recurrence as one of the grievances cited in the *cahiers* of the Third Estate in 1789 is not surprising.<sup>3</sup> Here was evidently the classic, archetypical case of the aristocratic reaction.

How should we understand the army's behavior? Did Ségur and his colleagues act reflexively as aristocrats? Were they, in short, but one wing of a wide and articulated noble offensive aimed at sweeping aside *roturiers* and future democrats? In this crucial instance, does the supposed model of broad class behavior fit the facts? Does it fit at all? This is the problem that we shall want to consider as closely as possible.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the examination of it is difficult because, for reasons

---

<sup>3</sup> From 73% to 100% of the *cahiers* examined by George V. Taylor for four categories of *bailliage* and city assemblies specified as a grievance exclusion from offices and appointments on the basis of birth. Lower in the social hierarchy of the Third Estate that issue mattered much less: only 9% of 428 parishes and 14% of 146 lower corps in five towns mentioned it. See Taylor, "Revolutionary and Non-revolutionary Content in the Cahiers of 1789: an Interim Report," *French Historical Studies* 7 (1972), 485, 498.

<sup>4</sup> The standard works on the army are of high quality and, of course, have been useful and important to this study: Louis Hartmann, *Les officiers de l'armée royale et la Révolution* (Paris, 1910); Albert Latreille, *L'armée et la nation à la fin de l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1914); Louis Tuetey, *Les officiers sous l'ancien régime. Nobles et roturiers* (Paris, 1908). For the Ségur law and social hierarchy, see also André Corvisier, "Hiérarchie militaire et hiérarchie sociale à la veille de la Révolution," *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire* 30 (1970), 77-92; and Georges Six, "Fallait-il quatre quartiers de noblesse pour être officier à la fin de l'ancien régime?", *Revue d'histoire moderne*, 4 (1929), 47-56.



indicated below, there is not much direct evidence on the subject. Critics did not come to grips with the issue in specific and practical detail. The references that one finds in scattered writings are made in passing; they are usually brief, tucked into works on other matters, and tell little about the ideas and intent of those who drew up and implemented the genealogical requirement. When they did talk about it, contemporaries often placed the Ségur regulation in a broad context of thought and discussion about relations between the classes.

Before 1789 some grumbled and expressed tentative doubts about the wisdom of the Ségur *règlement*. An infantry captain, de Cessac, himself a *roturier*, son of a *bailliage* official at Agen, was commissioned to write the article “Capitaine” for a volume on military affairs that appeared as part of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* in 1784. In it he wondered whether a long war might not necessitate dropping the genealogical barrier, and he went on to evoke the names of several great army leaders who had not been *gentilshommes*: “Let’s hope... that the Faberts, the Cheverts, and all the French who resemble them, or who will resemble them, may come from illustrious parents.” The next year Jacques Necker, in a work analyzing French state finance and society, briefly questioned the wisdom of the Ségur *règlement*. In his view, it unduly favored the whole nobility without truly being effective in protecting the “real French chevaliers whose founding titles are lost in the darkness of time.” The exclusion of *roturiers* was consistent with the French “constitution,” according to Chérin, the court genealogist whose trade it was to concern himself with such matters. But he too had doubts about an action that, if useful for poor, rural nobles, was nonetheless humiliating for the Third Estate. The writer Saint-Lambert, envisioning a new society where unequal but functionally complementary social groups joined together in common enterprise for the good of all, thought that the Ségur *règlement* would only produce needless and unhealthy envy and hostility between groups that must coexist.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> De Cessac, “Capitaine,” *Encyclopédie méthodique. Art militaire* (1784), vol. 1, p. 475; Jacques Necker, *De l’administration des finances de la France* (1785), vol. 3, p.151; L.-N.-H. Chérin, *La noblesse considérée sous ses divers rapports, dans les assemblées générales et particulières de la nation...* (Paris, 1788), pp. 61-62; Jean-François, marquis de Saint-Lambert, *Oeuvres philosophiques* (Paris, 6 vols., n.d.), vol. 4, pp. 371-372. De Cessac’s legal status is indicated in the article on him in the typescript group biography of officers serving in 1789 prepared by F.V.S. Churchill and kept today in the Bibliothèque du Ministère de la Guerre [on the

For all that, references in printed works were few, and until almost 1789 there was no explicit or dramatic confrontation or quarrel in print over the army's admission procedures. Only in 1789 did discussion become freer, and then the tone hardened. An anonymous pamphlet echoed and developed the complaints that were appearing in the *cahiers* of the Third Estate: the new system robbed *roturiers* of an ancient right to serve, and it deprived the nobility of the means to renew itself after losses suffered in war; it destroyed ambition and "émulation" in the Third Estate. The writer went on to say that although high birth and education disposed the heart naturally toward virtue, one must not therefore scorn everything that is not noble, "as if nature, by a new compact, had reserved absolutely all talents, all qualifications for this first class of society, and as if the other had for itself only what is common and vile."<sup>6</sup>

## II Non-noble army officers: how many were there ?

---

The evidence in print that reflects what contemporaries were saying, however, is not extensive or detailed enough to take us very far into the question. The records of the army should tell more. Here too, if one looks for proof that the Ségur *règlement* was an aspect of a global aristocratic reaction directed against *roturiers*, the examination of who the army in fact recruited to be officers in the 1780s seems at first glance to be helpful. We should, of course exclude from the analysis the 10% who were *officiers de fortune*, nearly all of them *roturiers*. Beginning as simple soldiers and rising slowly by assiduous service through the ranks of the non-commissioned officers, officers of fortune were fitted into special, designated slots in the grenadier companies. Usually more than twice as old as the other newly-created lieutenants, often forty rather than sixteen

---

Boulevard Saint-Germain when I used it, but now part of the Service Historique de la Défense at Vincennes].

<sup>6</sup> *Observations sur le règlement du 22 mai 1781, concernant les preuves de noblesse exigées pour entrer au service* (Londres, 1789), p. 8.

or seventeen, they performed the dull and routine tasks of regimental administration and were not allowed to rise higher than *capitaine de grenadiers*. It is not these, but the other, regular officers who formed 90% of the total in the regiments who are of interest here. For them a narrowly aristocratic social origin at the end of the *ancien régime* is undeniable.

Of almost 3,000 young men who entered the line regiments of the French infantry, cavalry, and dragoons in the 1780s, about one-third were either students paid for by the king in the royal military schools, or had been pages in one of several such corps at Versailles.<sup>7</sup> They had presented their proofs of nobility earlier – four generations for the military schools and nobility to the year 1550 for pages – when they entered the educational institutions. Others might have attended a military school at their parents' rather than the king's expense, or joined directly from home, but in either case after 1781 they had to obtain a certificate of *noblesse*. The royal genealogists – the two Chérins and Berthier served in succession during these years – investigated and verified the credentials of applicants with scrupulous care, and have left us records that are full for the years 1784-87 and partial for the others. These records show 1,102 names of persons who, in addition to those from the pages or *écoles militaires*, were actually placed in regiments after having received the

---

<sup>7</sup> Overall, in 1788-89, about 7,100 officers were serving at any one time in those regiments, including artillery but not the 12 regiments of light cavalry, 12 battalions of light infantry, 6 regiments of *hussards*, and the engineers. The officers excluded from our calculation numbered about 1,050, and in light infantry and *hussards* were often foreigners not subject to the same proofs of *noblesse*. The estimate of 3,000 entrants to places in the regular units that required genealogical proofs is based on examination of a sample of registers for 20 regiments, and it conforms closely to the figure of 2,943 that Tuetey gave in his *Les officiers sous l'ancien régime*, p. 219. The students entering the line regiments included 487 *élèves du roi* whose education in the provincial schools the king had paid for, and 119 *pensionnaires* whose families paid their expenses at the École militaire in Paris. The pages numbered 325, of whom 101 from the Grande Écurie, 79 from the Petite Écurie, 34 pages of Monsieur (the comte de Provence, Louis XVI's younger brother), 24 of the Queen, 24 of the comte d'Artois (the king's youngest brother), and a scattering who had served other members of the royal family. These figures are taken from the registers that record for each regiment the service of their officers, which service included time spent as page or *élève*. Service Historique de la Défense (SHD) Y<sup>b</sup> 166-468, 529-643.

certificate.<sup>8</sup> Finally, a third group of uncertain size was comprised of sons whose fathers had earned the Cross of the Order of Saint-Louis through long military service and who were thereby exempted from having to present proofs of *noblesse*. In the artillery after 1781 these numbered 49 of the 148 entrants; for all the branches it is likely that as many as 500 took advantage of the exemption for sons of military men. In principle they could have been *roturiers*, and unquestionably a few were. But most of the sons of *chevaliers* of the Saint-Louis were in fact nobles. Among the 49 coming into the artillery, generally considered more open to non-nobles than the rest of the infantry or the other branches, a maximum of 8, but probably only 3 or 4, were *roturiers*.<sup>9</sup> It seems clear, then, that overall the vast and overwhelming majority of the new *sous-lieutenants* after 1781 were nobles, and most of them could prove four or more generations of *noblesse*. Except for the handful whose fathers had served, ambitious bourgeois did not find an army career open to them in the 1780s. The exclusion of *roturiers* was almost complete.

To see what this exclusion meant, it should be understood against a background of earlier recruiting practice. Access for *roturiers* had once been much easier, it is said. The case for the army's new and stringent determination to exclude non-nobles at the end of the *ancien régime* is often made by invoking the intelligent and interesting work of Louis Tuetey. It was he who first stated that *roturiers* must have occupied at least one-third of all the places as officers in the infantry regiments during the Seven Years War. Earlier there had evidently been a time of relatively open recruitment. Tuetey found a military man who complained in 1742 "that scarcely six 'officiers gentilshommes' would be found in any infantry battalion," and in 1758 the comte de Saint-Germain stated flatly that the troops were "filled with roturiers." On the basis of this and other evidence that reflected contemporary opinion, Tuetey established his

---

<sup>8</sup> The names are in the fichier prepared by J. de la Trollière, who took the information concerning the placements and families principally from the certificates in the cartons of the *Travail du Roi* in the Service Historique de la Défense. The *fichier* is in the Archives Nationales (AN), listed as Inv. 464 (974).

<sup>9</sup> SHD Y<sup>b</sup> 669, Corps Royal de l'Artillerie, *contrôle*, lieutenants, 1768-1791. The clerk recorded the fact of noble status and often the father's profession for nearly all entrants to the artillery during these years.

proportion of non-noble to noble officers. His was only an estimate, but it has seemed a reasonable one to historians who used it subsequently.<sup>10</sup>

But how can one be sure? Do we really know that large numbers of non-nobles, other than the officers of fortune, had ever served in the army as officers, at least in its main branches that comprised the line regiments of infantry, cavalry and dragoons? Unfortunately, systematic evidence on this important point is scarce. The evidence that Tuetey used for individual cases, interesting though it is, is susceptible to varying interpretations – it could even be argued that the very availability of the kind of information he used, information from the military archives concerning the difficulties that individual *roturiers* sometimes had as officers because of their personal status, may be testimony to the infrequency, rather than the frequency, of their appearance in that role. What is needed then, is to review what data there are, and in doing so, to try to avoid making general the special or unusual cases, and avoid also misusing the comments of contemporaries who were expressing only what they believed to be true and in terms that are sometimes misleading. The picture that can be pieced together from other sources is quite suggestive.

André Corvisier studied Louis XIV's generals, and concluded that *roturiers* among them were scarce, in fact nearly as scarce, as we shall see, as they were on the eve of the Revolution. From a total of 211 French-born lieutenant-generals for whom he had information, 16 (7.6%) were *roturiers* or doubtful nobles. If new families appeared increasingly among the names of generals late in Louis XIV's reign, they came mainly from the *robe* and administrative nobility. Except among the engineers, the number of *roturier* generals was very small.<sup>11</sup> For the mid-eighteenth century, another piece of evidence, limited and uncertain though it is, helps a little. This is a register that was used to record the entries of all *sous-lieutenants* and *lieutenants en second* into the infantry regiments

---

<sup>10</sup> Tuetey, *Les officiers sous l'ancien régime*, pp. 94-99. Louis Hartmann, who published two years after Tuetey, concluded on this basis that in 1781 there must have been, in addition to the 1,100 *officiers de fortune*, another 1,845 officers who were *roturiers*: see, *Les officiers de l'armée royale et la Révolution*, p. 97. The matter is discussed by R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 460, n. 15. John Shy kindly allowed me to read a paper he prepared on the subject.

<sup>11</sup> André Corvisier, "Les généraux de Louis XIV et leur origine sociale," *XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* 42-43 (1959), p. 53.

between 1738 and 1763.<sup>12</sup> For most of the years nothing but the names appear, but during the years 1740 to 1743, for 74 regiments and for periods varying from one to three years according to the regiment, the clerks also added brief information concerning relatives already in the regiment or the social status of the new officer. This information, taken by itself, is perhaps not conclusive and might not convince a genealogist, since it was surely in the interest of the lieutenant to hide his low social origin if he had one. But it does measure what was officially accepted and believed about the social composition of the officer corps at this moment of rapid expansion of the armed forces. After eliminating the 47 officers of fortune, 813 names remain. Among those, 84 had relatives who were then or had once been officers in the regiment, and that fact once indicated, no further information was needed or recorded. Thus, for them it is impossible to be certain what was their social and legal status. Among the rest, 649 were designated as noble, *gentilhomme* or “homme de condition” as opposed to 81 said only to be of “bonne famille” or for whom nothing at all was written beside the name. The appearance in that last category of a La Tour du Pin when he entered the Bourbon infantry regiment suggests that not all of the 81 were in fact non-noble. Nonetheless, it is clear from other cases where sometimes the clerk added information on a father’s occupation that some in this group were *roturiers*. On this evidence, a maximum of 10%, but more likely 5%, of the entrants did not belong to the nobility.

There is another, somewhat circuitous means that might allow one to get at the same question. In 1766, the publishers of the annual *État militaire* (that began to appear in 1758) issued a special volume that listed the names of all the “officiers major”, mainly *aides-major* and *sous-aides-major*, in the regiments (in contemporary American terminology, staff or regimental headquarters officers) who had seen service between 1758 and 1765. The intent was thereby to complement and to complete the skimpy early volumes of the *État militaire* that often omitted the names of these officers. The special volume contains biographical and career information for each officer, and from that work it was possible to extract the names of 297 French-born regimental staff officers who were either killed or wounded during the mid-century wars. Then, by comparing those names to others that appear in a work compiled by Champeaux, an unofficial list of casualties among officers through the *ancien régime* – taken mainly

---

<sup>12</sup> SHD Y<sup>b</sup> 126.

from *nobiliaires* and other sources that would include the noble, but exclude the non-noble, officers –, one finds which among the 297 names officially listed did not appear also in Champeaux's collection and, thus, may have been *roturiers*. What emerges is that only 20 of the 297 names on the official list were not also in the other list that contains the nobles, and of those 20, there were six who were, to judge from their titles of prince, *comte*, or *marquis*, definitely noble. Thus, no more than 14 of the 297, or a little less than 5%, might have been *roturiers* in these functions.<sup>13</sup>

With the edict that created the "Noblesse Militaire" in 1750, other and complementary sources accumulated that fortunately permit locating more exactly and positively many of the *roturiers* who served. Army reformers in 1750, after the War of the Austrian Succession, secured the issuance of an edict that conferred legal nobility on those valorous *roturier* officers who, as the preamble put it, were "already ennobled by their actions."<sup>14</sup> It is important to review the provisions of this edict of "Noblesse Militaire" and the king's *Déclaration* of January 1752 that amended and interpreted it. The legislation provided two paths to nobility. One was by rising to very high rank: any non-noble *maréchal de camp* or lieutenant general serving in 1750 or one who would attain that grade in the future was automatically ennobled with all his posterity. The other path to *noblesse* was longer and much less direct, but it was open to the officer who did not rise so high: it required three generations of military service to reach permanent or hereditary nobility. A kind of personal, or life, nobility was given to the officer who retired as chevalier de Saint-Louis after at least thirty years' service, of which twenty with the commission of captain. The requirement of twenty years' service as captain was reduced to eighteen for lieutenant-colonels, sixteen for colonels, and fourteen for brigadiers. The most tangible of the immediate rewards for the eligible *roturier* officer was life exemption from payment of the *taille* for the cultivation of two ploughlands. When the officer whose father and grandfather had completed these requirements, in 1750

---

<sup>13</sup> *Table historique de l'état militaire de France depuis 1758 jusqu'à présent* (Paris, 1766); J. de Champeaux, *Honneur et Patrie, ou la noblesse aux armées* (Nevers, 3 vol.s, 1893-96).

<sup>14</sup> The *Édit* and the *Déclaration* that qualified it in 1752 are printed in Tuetey, *Les officiers sous l'ancien régime*, pp. 367-75; and also in D. Labarre de Raillcourt, *La Noblesse militaire. Etude, liste biographique des titulaires. Armorial* (Paris, 1962), pp. 27-31.

or after, fulfilled the same service requirement, he obtained for himself and his posterity permanent, hereditary nobility. The edict specified that the service time prior to 1750 could be counted for this purpose by the officer who was still serving in the army in 1750, but careers of direct ancestors who had left the army before 1750 did not count toward the required three generations. The Declaration of 1752 directed the minister of war to issue *lettres d'approbation de service* to the eligible officer. These *lettres* were then registered without fees by the courts, and served the retired officer in each generation as proof that he need not pay the *taille*. In only two situations could the *lettres* be issued without the completion of thirty years as officer; that is, when a captain was forced to retire early because of wounds, or when a captain died in service and his family applied for the *lettres* as evidence for the completion of one of the three generations of service.

Two distinct groups of *roturier* officers, then – those who reached general officer's rank, and those who served twenty years as captain or above and thirty years altogether – were moving into or toward nobility through military service. Fortunately lists of these officers exist, and with the lists it is possible to trace the careers. If the records for these groups are not an exact index to the size of the whole body of non-noble officers, they do provide a rough measure of their numbers, the patterns of mobility, and changes in the patterns from 1750 to 1789.

Starting with the general officers, the *maréchaux de camp* and lieutenant-generals, ninety were created nobles through holding or rising into those ranks in 1750 or later. For the whole period the 90 represented 5.2% of the total of 1,748 who were in or entered these ranks and were eligible for being created nobles. The others (94.8%), then, were already nobles.<sup>15</sup> The break-down by decades was as follows:

---

<sup>15</sup> The list of those ennobled by rising into these offices is printed in Labarre de Raillcourt, *La Noblesse militaire*, pp. 11-26, constituted from SHD Y<sup>a</sup> 125-126, where the documents pertaining to the decisions on individuals contain some additional information on careers. I have determined the figures for the total number in the various promotions, nobles and non-nobles together, from the lists in the *Almanach Royal* and, after 1758, from the annual volumes of the *État militaire*.



	<i>Maréchaux de camp</i> or lieutenant-généraux	<i>Roturiers</i> among them
Serving in 1750	461	8 (1.7%) <sup>16</sup>
Promoted: 1751-60	109	7 (6.4%)
1761-70	383	18 (4.7%)
1771-80	265	15 (5.7%)
1781-89	530	42 (7.9%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,748</b>	<b>90 (5.1%)</b>

A rising number and proportion of the *maréchaux de camp* were *roturiers*. But lest one exaggerate the extent to which the army was being opened rather than closed to upwardly mobile *roturiers*, it is important to qualify a bit what precedes. Of the 86 *anoblis* whose careers were traced, two were in the Swiss guards associated with the Maison du Roi and seven were foreigners serving in other foreign regiments within the French army.<sup>17</sup> The technical branches – artillery and engineers – accounted for 41, or almost one-half of those identified, and of these, 24 were ennobled in 1784 or later. The big bulge, then, came mainly in the smaller technical branches, and it came late. Cavalry and dragoons together provided only fourteen *roturiers* ennobled by becoming general officers, and the infantry 21 (of whom, 11 in 1780 or later). If the incidence of non-nobles among the engineers and artillerymen was quite high – for example, four of the

---

<sup>16</sup> The much lower percentage of *roturiers* who appear among those promoted prior to 1750 and still serving in that year is deceiving. The figure does not show the *roturiers* in the ranks of general who were ennobled before 1750 by individual *lettres de noblesse*. Their conferral on generals ceased after 1750 when the office itself gave *noblesse*.

<sup>17</sup> Summary information for careers has been found by using SHD Y<sup>a</sup> 125-126 and the volumes of the *État militaire*. More detailed information could be found in the dossiers for the individual generals in Y<sup>2d</sup> and Y<sup>3d</sup> of the SHD.

eleven engineers promoted in 1780-81, and 13 of 36 in artillery – the percentage of non-nobles in the main branches of infantry, cavalry and dragoons was not large even at its height. The highest point for *roturiers* in those line regiments was in 1780 when seven became *maréchaux de camp*, but even then the seven in that year comprised but 4.4% of promotions in those branches. The later promotions reflected the temporarily larger number of non-nobles who may have entered the army toward the end of the wars in the middle of the century. But in general, not many French-born general officers were being ennobled, because the vast majority, except in the artillery and engineers, were already noble.

It is perhaps more interesting to see how many lower officers received *lettres d'approbation de service* and were, therefore, non-noble. The lower officers or their families had good reasons – tax exemption, recognition of having fulfilled one of the three steps toward hereditary nobility – to apply for the *lettres* if they were eligible. That does not mean that all would actually have done so. The officer who lived where payment of the *taille* rested on the status of the land rather than the personal condition of its owner, that is, in the *pays de taille réelle*, and who also had no son to carry on his name had less incentive to apply. The family of an officer killed in battle or who died later from his wounds might ask for the *lettres*, but again would probably have made the effort only if a son were preparing to follow a military career. Moreover, if the retired officer was not troubled at home over the *taille* or *franc fief*, he surely preferred not to advertise his *roturier* status by asking for the *lettres*. For all that, there were real gains to be derived from the *lettres*, and probably most of the eligible retired officers who were known to be *roturiers* would have found it useful to apply.

The available records reveal the names of 138 *roturier* officers – 122 who themselves applied for and received the *lettres* immediately after retirement and an additional sixteen whose sons or grandsons cited their ancestors' prior service when making their own applications at a later date. It seems that that list is not complete, but it represents probably a little more than two-thirds of the total issued.<sup>18</sup> The 138 can be divided by period and type of service in this way:

---

<sup>18</sup> Basing his listing on the dossiers in SHD Y<sup>a</sup> 125-126, Labarre de Raillcourt cites 122 *lettres d'approbation* actually issued. Knowing the completeness of that listing is of course important here. Tuetey estimated that the total was 200, but only 1 of the 9 recipients whom he mentioned was not also in Labarre's list. For the 1780s the listing seems nearly complete: all those receiving the *lettres* had to

Year of retirement	Royal Household	Infantry	Cavalry & Dragoons	Artillery & Engineers	Others	Total
1751-60	6	8	2	1	3	20
1761-70	4	16	6	0	4	30
1771-80	17	15	1	1	8	42
1781-90	14	19	4	3	6	46
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>138</b>

Whether the increase in the numbers applying in the late 1770s and 1780s is real, reflecting a rise in *roturier* entrants late in the War of the Austrian Succession, or only apparent, owing to some *lettres* for the earlier period that are missing from the list, is uncertain. It is clear that, for the *roturiers* who received the *lettres d'approbation*, infantry was the favored branch, but the Maison militaire du Roi was also strongly represented. The very small number from the artillery and the engineers is surprising: only five officers served in the lower ranks there long enough to gain the *lettres*. This reversal of the trend among the ennobled generals, nearly half of whom were from these technical services, suggests that in them the *roturier* either rose quickly and far, or he got out early. Perhaps men who commanded technical and mathematical skills that were easily

---

pay a fee, the *droit de marc d'or*, that varied in amount from 36 to 49 *livres*; records of payments made for these letters, 1785-89, are in the registers of the Trésorier des revenus casuels (AN P 4881-4888) and reveal 16 names of persons who paid in those years; of the 16, there were 15 who were also in Labarre's list and only one name (Semilly) was missing from it. Earlier, however, many more names are missing: Mme Gallet at the Archives Nationales has completed an inventory that details all the *arrêts* made by the Royal Council during Turgot's two-year ministry, 1774-76; among them are those that were needed to authorize the payment of the *marc d'or* by individuals receiving the *lettres d'approbation*. Of seven such *arrêts* issued during those two years, four do not appear in Labarre's list. Thus, the figure of 122 is too low, and the list, fairly accurate for the 1780s, is incomplete for the earlier period. Tuetey's guess of 200 is probably about right.

convertible to civilian occupations found other alternatives for careers too attractive to resist unless it was clear that they might become generals. In any event, at no time had the lower ranks in the artillery and engineers been filled by many long-serving *roturiers*.

In a sense, however, the essential point is not to become too immersed in the details of these figures, but to keep in mind that the total who received *lettres d'approbation* for the entire period was something above 138, probably about 200. To these must be added other *roturiers* in military service who, without becoming generals, received direct ennoblement by royal action. These were men who did not wish to wait for the slow turnover of the three generations' service, and who found a friend in or near power to recommend them for *lettres de noblesse*. Once more, from a variety of sources, it is possible to assemble a picture that includes most, if not all of them. The 102 military men in this group, taken from regional lists that include about two-thirds of all the *lettres de noblesse* issued between 1750 and 1789,<sup>19</sup> were distributed as follows:

---

<sup>19</sup> AN P 2592-2601, *lettres de noblesse* registered in Chambre des Comptes, Paris, to 1787; E 2768-2782 (registers listing letters sent by Minister of War, 1750-51, 1753-59, 1767, 1770-71, 1775, 1777, 1779); O<sup>1</sup> 94-123 (registers of letters of the Ministère de la Maison du Roi, 1750-76); Jules Maulbon d'Arbaumont, *Les Anoblis de Bourgogne, liste par ordre chronologique des lettres d'anoblissement, de confirmation et de relief de noblesse enregistrées au Parlement et à la Chambre des Comptes de Dijon (1363-1782)* (Paris, 1867); *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790. Gironde. Série B. Archives Judiciaires. Registres d'Enregistrement du Parlement, I B 1 à 58. Rédigé par Jean-Auguste Brutails* (Bordeaux, 1925) (includes references to registration of *lettres de noblesse* in the Parlement of Bordeaux, except during the years 1766-74 for which the registers are missing); *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790. Haute Garonne. Archives civiles. Série B. Parlement de Toulouse, Nos. 1923-74, vol. 5 Enregistrement des actes du pouvoir royal (2ème partie), 1569-1790* (Toulouse, 1965). These regional lists overlap and are sometimes incomplete. Comparison between the composite list formed from them with known general enumerations that are complete for all of France, 1750-1767 and 1784-1789 (see note 42 below), but lacking indication of profession, shows that the regional lists together contain about two-thirds of the total.

Years	Royal Household	Infantry	Cavalry & Dragoons	Artillery & Engineers	Others	Total
1751-60	8	2	4	0	2	16
1761-70	17	4	3	1	0	25
1771-80	22	11	4	3	4	44
1781-90	10	4	1	1	1	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>102</b>

This time the preponderance of the *Maison militaire du Roi* (Royal Household) is striking, though surely not surprising.

What is even more striking, however, is how low these figures are overall. Consider just the main branches of infantry, cavalry and dragoons, where the regiments contained some 6,000 officers: during the forty years after 1750 those places produced 35 generals who were ennobled by their offices, and if we adjust the totals upward (in each instance by 50% to compensate for the incompleteness of our lists), probably 50 junior officers who received *lettres de noblesse* and perhaps 100 who had *lettres d'approbation*. The likely total of confirmed *roturiers*, then, was 185. Fairly complete regimental service registers for the period from 1758 to 1789 show that there were 619 majors and lieutenant-colonels in line regiments who finished their careers there, occasionally by death but usually by retirement.<sup>20</sup> Of those, 21 were ennobled by being made *maréchaux de camp* at retirement and ten others received either *lettres de noblesse* or *lettres d'approbation*. Thus, 31 of 619, or 5%, were confirmed *roturiers* in these highly professional grades where long service was likely to have brought recognition through

---

<sup>20</sup> SHD Y<sup>b</sup> 166-468, 529-643.

ennoblement if one needed it, and always eligibility to apply for *lettres d'approbation*. In the infantry regiments captains were ten times more numerous than the majors and lieutenant-colonels, in cavalry and dragoons six times more numerous. It is probable that 4,000 or more of these officers retired after long service in our period, and yet only 70 secured either kind of the *lettres*. There were 295 captains killed and about 1,000 wounded, some badly enough to retire, during the Seven Years War, but only very few of their families appeared then or later to claim *lettres d'approbation*.<sup>21</sup>

What is impressive, then, in all the evidence is the relative scarcity of *roturiers* in military service as officers, both late, which is not surprising, and early, which is. The wars of the mid-century were bloody, the yearly average of casualties heavier than in Louis XIV's wars, and captains were the most exposed and vulnerable of the officers in battle. Some were killed, many wounded, and thousands retired through the period. Any of them or their families might have applied at least for the *lettres d'approbation* if they had needed them. The evidence for entering lieutenants and for the killed and wounded *aides-major* reinforces what the records for the *lettres* tell us. It simply does not seem possible that anything like one-third – Tuetey cited estimates of one-half and thought his own a conservative one – of the officers in line regiments were *roturiers*. Some did enter, and they appear among the retirements, especially in the 1780s. But there cannot have been many – 5% may be too high but it is the proportion toward which all the evidence converges and is probably a safe guess. Their presence in larger numbers would have been recorded in a flood, rather than the trickle that we have, of *lettres d'approbation*, and would show up in the other sources as well. Thus, whether one looks to the middle of the century, to find *roturiers* whose careers might have begun under Louis XIV or in the early years of Louis XV, or to the end of the century, what emerges is the extent to which the army officer corps had never really provided a wide access to *roturiers* in the eighteenth century. They were present, but not in large numbers.

---

<sup>21</sup> The numbers of captains killed or wounded are derived from Champeaux, *Honneur et Patrie*.

### III The purpose of the Ségur law

---

Who, then, was the Ségur *règlement* directed against? Were the limited number of *roturiers* among the army officers really thought to be a problem sufficient to evoke so strong a response? Or, was that response purely gratuitous, an attack by the aristocrats who ran things against an imaginary evil and enemy? But all the hypotheses that impute the action to an essentially noble reaction against non-nobles will run into one serious difficulty: the army's committee that discussed and adopted the *règlement* knew quite well that the officer corps had been recruited almost entirely from the nobility alone for many years. As early as 1718 the Conseil de la Guerre was directing the army's *inspecteurs* to be sure that the colonels chose only nobles to be *lieutenants en second*. It insisted even then on proofs of the candidate's *noblesse* through attestations of the fact by three or four *gentilshommes* who knew the family. Perhaps the requirement was not always enforced strictly, and in 1734 the minister of war, under pressure to fill vacancies in the regiments fighting then in Germany and Italy during the War of the Polish Succession, did advise the *intendants* to do what he in a similar place had done earlier. That advice was to seek out for officers the young men who were wealthy enough to support themselves in the service among the "*gentilshommes* or sons of magistrates living nobly,"<sup>22</sup> that is, not in trade or the manual occupations. Nonetheless, most of the recruits were nobles, and the maréchal de Belle-Isle, who was running the Ministry of War in 1758, did not hesitate to remind the colonels of the old rules right in the middle of the Seven Years War. The scattered instances that Tuetey cites where *roturiers* had difficulty in entering, even in the light infantry and militia, testify to the broad awareness among colonels and others that it was unusual for a non-noble to enter. When the colonel of the Bigorre infantry regiment wrote a letter to the minister in 1760 to ask permission to receive a *roturier*, he found it necessary to reassure his superior: "I can assure you, monseigneur, that until now I have paid great attention to giving preference to the nobility; nearly all those whom I have named to officerships since I have been colonel have been *gens de condition*."<sup>23</sup> The

---

<sup>22</sup> Tuetey, *Les Officiers sous l'ancien régime*, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172; see also pp. 164-181.

system of testimonial proofs of *noblesse* was well established by the 1770s.

Then in 1776, the minister Saint-Germain and the reformers in his entourage hit on a new plan for training junior officers. They would use the savings from a reorganization of the *École militaire* to create special places in the regiments through which all the new officers had to pass. These places of “cadets gentilshommes” held the young men to a program of studies and apprenticeship in the ranks during which they were supposed to learn the regiment’s work from the bottom up. But in order to enter, every one of these cadets had either to present a certificate of nobility, verified now by the military commander in the province where he lived and the *intendant* in his *généralité*, or else show that his father had been or was then in military service, in the grade of captain or higher. It was the ending in 1781 of this experiment in practical training for the entering officers – the cadets to be replaced by an equal number of ordinary, though unpaid, *sous-lieutenants* in the regiments – that was the occasion for the simultaneous issuance of the *Séjour règlement*, an act that in fact only renewed the prior demand for proofs of *noblesse*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the army’s committee in 1781 could not have thought that it was doing something new when it insisted that candidates for officerships be nobles. By then that was an old story, and everyone was well aware of it.

But much did change in 1781, and we must try to see what it was. To grasp what was happening, however, one needs to look elsewhere, to look past the social categories of noble and *roturier*, so useful for understanding the Revolution itself but misleading for what happened earlier. The army’s behavior needs to be seen against the wider background of thinking about society and social questions. Many observers found the functioning of society bad, bad both because it was inefficient and because good morality seemed to have broken down. The idea that social ills come from essentially moral causes was, of course, not

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ordonnance portant création de Cadets Gentilshommes, 25 mars 1776*, summarized in *État militaire de France pour l’année 1777*, pp. 411-12; *Règlement concernant les Cadets Gentilshommes, créés dans les troupes du roi, par l’Ordonnance du 25 Mars 1776*. Du 20 août 1776, and *Ordre du roi, envoyé à chaque Mestre-de-camp-commandant des régimens d’Infanterie française, de Cavalerie, Chevaux-légers, Dragons et Chasseurs à cheval, concernant la création d’une troisième place de Sous lieutenant en pied, sans appointemens et l’extinction des places de Cadets-gentilshommes, 22 mai 1781*, in AN AD VI 10<sup>B</sup> Recueil, vol. 1, pp. 104-109, 169-172.



new in the eighteenth century, nor has it disappeared since. But its form then was a special one – a misplaced ambition, many thought, was driving men to move restlessly from more to less useful occupations in quest of higher social standing and a more luxurious life. The result was a kind of chaos that derived from the excessive mixing of ranks. Perhaps this mixing of ranks is what is meant when historians speak of the shift from a society of orders to a society of classes. Whatever the cause, there arose a chorus of complaints that sons of peasants were leaving for the city; that artisans' sons abandoned productive trades in favor of schools where the Latin curriculum taught them only how to be useless monks, scholars, or scribblers; that merchants were pushing into occupations that did not concern them, to the neglect of their own. Money seemed too much the measure of men. Whether caused by the increased mobility of individuals or the rising sense of dignity and importance in the activities that mobile individuals abandoned, or both, is not certain, but these concerns grew, and everywhere there were men unhappy over self indulgence, the lost sense of duty, the lack of seriousness. Excessive luxury and pomp, the emulation of bad models – these were driving young men to scorn what their fathers had done and to move outward and upward into uselessness in cloisters or in swollen cities that were not really productive. If the theme was not new, what Molière had once satirized no longer seemed an object for humor, and one can still sample the outpouring of works in print and the draft projects that crossed the desks of ministers proposing remedies through changes in the education of the young and not so young. Some wanted to transform the *collèges*; others would create new orders and honorific distinctions to change the social objects of emulation. However conflicting and various the proposals, many shared the concern. Somehow order had to replace disorder.

The theme was general and widespread. Here it can only be illustrated briefly. Proposals proliferated that would place and classify men, would mark them off more clearly from one another. Babeuf, one of the many correspondents with whom the secretary of the Academy of Arras maintained frequent communication, discussed many things in his letters to him. In 1787 he wrote that people in preceding years had been talking about “the excessive progress of luxury,” and he described the discussion that went on:

People complained that all the ranks were mixed up; that it was no longer possible to distinguish a grand seigneur from a peasant clod by what he wore, and it was proposed, in order to check this alleged abuse, to

establish a distinctive sign for each rank. A sign, moreover, to express and even to explain the *état* of each individual, such as the mark of a sword for the noble; for the grocer, the image of a sugar-loaf; the oil dealer, a cask of anchovies; the cook-shopkeeper, a goose; the locksmith, an anvil; the tailor, scissors, etc.<sup>25</sup>

Babeuf objected strongly to such a plan, but others did not. Someone sent to Chérin's office a plan to divide the nobility into four separate groups – great officers of the crown, families noble for over 200 years, families with four or more generations of nobility, and a last category for all the rest – each group distinguished from the others by the different color of the ribbon that every noble would wear around his neck. A special medal worn on the ribbon had the additional advantage that nobles were to purchase it and thus contribute two and one-half million *livres* to aid the king's finances. The abbé Expilly conceived a similar plan to demark by visible honorific distinctions a corps of persons intermediate between the nobility and the Third Estate. From the Vivarais came a *mémoire* protesting that in France “the language of signs” was too much neglected: “Nothing is more imposing for ordinary people than external marks, they always begin by respecting the dress, and that's good.” Its author believed that, for the purpose of showing the differences between them, it would be best to put all men into uniforms. Conceding that this might be impractical, he settled for ornamental shoulder-knots to filter into recognizably separate groups at least the titled nobility, nobles whose origin in that status was before 1500, “militaires” and other nobles. It is hard to know what the Minister of War made of the proposal he received to decorate with special distinguishing insignia not only the husbands, but the wives as well, of “the nobility of every kind”, sword, *robe*, church, finance, and others.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Correspondance de Babeuf avec l'Académie d'Arras (1785-1788)*, publiée sous la direction de Marcel Reinhard, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Paris, Série “Textes”, vol. 1 (Paris, 1961), p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> The four *mémoires* cited are in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), Collection Clairambault, ms. 930, f<sup>os</sup> 64-65; Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 6085, f<sup>os</sup> 356-363; SHD A<sup>4</sup> XLI, no. 37, “Project des Notables, par l'abbé Expilly;” and Mémoires et Reconnaissances [IM], 1709, no. 47.

If no one took such proposals seriously enough to try to implement them, many did wonder what was the source of the confusion of ranks and how in other ways the ill could be corrected. Less informed persons believed that in the upper levels of society there was widespread usurpation of noble status by persons who had no legal claim to it. From the provinces came repeated complaints. According to the *avocat du roi* in the *sénéchaussée* of Béziers, writing in 1767, the problem there lay in the assuming of noble titles on their own initiative “by the smallest bourgeois, so that it is no longer possible to know the true nobility.” The next year an infantry captain at Aubenas, bothered over local abuses that caused “grumbling,” told the Minister of War about the need to stop “usurpation of nobility by an infinity of men of wealth.” He added that “these daily examples tend directly toward the destruction of subordination.” License and fraud reigned in the Vivarais, another reported: “there is no *petit bourgeois* who does not think himself *gentilhomme* and who does not take that title with impunity, no peasant with a little opulence who on becoming bourgeois does not soon expect to be equal to his seigneur...,” and from this there “necessarily follows the upsetting of every kind of subordination and the discrediting of that part of the Nation that is alone capable of containing a naturally insolent and Republican populace.”<sup>27</sup>

By the 1780s some even at the center were pondering the possibility of the government’s renewing the old formal search for false nobles that had ended in 1717. Not surprisingly, the genealogists, who stood to profit from it, favored the new *recherche de la noblesse* and they disagreed among themselves only over whether a single man or a special joint tribunal should run it. The younger Chérin, disparaging the common “frenzy to change one’s place and to usurp privileges” that injured mainly the ones who were left behind to pay the taxes, expected to direct the investigation himself.<sup>28</sup>

But few people who were in a position to know, even the genealogists, really thought that the principal issue was usurpations. They knew that the center of the problem lay elsewhere. Throughout the

---

<sup>27</sup> For the *mémoires* from Béziers, Archives départementales de l’Hérault, C 1995; from Aubenas, BNF Clairambault ms. 930, f<sup>o</sup> 60; from the Vivarais, Arsenal ms. 6085, f<sup>os</sup> 356-363.

<sup>28</sup> BNF Clairambault ms. 930, f<sup>o</sup> 124; see also on the subject, f<sup>os</sup> 42, 46, 66, 125, 128; and Chérin, *La noblesse considérée sous ses divers rapports*, pp. 37-49; Antoine Maugard, *Remarques sur la noblesse, dédiées aux assemblées provinciales* (Paris, 1787), *passim*.

eighteenth century one did not need to dissemble or to cheat in order to rise in status and to enter the nobility; in practice anyone with money could do it quite easily and legally. Jacques Necker, as minister of finance, knew the situation as well as anyone. He described in 1785 the more than 4,000 venal offices in France that conferred noble status on their holders. If “a large number” of these offices in law courts and administration did not effectively ennoble because persons entering them were already nobles, others did. Generally it was the least useful of the offices, especially those of *secrétaires du roi* in the chancelleries attached to sovereign courts that made the most new nobles. Necker rehearsed the usual arguments against them – these offices removed wealthy *roturiers* from the tax rolls; they deflected and diverted merchants from useful commerce. His position was clear and succinct: “I think, therefore, that all public arrangements that augment or favor vanities foreign to the *état* in which the various citizens find themselves placed, are contrary to a healthy policy.” Like others, he objected to the growth in “that prodigious number of families who have acquired nobility for money alone,” and wished that the state could make a massive effort to repurchase and retire at least the offices of *secrétaires du roi*.<sup>29</sup> When he returned to the subject eleven years later it was 1796, and Necker then found tragic the weakness of the nobility that had hastened its own fall. Induced by Richelieu to depart the provinces and to surround the throne, the nobility lost its old morals in idleness and the life of luxury. But more immediately serious had been the loss of luster by the perpetual alteration of the nobility’s composition: “...it was no longer the same after an endless incorporation of new Anoblis was the result of prerogatives granted to municipal offices and venal charges.”<sup>30</sup> In Necker’s view, then, the rapidity of movement by bourgeois into the *noblesse*, a movement fully legal if unwise, fatally divided and weakened that body before 1789.

Chérin too thought that ennoblement through purchase of office was frequent, too frequent, but feared that suppressing those offices would have been dangerous.<sup>31</sup> When Chérin’s rival and critic also wrote a book, he introduced it as “a work in which the author proposes to put each citizen in his place ... [and] to convey undivided to the children of *la*

---

<sup>29</sup> Necker, *De l’administration des finances*, vol. 3, pp. 149-51.

<sup>30</sup> Necker, *De la Révolution française* (s. 1., 4 vols., 1796), vol. 1, p. 163; and see generally pp. 157-70.

<sup>31</sup> Chérin, *La noblesse considérée sous ses divers rapports*, pp. 93-96.

*gloire* the honors usurped by the children of *la fortune*.”<sup>32</sup> Maugard calculated that in each twenty-year period offices in France might ennoble 3,000 heads of families, or 18,000 persons, and said that it was impossible to absorb such persons into the functions of nobles. His plan was to strip the power to ennoble from all but a few civil offices, and to have those ennoble only after three generations of real service.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Maugard shared with Chérin, Necker, and many others the supposition that *roturiers* were moving rapidly and easily into the *noblesse*, a movement that the critics did not like but whose existence they did not doubt.<sup>34</sup>

If one assumes that, perhaps, these observers were right, and that whatever aristocratic reaction there was did not in fact close off the old means by which *roturiers* gained noble status, we may begin to make better sense of what the army really did in 1781. Who did the army’s leaders have in mind when they imposed the Ségur *règlement* to govern and limit entry as officer? In the army many were grumbling and grew angry over the presence in it of non-serious officers, men of wealth, frivolous, sunk in the habits of luxury. We should recognize that if there had been such *roturiers* there to exclude, the army would have gladly done so. What was entirely new in the *règlement* of 1781, however, was not the

---

<sup>32</sup> Maugard, *Remarques sur la noblesse*, Introduction.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7, 35.

<sup>34</sup> For a good discussion of social hierarchy and other examples of the views concerning it, see Yves Durand, *Les fermiers généraux au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Paris - Sorbonne, Série: Recherches, vol. 70 (Paris, 1971), pp. 177-203, 289-292. Among contemporaries, it was the common view that access to nobility was too easy. For additional illustrations, see André Decouflé, “L’aristocratie française devant l’opinion publique à la veille de la Révolution (1787-1789),” in Decouflé, F. Boulanger, & B.-A. Pierelle, *Études d’histoire économique et sociale du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Travaux et Recherches de la Faculté de Droit et des Sciences Économiques de Paris, Série Sciences Historiques, no. 9 (Paris, 1966), p.46. Some did not oppose fluidity of social movement. The abbé Expilly (mentioned above, see note 26) merely assumed its existence, and proposed to take advantage of it to aid the king’s finances. His draft *édit* in 1772 would have created from the third estate a new fourth estate of 60,000 *roturier* notables, paying 1,500 to 2,500 *livres* each. Only shopkeepers and persons who worked with their hands were ineligible to buy the *lettres de notable* that conferred on its purchaser a new hereditary condition that automatically changed into noble status in the fifth or seventh generation after its acquisition, the length of time depending on the amount paid originally for the *lettres*. See SHD A<sup>4</sup> XLI, no. 37.

elimination of *roturiers*, but the demand for rigid proofs of four generations of nobility on the paternal side. If the army had meant only to keep out *roturiers*, the method chosen was a kind of genealogical overkill – a requirement of one generation of nobility would have been enough for the purpose. What this suggests, in turn, is that the offending group was persons already noble, but whose pedigrees fell short of four generations. Nobles of at least one but less than four generations, always admissible until 1781, would now be left out. If this was in fact the issue, the quarrel should be understood as intra-aristocratic, setting one group of nobles against another, *gentilshommes* against *anoblis*.

One can find observers at the time who saw the Ségur *règlement* in just those terms. Already anticipating in 1790 his later and fuller statements of counter-revolutionary doctrine, Sénac de Meilhan nonetheless criticized the Ségur *règlement* that he thought unwise and an important cause of the Revolution. Ennobled himself by an office in the Grand Conseil and understandably sensitive on the subject, he described it as “a regulation that singularly offended a large part of the nation,” and said that it had eliminated for many the older and healthy hope for rising in a French society where ranks had not been distinct and clearly marked off from one another. What was the injured part of the nation? Sénac de Meilhan explained: “Such a regulation humiliated the Magistracy, the opulent, and a crowd of honorable families in the Provinces that were forced to admit that they could not make these proofs and from that time were scorned by men from the same Order but who had two or three more *lustres* of nobility than they.”<sup>35</sup> Sénac recounted for emphasis the story of the son of a Minister of the Navy who, being only a third-generation noble, was not permitted to enter the service. He went on to say that the *règlement* outraged the Third Estate also by throwing up insurmountable barriers against them, but he mentioned the Third Estate as a body apart from the one that was directly injured. In this view Sénac was joined by Soulavie who said that the army’s action irritated “the provincial *robe* which cannot prove four degrees of nobility.”<sup>36</sup>

The genealogists, if anyone, should have understood the issue, and they did. Chérin noted especially that the Gardes du Corps demanded for entry only that one have been noble; hence they accepted “the sons of

---

<sup>35</sup> [Gabriel Sénac de Meilhan], *Des principes et des causes de la révolution en France* (Londres, 1790), pp. 103-104.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Louis Soulavie, *Mémoires historiques et politiques du règne de Louis XVI depuis son mariage jusqu’à sa mort* (Paris, 6 vol.s, 1801), vol. 4, p. 394.

*anoblis*.” The contrast to the regular army that did not accept such persons as officers was clear.<sup>37</sup> Maugard confronted the question directly. His hostility to what he believed to be the continuing and frequent ennoblement of *roturiers* led him to protest that the “titles of honor” that once went to “gentilshommes d’ancienne extraction” as a reward for striking services were being usurped by others. The usurpers, however, were not *roturiers* but “persons whose nobility is, if not doubtful, at least very new.” The mass of new nobles would either be idle and useless, or they would use their wealth to procure employes at the expense of the “nobles de race.” For Maugard the problem was a crucial one, and he worked out a plan to deal with it: reduce ennoblements, on the one hand, and establish a clear and fixed progression of service allowable to new nobles according to the degree or age of nobility that they held, on the other. Let new nobles, not yet able to “claim [the honor] of defending the country,” be administrators and judges. “How many nobles, excluded from military service by the regulation of 22 May 1781, would make excellent magistrates!” Thus, assign to second-generation nobles the places in *bailliages*, *sénéchaussées*, *chambres des comptes*, *cours des aides*, and *bureaux des finances*. Their sons, in the third generation of nobility, could fill the offices in the *parlements*. If jobs there were not numerous enough to go around, they might serve in the Gendarmerie awaiting the moment when the family would have ripened sufficiently in its *noblesse* to enter the army officer corps in the fourth generation. For good or ill and, however inadequate his solution, Maugard had diagnosed the problem that others believed they were treating.<sup>38</sup>

Most persons, however, were not genealogists and used words loosely. They did not classify families so precisely, and the concepts that moved them were moral and social, not legal. It is not surprising that on hearing the complaints that there were scarcely six “officiers gentilshommes” in any infantry battalion in 1742, historians have thought that the regiments were filled by *roturiers*. But that is almost certainly not what the writer at the time meant. He was more likely to have been referring instead to men like Randon de Pommery whose grandfather gained nobility by being a *capitoul* at Toulouse and who was denied entry to a cavalry regiment after 1781, this despite the combined solicitations of the colonel, the comte de Vaudreuil, and members of the royal family. Or

---

<sup>37</sup> Chérin, *La noblesse considérée sous ses divers rapports*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Maugard, *Remarques sur la noblesse*, pp. 3-7

the son of the Parlement of Besançon's *greffier en chef*, an office that ennobled in one generation, who could not enter the corps of military engineers in the 1780s. To judge from their fathers' offices, at least seven of the persons whom Tuetey listed as evidence for the frequent appearance of *roturiers* in the officer corps at mid-century were nobles.<sup>39</sup> If not *gentilshommes*, they were not *roturiers* either.

What this hypothesis supposes, then, is that the creation of new nobles continued unabated until the Revolution; it assumes the continuing presence of a substantial pool of nobles of less than four generations, a pool constantly fed from bourgeois springs below, against which the army reacted at the end of the *ancien régime*. But seen this way, the "reaction" becomes more specifically military than aristocratic, for its essential condition is the failure or non-existence of a broader reaction by nobles in general. The continuing flow of *roturiers* into the nobility, especially through the purchase of office, could have persisted only if the aristocracy had not been effective in closing off to *roturiers* the traditional path to personal advancement. But did the avenues upward in fact remain open?

## IV Proliferating ennoblements and venality

---

The next step, then, is to examine the various means of ennoblement and to ask whether and on what scale *roturiers* continued to enter the nobility. In addition, since the sources allow it, it is interesting to look at the age of nobility of many of the high office holders in order to learn how large was the whole pool of nobles whose credentials did not stretch to four generations, and to see which offices in particular sheltered *anoblis*. Who and how many in various high offices, the offices that ennobled, could and did fulfill the four-generation requirement? If a general reaction against *roturiers* by a unified, homogeneous nobility had taken place, one might expect that a rising number of office holders would have had claims to older *noblesse* at the end of the *ancien régime*, and that there would be signs that the pool of *anoblis* was drying up. But was it?

---

<sup>39</sup> Tuetey, *Les officiers sous l'ancien régime*, pp. 94-98, 202-203, 212.



It would no doubt be interesting to know the genealogical status of the holders of high offices through the whole century, but that would be very difficult to determine. But owing to the availability of special sources that cover the last fifteen years of the *ancien régime*, it is possible to examine closely the more than 3,000 persons who were ennobled or entered ennobling offices during those years. There is good reason to think that, except for the issuance of the *lettres de noblesse*, the patterns that emerge for the later period were much the same as those that had obtained since about 1730. To study the 3,000 persons I have drawn on a fairly wide range of printed and unprinted sources, some used by others and some evidently not. It cannot be said that no errors have been made for individuals here and there, but after checking each as carefully as possible, I am confident that the general impressions that come out of the data are correct. Where there is the risk of any systematic and more serious error, it will be indicated in the notes that detail the sources and basis for the analysis. That said, we should proceed in order from those methods of ennoblement that were quickest and most direct to some that were slower and others that were only nominal and in fact failed to ennoble. In each case it will be important to find out both how many persons were ennobled and how many fell on either side of the critical fourth-generation dividing line.

1. *Lettres de noblesse*. These *lettres*, once registered in the sovereign courts, of course conferred immediate inheritable nobility on the receiver and all his descendants. The king issued them, as we saw, to military men, but also to wealthy merchants who developed commerce or otherwise aided the state, to officials in government functions at the center or in the provinces, and to a scattered lot of doctors, scholars, engineers, architects, and artists. The distribution of these dignities was intended to reward the talent and energy of socially useful individuals. That was not always the case – the names of servants of the royal family and men who served only in the increasingly ornamental military units of the *Maison du Roi* appear too frequently to leave doubt that personal connections and friendship often mattered at least as much as utility. Still, an effort was being made through these ennoblements to dignify useful pursuits, an effort that grew in scale later in the century.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Marcel Reinhard, "Elite et noblesse dans la seconde moitié du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 3 (1956), 5-37.

How many persons received these *lettres*? Earlier estimates seem too low, at least for the final period. Two sources are especially convenient since they tell about *lettres* issued throughout the whole country for at least some of the years. Others record them fully over time but for a single region only, usually through their registration in a sovereign court. One comprehensive list includes all the *lettres de noblesse* that were granted, 1731-67, and it has been possible to construct another, for the years 1784-89, from the registers of payments for a fee, the *marc d'or*, that each recipient had to make.<sup>41</sup> Three stages are discernible: from an average of 3.5 a year for 1731-42, the figure rose to 10.5 in 1743-66, and finally to 18.0 a year in 1784 and after. During the five and one half years that preceded July 1789, there were 99 persons who paid the fee for the *lettres*. The comparison of that list to regional ones that cover a longer period shows that the later 1780s were not exceptional for the whole later period, and that 17 a year was the likely rate of ennoblement by this means from 1774 on. The *lettres de noblesse* issued, 1774-89, totalled about 270.<sup>42</sup>

2. The Chancelleries. Secrétaires du roi. Turning now to consider the entrants to various offices, those who were most conspicuous by their rapid ennoblement were the *secrétaires du roi* in both the better-known Grande Chancellerie in Paris and the other chancelleries attached to the provincial sovereign courts. These were the offices that opened the way to those whose descendants would eventually reach very high places in the

---

<sup>41</sup> For the earlier period, BNF ms. fr. 32889; for 1784-89, AN P 4881-87.

<sup>42</sup> For references to regional and other lists that do not cover the whole country, see notes 18 & 19 above. To names appearing in them for 1774-83 were added others in H. Gourdon de Genouillac, *Dictionnaire des nobles* (Paris, 1875), which is based on several courts in addition to the Chambre des Comptes de Paris. The lists are often overlapping, but when the duplications are eliminated, there remain 113 names for 1774-83. Comparison of the composite list from partial sources to the complete one from the registers of the *Trésorier des revenus casuels* who received payments for the *marc d'or*, 1784-86, shows that the list from partial sources contains about two-thirds of all the *lettres de noblesse* issued each year. Thus, the 113 names that we have for 1774-83 should be increased by 50% to about 170, or 17 a year, to make a reasonable estimate of the total for the decade to 1784. M. Reinhard's estimate ("Elite et noblesse", 29) that 400 *lettres de noblesse* were issued during the whole period from 1750 to 1789 rests on the assumption that the rate of about ten a year after mid-century continued to the Revolution. In fact, the rate of issuance rose, and the estimate is too low.

state. More than 20% of the ministers and about 40% of the judges in the Parlement of Paris and the provincial intendants came from families that were originally ennobled through holding them.<sup>43</sup> Many of the purchasers occupied places in state finance before they entered the office. In the offices they were charged with the job of supervising the writing, transmitting, and signing of the official letters that went out from the royal chancelleries. By the seventeenth century, however, clerks did the work, and the *secrétaires du roi* themselves had no real functions left, only privileges, which were very considerable ones. A *secrétaire du roi* had his suits at law evoked directly to the Parlement of Paris or to the Royal Council, received exemptions from taxes and from fees demanded of other officeholders, and had the right to be received at court. But by far the most important privilege, and the one that really mattered for an eighteenth-century purchaser, was the conferral of hereditary or transmissible nobility on the holder of this office. Upon his installation the new *secrétaire du roi* and all his posterity were nobles.<sup>44</sup>

If the privilege was enormous, so was the price. To purchase the office in 1789 cost 120,000 *livres*, at a time when Church and State figured subsistence for a *curé* at 700 *livres*, and a professor at the École Militaire in Paris earned 2,400 *livres* for a year's work. In return for the investment the *secrétaire du roi* received 3,033 *livres* a year in *gages*, less deductions for the *capitation* and other impositions, and 1,000 to 1,400 *livres* a year in 1789 from his *bourse*, which was the equal share that each secretary received from the fees and emoluments of the Chancellerie. At best the return was only a little over 3% a year on the price of a Paris office, and normally 2% in the provinces.<sup>45</sup> But through this sinecure the richest non-nobles could rise into the nobility.

One may wonder why the king permitted useless offices such as these to exist. Necker wanted to be rid of them. But the wonder diminishes

---

<sup>43</sup> François Bluche, "L'origine sociale du personnel ministériel français au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Moderne*, 12<sup>e</sup> série, no. 1 (1957), 9-13; Vivian R. Gruder, *The Royal Provincial Intendants: a Governing Elite in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York, 1968), pp. 120-21.

<sup>44</sup> P. Robin, *La compagnie des secrétaires du roi, 1351-1791* (Paris, 1933), pp. 10-13; François Bluche & Pierre Durye, *L'anoblissement par charges avant 1789* (La Roche-sur-Yon, 1962), vol. 2, pp. 3-12.

<sup>45</sup> For the Grande Chancellerie, see the *Mémoire* pertaining to finances, septembre 1789, in AN V<sup>2</sup> 55; for the provincial offices, see Jean Meyer, *La Noblesse bretonne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1966), vol. 1, p. 241.

on discovering that the wealthy merchants and financiers who composed the Grande Chancellerie in Paris numbered 300, and that to reimburse them the price of their offices would have cost 36 million *livres*. In addition, their credit rating being higher than the king's, they had collectively borrowed from the public another 24 million *livres* for the royal treasury, a sum the state would have had also to repay.<sup>46</sup> Adding to these the price of the offices of the nearly 500 *gardes des sceaux*, *audienciers*, *contrôleurs* and *secrétaires* in twenty provincial *chancelleries*, places that cost nearly 40 million *livres*, it is clear that the king would have needed about 100 million *livres* if he were to reimburse and retire all the *chancellerie* offices. The condition of royal finances, for which each new year brought the need for additional borrowing, made it evident even to Necker that it was impossible to touch this structure. If French kings had once been able to dispossess and destroy merchants and financiers, that time was long past.

In principle, of course, the actual effect of the offices in ennobling *roturiers* could have been limited if their turnover was very slow or if, as happened elsewhere, it was common for sons to follow fathers in the same offices. In this, as in most other ennobling offices, the occupant and his descendants were confirmed in the acquisition of nobility only if he either held the office for twenty years or died earlier while serving in it. For the 300 offices in the Grande Chancellerie in Paris the information is good: here 266 persons entered places of *secrétaire du roi*, 1774-89. Of those, five succeeded their fathers in the office and thus need not have entered in order to gain *noblesse*.<sup>47</sup> But it appears that all the other 261 were *roturiers*. Seven had been in other ennobling offices, but only of the kind that ennobled over two degrees, that is, when father and

---

<sup>46</sup> AN, V<sup>2</sup> 55: *mémoire* on finances, septembre 1789.

<sup>47</sup> The figures are derived from analysis of the dossiers of the “enquête sur la vie et les mœurs” of the *secrétaires du roi*, who entered the Grande Chancellerie. The dossiers are in AN V<sup>2</sup> 35-46, and are complete for the years 1675-1705, 1713-1789. The number of entering *secrétaires du roi* who succeeded their fathers in the office and thus did not need it for the purpose of being ennobled had declined throughout the century: in the years 1731-1750, there were 31 sons and 3 grandsons of former *secrétaires du roi* who entered the office; in 1751-1770, there were 25 sons; in 1771-1789, only 6. The average of more than 17 entries a year, 1774-1789, is slightly higher than normal. It reflects some that were delayed during the years 1771-1773, when the abbé Terray was demanding an additional 40,000 *livres* from each officer, until 1774 and after. Normal recruitment was that of the 1780s when about 16 entered each year.

son each held the office; these 7 now became *secrétaires du roi* to speed the process of ennoblement. A sampling of dossiers of the “enquête sur la vie et les moeurs” for 87 *secrétaires* reveals the *roturier* occupations of their fathers: 30 merchants, 13 in *bailliage*, *sénéchaussée*, or municipal administration; 6 with places in the tax farms or various offices in finance; others were doctors, lawyers, notaries, some designated only “bourgeois,” a few “laboureurs” or non-noble landowners.<sup>48</sup> Except for the three in this sample whose fathers were *secrétaires du roi*, all evidently needed the office to gain noble status.

That impression is strongly reinforced by examining the more numerous *secrétaires du roi* in the provinces. The evidence, if less detailed, is at least as clear. Here the *secrétaires du roi*, unlike their colleagues in Paris who were exempted from it, had to pay at entry not only the ordinary *marc d'or*, but as well the *marc d'or de la noblesse*, a special fee imposed by the edict of December 1770 on *roturiers* who entered ennobling offices – 3,000 *livres* for entry to offices that ennobled in one degree, 1,500 *livres* for those that required the two generations' service. The aim of the edict was to generate revenue for the king by making persons ennobled by office pay the same amount as would have been required had they received *lettres de noblesse*. When, as frequently happened, the entrant to one of these offices was already noble and thus could not profit additionally from its power to confer *noblesse*, he applied to the Royal Council for a special *arrêt* dispensing him from having to pay the fee. To secure this *arrêt* the applicant had to present his proofs that he was already noble, and the proofs were detailed in the *arrêt* itself. These dispensations from the payment have been printed.<sup>49</sup> In addition, evidence

---

<sup>48</sup> The sample selected for closer examination was constituted from the dossiers of entrants in 1773, 1776, 1779, 1782, 1785, and 1788.

<sup>49</sup> Robert de Roton, *Les Arrêts du Grand Conseil portant dispense du marc d'or de noblesse*, commentés et complétés par J. de la Troisième & R. de Montmort (Paris, 1951). The *arrêts de dispense* were taken from AN E 2466-2655. The volume's uses for analyzing the social composition of institutions were shown by Jean Égret: “L'aristocratie parlementaire française à la fin de l'ancien régime,” *Revue historique* 208 (1952), 1-14. The Roton collection of *arrêts* omits one interesting category of very new nobles who received dispensation from making the payment, that is, the sons or grandsons of *secrétaires du roi* in the Grande Chancellerie who had not completed twenty years in office when the Revolution began. By special arrangement such sons or grandsons had been considered to be nobles already, this on the traditional privilege granted earlier to the Grande Chancellerie and providing that its member, although he might lose the status if he failed to serve

as to who actually paid as well as the noble entrants who did not is available from 1784 to 1789 in the records of receipts issued by the *trésorier des revenus casuels*.<sup>50</sup> From one or the other of these sources, and some others discussed later, the genealogical profile of the entrants to nearly all ennobling offices can be sketched.

In the case of the twenty provincial chancelleries, the records of payments of the ordinary *marc d'or* show that from 1784 alone, 206 persons entered their ennobling offices. Among the 206, there were three who paid only 1,500 *livres* because, having bought since 1770 another office that conferred *noblesse* over two generations, they had already paid 1,500 *livres* and had now only to make up the difference to the 3,000 *livres* that were required to attain *noblesse* in the first degree. All the rest, the other 203, paid 3,000 *livres*. In short, none but *roturiers* entered these offices.

Considering the motives of the persons who bought offices in the *chancelleries*, it is not surprising that movement through them was rapid. With some exceptions in Paris, this was not an office that many wished to occupy longer than was necessary to become nobles; it was commonly sold promptly by its owner after twenty years incumbency. In addition, the *secrétaires du roi* were much older than other entrants to offices – nearly half were aged 50 or more when they entered the Grande Chancellerie. Consequently, they often died before completing twenty years there: this was the case in almost one-third (82 of 266) of the vacancies created after 1774.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the turnover was very high. In the provincial *chancelleries*

---

the twenty years, became a noble at the moment when he entered the office. Genealogists are no doubt purists, and in this instance the editors evidently did not wish to assign noble rank to families that did not really have it. Since the *secrétaires du roi* who in 1789 had not served twenty years did not and could not fulfill the formal requirement for confirming and preserving their nobility, our genealogists revoked their, and their descendants' noble status and did not print their *arrêts de dispense*. To find out how many *dispenses* of this type may have been omitted from the printed volume, I used Mme Gallet's *inventaire* of *arrêts* for the Turgot ministry (May 1774 –May 1776), which yield five, and also examined AN E 2590-2627 (late 1783-1786) where five others were found. For the whole period 1771-89, perhaps forty *dispenses* will have been excluded.

<sup>50</sup> AN P 4881-4888.

<sup>51</sup> These figures are based on the dossiers for the *secrétaires du roi* in the Grande Chancellerie: AN V<sup>2</sup> 35-46. Dates of baptism are available for 261 of the 266 who entered after 1774, and their ages at entry were: under 40, 70 (27%); 40-49, 77 (29.5%); 50-59, 71 (27%); 60 and over, 43 (16.5%).

an estimated 605 persons passed through their nearly 500 offices during the fifteen and one-half years beginning in 1774.<sup>52</sup> That number is slightly misleading, swelled as it is by the additional purchasers who had been afraid to acquire the office during the years between 1771 and 1773, when Maupeou and Terray were making threats to accompany the demands for additional capital from these offices. Many waited until 1774 and later to buy. Trade in these as in all offices was especially brisk in 1775 and 1776. Even so, the yearly average of 39 entries for the period from 1774 to 1789 falls only to 36 when the years 1771-73 are included. After adding 12 known entrants to the small Chancellerie du Palais in Paris, it is a reasonable estimate that 883 persons, all but five of them *roturiers*, entered the *chancelleries*' ennobling offices in Paris and the provinces during this period.

3. Municipal Offices. Ennoblement through municipal office, very common in the early seventeenth century, was sharply reduced in 1667. In five cities by the later eighteenth century seven offices of *maire* and *lieutenant de maire* continued to ennoble their occupants for serving over periods varying from four to twenty years, but these were not very significant in the addition that they brought to the nobility.<sup>53</sup> In three other cities, however, places in municipal administration remained important for

---

<sup>52</sup> Chronological lists of all entries into three (Arras, Dijon and Montauban) of the twenty *chancelleries* are available, and in them the 23 officers who were received from 1784 to 1789 were 32.4% of the total (71) who entered those *chancelleries* in the whole period, 1774-89. We know that in all 206 persons entered the twenty *chancelleries* after 1784, but about ten were the first holders at Roussillon of offices created under Louis XIV but never before sold. By reducing the figure for Roussillon by ten to make it conform to the average for the other *chancelleries*, we can take 196 as the proper figure to represent normal turnover in these offices in 1784-89. Calculating that they were 32.4% of all entrants 1774-89, we can estimate the total entering during that period at 605. The chronological lists for specific chancelleries are in André Bourée, *La Chancellerie près le Parlement de Bourgogne de 1476 à 1790, avec les noms, généalogies et armoiries de ses officiers* (Dijon, 1927); M. Taupiac, *Notice sur la Cour des Aides de Montauban, suivie de la liste chronologique de ses membres (1642-1790)* (Montauban, 1865); Chev. Amédée Le Boucq de Ternas, *La Chancellerie d'Artois, ses officiers et leur généalogie, continuée jusqu'à nos jours* (Arras, 1882).

<sup>53</sup> For information on which offices ennobled and when, see Bluche & Durye, *L'anoblissement par charges*, vol. 1, pp. 23-38.

that purpose down to 1789. In Paris, in addition to three administrative offices that ennobled over twenty years, places of *échevins* conferred *noblesse* for only two years of service. Two new men each year, many of them lawyers but some financiers and doctors also, came into these offices. It was exactly the same at Lyon, except that merchants and financiers were more strongly represented in the recruitment to the *échevinage*. At Toulouse a bitter struggle was taking place over the composition of the *capitoulat* that had at times produced as many as seven new nobles a year, many of them not from the region, and a few who never even saw the city. The fight led to a sharp reduction in the number of *roturiers* admitted to those ennobling offices, but even there 31 entered and gained *noblesse* in the years 1774-89. The 31 at Toulouse, added to 30 from Lyon, 35 at Paris, 4 *maires* of Nantes, and a few more in other cities bring to about 100 the total of non-noble persons who entered ennobling municipal offices in this period.<sup>54</sup>

4. Bureaux des Finances. The offices in these courts shared the privileges of the *chambres des comptes* and, except at Paris and Grenoble where their holders received nobility in a single generation, they gave gradual *noblesse* in two degrees. The number of *présidents*, *trésoriers de France*, *procureurs et avocats du roi*, *greffiers* and *chevaliers d'honneur* – all ennobling offices – had risen throughout the seventeenth century, even as their functions diminished. Their role, once a large one in assessing and distributing taxes, watching over all the operations in the royal domain, supervising the building and repair of roads, verifying annual lists of payments to all local officials, became trivial under the relentless administrative imperialism of the *intendants* and, to a lesser degree, the *chambres des comptes*. Nonetheless, except at Nantes where this court was absorbed into the *Chambre des Comptes*, every *généralité* retained an independent court. The 28 bodies contained 769 ennobling offices filled by persons whose real life, work, and even residence usually lay elsewhere. Revenue from the periodic fees that they paid and the need to

---

<sup>54</sup> For Paris, the names of the *échevins*, with summary indication of profession, are in the volumes of the *Almanach Royal*, 1774-90; for Lyon, see Maurice Garden, *Lyon et les Lyonnais au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Bibliothèque de la Faculté des Lettres de Lyon, 18 (Paris, 1970), pp. 497-505; for Toulouse, Archives départementales de la Haute Garonne, C290.



reimburse them the more than 33 million *livres* in capital invested in the offices were enough to assure their survival.<sup>55</sup>

Turnover in these offices was slower than that in the *chancelleries*. The explanation for this lies at least partly in the need for both father and son to hold the office to obtain hereditary nobility. The father frequently would keep it longer than twenty years, awaiting the arrival at legal maturity of an heir; or, in this relay race, his own twenty-year stint completed, he would promptly turn the office over to a son barely out of his teens whose actuarial chances of completing the full twenty years in office were substantially stronger than those of the older *secrétaires du roi*. Even so, movement through the *bureaux des finances* was brisk and regular. Between 1784 and 1789, payments for the regular *marc d'or* were made by 167 persons to enter the offices that ennobled, and of those 167, all but ten paid the additional *marc d'or de la noblesse* signifying that they were *roturiers*.<sup>56</sup> From available lists that show the names and number of men coming into eight of the *bureaux des finances*, it emerges that the members who entered in 1784 or later were 29% of all the entrants to those courts in 1774-89.<sup>57</sup> Applying the proportion derived

---

<sup>55</sup> The distribution of offices in 1789, except *greffiers*, is listed in Jean-Paul Charmeil, *Les trésoriers de France à l'époque de la Fronde* (Paris, 1964), p. 18; the offices of *greffier*, also ennobling, are specified for the individual courts in Louis de la Roque & Éd. de Barthélemy, *Catalogue des gentilshommes qui ont pris part ou envoyé leur procuration aux Assemblées de la Noblesse pour l'élection des Députés aux États-Généraux de 1789* (Paris, 1862-92), in 26 parts, divided by region and published separately. For the total investment in these offices, see the table in Édouard Éverat, *Le bureau des finances de Riom, 1551-1790* (Riom, 1900), p. 617.

<sup>56</sup> The term “roturier” in this instance, as for all the courts where the officers ennobled only over two degrees, is somewhat misleading. A second-generation officer whose father had been a *roturier* would, if he fulfilled the required terms, count as a second generation noble, even though on entering the office he had been technically still a *roturier* and paid the 1,500 *livres* for the *marc d'or de la noblesse*. His son, in turn, would be a third-generation noble. The records for the *marc d'or* do not distinguish between the first and second generations in the offices that gave only gradual *noblesse*, and the effect of calling all of them *roturiers*, as I shall do, is to expand that category at the expense of the second-generation nobles. For the purpose here, however, that will not matter much because for this analysis the critical dividing line is at four generations.

<sup>57</sup> Lists available were for the *bureaux des finances* of Aix: Balthasar de Clapiers-Collongues, *Chronologie des officiers des Cours Souveraines de Provence* (Aix-en-Provence, 1904); Amiens: comte Adrien de Louvencourt, *Les trésoriers de*

from the eight courts to the whole group, it can be calculated without risk of much error that, in all, 568 would have entered from 1774. Then, using the dispensations from the *marc d'or de la noblesse* that give information on the newcomers who were already nobles, the result is the following:

	<i>Roturiers</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation	over 4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Total
Entrants 1774- 1789	539	12	12	0	5	568

5. Cours des Comptes, Aides, Monnaies. With these financial courts we begin to arrive at the range of offices whose holders, or at least some of them, actually worked. Whether they worked well or badly is, of course, not the question here. The fifteen courts that concerned themselves with affairs of taxation and finance varied enormously in size. Their approximately 980 ennobling offices were spread through the *Chambre des Comptes* in Paris with its 200 members, those of Montpellier and

---

*France de la généralité de Picardie ou d'Amiens* (Amiens, 1896); Dijon: le père Gautier, *Armorial de la Chambre des Comptes de Dijon* (Dijon, 1881); Lille: baron Eléonore Paul Constant du Chambge de Liessart, *Notes historiques relatives aux offices et aux officiers du Bureau des Finances de la généralité de Lille* (Lille, 1885); Lyon: Léonard Michon and B.H. de Saint-Didier, *Armorial général de nosseigneurs les présidents, chevaliers d'honneur, trésoriers généraux de France, avocats et procureurs du roy au bureau des finances de la généralité de Lyon... 1577-1790* (Lyon, 1903); Moulins: C. Grégoire, "Le bureau des finances de Moulins, 1587-1790," *Bull. Soc. Émul. Bourbonnais* 18 (1910), 155-158, 188-195; Poitiers: Adrien Bonvallet, "Le bureau des finances de la généralité de Poitiers," *Mémoires de la Soc. des Antiquaires de l'Ouest*, 2<sup>e</sup> série, no. 6 (1883), 340-74; Riom: Éverat, *Le bureau des finances de Riom*, pp. 289-306. The proportion of entrants, 1784-1789 only, relative to those for 1774-1789 is based on figures for offices of *trésoriers de France, procureurs et avocats du roi*, and *greffiers en chef* that appear uniformly in all the lists. Of the 136 who took those offices from 1774, 40 did so in 1784 or later. The 29% that they represent is lower than the figure for the *secrétaires du roi*, and reflects the sharp reduction in entries after May 1788 when the *bureaux des finances*, together with some of the other sovereign courts, were suppressed. Although they were restored in September, the uncertainty of the situation lingered. As a result, in 1788 only 16 of these offices changed hands, whereas the average for the preceding years was 35.

Rouen, that had 125 each, down to the ones at Bar-le-Duc and Metz that together could muster only 20.<sup>58</sup> Among those officers, 359 (37%) gave-first degree *noblesse*: 315 in the three Paris courts, 38 in the Chambre des Comptes at Grenoble and 6 at Metz. All the rest required the two generations of service. It is here, in institutions that played some administrative role, where one might expect to find that nobles were themselves filling the offices and excluding newcomers. To a limited extent that did happen, for the records of the *marc d'or* payments, from 1784 to 1788, when the uncertainties concerning all venal offices caused a substantial drop in entries, show that 32% (48 of 151) of the new office holders in these courts did not pay the additional *marc d'or de la noblesse* and had thus been nobles earlier.<sup>59</sup> Still, after reconstructing lists for all the entries of *présidents*, *conseillers*, *maîtres*, *correcteurs*, *auditeurs*, and the *gens du roi*, and finding and classifying all the nobles according to their degree of *noblesse*,<sup>60</sup> it is the preponderance of *roturiers* and quite new nobles that impresses:

---

<sup>58</sup> These figures exclude the non-functional offices of *chevalier d'honneur* and *conseillers d'honneur*, usually filled by nobles.

<sup>59</sup> AN P 4881-4887.

<sup>60</sup> The list includes all officers who entered an ennobling office in these financial courts after 1774. In some cases the officer, usually a *maître des comptes* or a *président*, might have occupied a different ennobling office in the same or another court; if he entered the other office before 1774, he is counted in the office and court to which he shifted after 1774. It was fairly common for the officer to enter two ennobling offices in the same court, since *présidents* were usually recruited from within the court, and in *chambres des comptes* there was also frequent shifting from offices of *correcteur* to those of *auditeur* and *maître*. In all those cases the officer is counted only once. It was much less common, except in Paris, for the officer to enter two ennobling offices in two different courts after 1774. If he did, he is counted twice. At least twenty-two of the 90 officers who entered the Châtelet after 1774 had gone on to other ennobling offices before 1789. Among the 66 *maîtres des requêtes* who took office in this period, 17 had also entered as *conseillers* in the Parlement de Paris in 1774 or after; four others had been in the Cour des Aides de Paris, and six were from various provincial courts. Thus, 27 of the *maîtres des requêtes* will appear on two lists. Elsewhere, the problem is not a serious one. In the *parlements* most *présidents* and the *gens du roi* came from within the same court (see J. Égret, "L'aristocratie parlementaire..." 3-6). In the *chambres des comptes* and *cours des aides* promotion of outsiders to be *président* or *procureur général*, in particular, was a little more frequent, but duplication of entries to ennobling offices since 1774 through service in two of these courts involved only about 10 cases: 3 *présidents* each in the Cour des Aides and

---

Chambre des Comptes of Paris (5 of these 6 had been in the Parlement de Paris), 4 similar cases in the provinces. In other offices such shifting almost never occurred. But it should be kept in mind, when considering the full enumeration of ennoblements and entry to ennobling offices that between 60 and 70 persons, spread about equally through the columns that distinguish the degree of *noblesse*, will have been counted twice.

Lists for each court have been assembled from a range of printed and unprinted sources. For the courts in Paris, the volumes of the *Almanach Royal* have been used in addition to H. Coustant d'Yanville, *Chambre des Comptes de Paris. Essais historiques et chronologiques, privilèges et attributions nobiliaires et armorial* (Paris, 1866-75); and François Bluche, *Les magistrats de la Cour des Monnaies de Paris au XVIIIe siècle, 1715-1790*, Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, vol. 81 (Paris, 1966). For the courts in Aix, Dijon, and Montauban, the works by Clapiers-Collongues, Gautier and Taupiac, cited in notes 52 and 57 above, provide lists. Others, for Grenoble, Montpellier, and Nantes are in M. Pilot-Dethorey & M. A. Prudhomme, *Inventaire-Sommaire des Archives Départementales antérieures à 1790: Isère. Archives civiles – série B* (Grenoble, 1884), vol. 2, pp. 78-108; Pierre Vialles, *Etudes historiques sur la Cour des Comptes, Aides et Finances de Montpellier, d'après ses archives privées* (Montpellier, 1921); M. H. de Fourmont, *Histoire de la Chambre des Comptes de Bretagne* (Paris, 1854). Finally, among the printed sources, two works list for all the courts officers still serving in 1788 or 1789, sometimes with date of entry; these works would, of course, omit anyone who entered after 1774 and died or resigned before 1789, but they are helpful for verifying and completing lists assembled in other ways. They are La Roque & Barthélemy, *Catalogue des Gentilshommes* (see note 55 above) and [Duhamel], *État de la magistrature en France. Pour l'année 1789. Publié pour la première fois en 1788* (Paris, 1789).

To check these lists, and to make new ones for the other six courts for which none in print was available, various manuscript sources were used. Complete lists of all who entered these offices in 1784 and after were taken from the records of payments of the *marc d'or* (AN P 4881-4888). For the period 1774-1783 copies of the provisions of office, arranged in dossiers alphabetically by office, fill four to six cartons for each year in AN V<sup>1</sup> 470 ff. From 1771 many entering *roturiers* who had paid the *marc d'or de la noblesse* had that fact marked on their provisions, although comparison to the registers of the *trésorier des revenus casuels* shows that this was not done systematically and the omissions are too numerous to allow for their safe statistical use for purpose of social analysis. For this study I used only the dossiers marked “conseillers.” In addition, there are other registers of the *trésorier des revenus casuels* (AN P 3730-3747) that record payments made for “survivances” of offices. These registers are an accurate measure of how many offices changed hands, but between 5% and 20%, according to the individual court, of the persons recorded as making the payment were heirs or creditors of the preceding owner and did not themselves enter the office. The lists constructed

## High Financial Courts

Entrants, 1774-1789	<i>Roturiers</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Over 4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Total
<b>Chambres des Comptes</b>						
Aix	17	4	5	1	4	31
Bar-le-Duc	4	0	0	0	4	8
Dijon	28	3	6	0	2	39
Grenoble	18	1	1	0	0	20
Metz	4	0	0	0	0	4
Montpellier	64	3	10	3	5	85
Nancy	7	0	1	0	4	12
Nantes	49	3	2	0	1	55
Paris	51	39	16	1	11	118
Rouen	49	3	3	0	4	59
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>431</b>
<b>Cours des Aides</b>						
Bordeaux	28	2	0	1	0	31
Clermont- Ferrand	16	0	0	0	1	17
Montauban	16	1	1	1	0	19
Paris	21	22	13	4	7	67
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>Cour des Monnaies Paris</b>	19	3	0	0	2	24
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>589</b>

---

from the combined manuscript sources in the Archives Nationales proved to coincide almost exactly with the others, often made from local records that were in print. There is no reason to think that the lists for the courts where no printed list was available would be any less accurate.

One fact that emerges is that their occupants did not leave these offices nearly so quickly as did those who were in offices solely to be ennobled. Movement through the offices in the provincial *chancelleries* was nearly twice as fast.<sup>61</sup> In the financial courts men coming in were much younger: in the Cour des Aides de Paris, from 1727, 84% were not yet 30, and 56% under 25, this compared to the Grande Chancellerie where only several were less than 30 and 73% were over 40.<sup>62</sup> There was, perhaps, a professional, and also a financial, interest in remaining in these working courts for a long time. A close study of the papers of Dionis de Séjour, *conseiller du roi* in the Cour des Aides from 1724, shows that the 2% return on his 68,000 *livres* invested in the office began to rise toward the 10% it eventually reached only after he had served for twenty-eight years and started then to receive bigger fees through seniority.<sup>63</sup> Only early entry and living a long time brought a good return. Others were held to their *corps* by professional interest and by the heightened social standing that their places conferred. For all that, if they remained longer where they were, the majority of these magistrates were men who would gain noble status from their jobs.

6. Parlements and Conseils Souverains or Supérieurs. Here at last is the group of magistrates whose credentials as nobles were often in good order. Their story is familiar.<sup>64</sup> Secure and confident in their aristocratic status, steeped in truths derived from Montesquieu and an English model they perceived only dimly, they did not hesitate to instruct the crown about what they called the “fundamental laws” of the putative French constitution. They used their venal offices to provide the independent base from which they preached about the proper limits to draw to the crown’s authority. Activist *parlementaires* claimed a kind of right of judicial review, and sometimes refused to validate by registration in their courts

---

<sup>61</sup> In the provincial *chancelleries*, about 600 persons entered the nearly 500 offices; in these financial courts, counting the miscellaneous sovereign court officers discussed below, about 650 persons entered 980 offices.

<sup>62</sup> For the Grande Chancellerie, see note 51, above; for the Cour des Aides, G. d’Arvisinet, “L’office de conseiller de la Cour des Aides de Paris, au XVIIIe siècle, d’après les mémoires inédits de Louis-Achille Dionis du Séjour,” *Revue hist. de Droit français et étranger*, 4e série, 33 (1955), 540, n. 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 539-59.

<sup>64</sup> See the well known works by R. Bickart, Fr. Bluche, E. Carcassonne, J. Égret, F. Ford.

the acts of royal authority, especially on financial matters, that they regarded as unconstitutional. Through their periodic confrontations with the king's administration they were powerful enough to block action and, in the end, to force the crown to call first the Assembly of Notables and then the Estates General in its desperate effort to by-pass them. The proud magistrates in the more aggressive of the sovereign courts have increasingly seemed to historians the main moving force that defined and led the broad movement within which were united many nobles in defense of their privileges. Their ideas, institutional base, training in law, and skill with words, it is said, made the *parlementaires* from at least mid-century the aristocracy's voice that articulated more clearly what the other members of that class thought.

The sixteen courts contained slightly more than 1,000 offices of *présidents*, *conseillers*, and *gens du roi* that ennobled their holders. The data here are perhaps less certain for the officers who are listed as second- or third-generation nobles – some, though probably not many, may have had additional degrees of *noblesse*.<sup>65</sup> The following genealogical profile of

---

<sup>65</sup> There is a problem here that, for the moment, I can only state. For most individuals who received a *dispense* from paying the *marc d'or de la noblesse*, the *arrêt* traces the family's noble origin to a source that *roturiers* commonly used for ennoblement, the *lettres de noblesse*, but more often to an office in a *chancellerie* or in a financial court. For them there is little difficulty. But for others, especially in the Parlement de Paris, it is clear that the *arrêts de dispense* do not always list all the noble ancestors. For example, when the young Anjorant entered as *conseiller* there in 1778, the *arrêt* noted only that his father was also *conseiller*, an office that conferred first-degree *noblesse* on its holder. For Anjorant, the *arrêt* thus tells us that he was a noble, but not that he was in fact a ninth-generation noble, which we learn from the dictionary of officers in the Parlement de Paris: Fr. Bluche, *L'origine des magistrats du Parlement de Paris au XVIIIe siècle (1715-1771): Dictionnaire généalogique*, Mémoires de la Fédération des sociétés historiques et archéologiques de Paris et de l'Ile-de France (Paris, 1956), vol.s 5-6, 1953-1954. For Paris, this and other of Bluche's works make verification easy. But outside Paris there were 70 such cases where the presence of ancestors in the same court for one or two generations, depending on the number required for ennoblement, is all that appears. This leaves doubt as to whether there may have been additional noble ancestors. The type appears everywhere, but most frequently at Pau (11 instances) and at Besançon, Bordeaux and Dijon (9 each). Where the offices ennobled over two generations and where the proof of *noblesse* is that the father and grandfather held offices in the same court, an additional noble ancestor would have pushed some across the important line between the third and fourth generations. Some of the 70, then, might have been older nobles. I am inclined to

680 entering *parlementaires*, 1774-1789, is nonetheless accurate in the main outline it portrays:<sup>66</sup>

---

think, however, that outside Paris, where corrections have been made for this tabulation, such cases were rare, for in 61 other cases of exactly the same type, entrants listed degrees of *noblesse* beyond what they actually needed to prove they were noble. This suggests that if the 70 dubious cases could have shown additional degrees of *noblesse*, they would have done so.

<sup>66</sup> The heterogeneous social and professional recruitment to the *parlements* is shown in Égret's article (note 49 above). The figures here are derived from the unprinted sources detailed in note 60, above, and from printed works by Clapiers-Collongues (note 57), Pilot-Dethorey & Prudhomme, La Roque & Barthélemy, Duhamel (all specified in note 60), Bluche (note 65), as well as from the *Almanach Royal* and Roton. In addition, for Arras: P.-A.-S.-J. Plouvain, *Notes historiques relatives aux officiers et aux offices du Conseil provincial d'Artois* (Douai, 1823); for Bordeaux: J.N. Dast Le Vacher de Boisville, *Liste générale et alphabétique des membres du parlement de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux, 1896); for Grenoble: Jean Égret, *Le parlement de Dauphiné et les affaires publiques dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Grenoble & Paris, 1942), vol. 2, pp. 374-78; for Metz: Emmanuel Michel, *Biographie du parlement de Metz* (Metz, 1853); for Nancy: Hubert de Mahuet, *La Cour Souveraine de Lorraine et Barrois, 1641-1790* (Nancy, 1958), pp. 234-43; for Rennes: Frédéric Saulnier, *Le parlement de Bretagne, 1554-1790...* (Rennes, 2 vol.s, 1909); for Rouen: Stéphane & Louis de Merval, *Catalogue et armorial des présidents, conseillers, gens du roi et greffiers du parlement de Rouen* (Rouen, 1867); for Toulouse: Benjamin Faucher & Thérèse Gérard, *Inventaire des Archives départementales antérieures à 1790. Haute-Garonne, série B, Parlement de Toulouse* (Toulouse, 1965).



	<i>Roturiers</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Over 4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Total
Aix	5	0	12	5	12	34
Alsace (Colmar)	8	0	0	1	1	10
Artois (Arras)	10	4	0	0	0	14
Besançon	6	13	6	4	8	37
Bordeaux	15	1	18	3	13	50
Dijon	13	5	16	14	15	63
Douai	6	14	4	2	5	31
Grenoble	6	7	8	1	9	31
Metz	13	12	6	1	3	35
Nancy	0	0	0	0	17	17
Paris	9	20	26	23	38	116
Pau	15	2	12	2	12	43
Rennes	0	0	0	0	72	72
Rouen	11	1	11	8	34	65
Roussillon (Perpignan)	3	0	3	2	6	14
Toulouse	9	4	8	10	17	48
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>129</b> <b>(19%)</b>	<b>83</b> <b>(12%)</b>	<b>130</b> <b>(19%)</b>	<b>76</b> <b>(11%)</b>	<b>262</b> <b>(39%)</b>	<b>680</b> <b>(100%)</b>

Several points deserve comment. Overall, turnover in these offices was fairly slow, and although they conferred *noblesse* on their holders, over 80% of the entrants did not need it. The courts varied enormously in size, importance and degree of aristocratic membership. The *parlements* at Rennes and Nancy were special cases where the courts themselves verified the *noblesse* of their recruits and accepted only old nobles. At the other end the three *conseils* of Alsace, Artois, and Roussillon, together with the *parlements* of Douai and Metz, were quite open; they did not differ much from the *chambres des comptes* in their recruitment. Among the other courts, those where 50% or more of entering members had at least four generations of nobility – Paris, Aix, Rouen,

Toulouse – were also the ones that, together with the Parlement of Rennes, had strong traditions of intransigent resistance to the king.<sup>67</sup>

For us, however, what matters most is, which of these new magistrates would have been excluded from entry into the army officer corps by the requirement for four generations of nobility. It appears that about one-half of all the entering magistrates in these courts, or three-fifths of those outside Rennes and Nancy, could not themselves have satisfied the requirement. There was, of course, a sizable group here of third-generation nobles whose sons would have been eligible to become army officers. But since almost invariably the entrants to the offices in the sovereign courts were very young, they did not in fact have sons to place.<sup>68</sup> Except at Rennes and Nancy, the four-generation requirement cut through and divided most courts somewhere near the middle.

7. Miscellaneous Offices in High Sovereign Courts. It would be easy to overlook approximately 150 offices of various kinds that were steadily producing a number of new nobles. They are here classified separately because, whereas all the others are complete, this list will have at least a few omissions, and because also to include these with the others would be misleading, especially for the *parlements*, by suggesting a more open

---

<sup>67</sup> The various writings of Jean Égret are essential for these matters: in the 1780s the *parlements* of Besançon, Bordeaux, and Dijon, quiet earlier, became active: the “badly composed” courts at Arras, Colmar, Douai and Metz were subservient to the crown throughout; see *La Pré-Révolution française, 1787-1788* (Paris, 1962), ch. 5. Contemporaries during the Maupeou ministry were drawing connections between the recruitment of non-nobles and *anoblis* to the magistracy, on the one hand, and obsequious compliance with despotic royal demands enforced with military display, on the other: see *Louis XV et l’opposition parlementaire, 1715-74* (Paris, 1970), pp. 193, 198, 227-28. For the composition at Grenoble, see *Le parlement de Dauphiné et les affaires publiques*, vol. 1, pp. 20-24, 290-94; vol. 2, pp. 27-37. For recruitment at Colmar, see F. Burckhard, “La bourgeoisie parlementaire au XVIIIe siècle,” in *La bourgeoisie alsacienne, études d’histoire sociale*, Publications de la Société savante d’Alsace et des régions de l’est (Strasbourg & Paris, 1954), pp. 153-176; for the Maupeou Parlement and Chambre des Comptes at Aix, see Ch. Carrière, “Le recrutement de la Cour des Comptes, Aides et Finances d’Aix-en-Provence à la fin de l’ancien régime,” *Actes du 81e Congrès national des Sociétés savantes* (Rouen-Caen & Paris, 1956), pp. 141-59.

<sup>68</sup> Of the 126 entrants who were third-generation nobles and whose ages have been determined, 86 (68%) were not yet 25 years of age, an additional 19 (15%) were 25-29 years old, and only 8 (6%) were over 40.

recruitment than there really was in the functionally more important offices of the magistrates. In the case of the Parlement of Rennes, for example, no *roturiers* could get into places of *conseiller* but *roturiers* were being ennobled in six other, lesser offices of different kinds in that court. The list here is complete for entrants after 1784, but not for the ten preceding years.<sup>69</sup> These offices include the court clerks (*greffiers*), at least 56 offices in 32 courts, of which 20 offices ennobled in the first degree. Places as *secrétaire*, or *secrétaire et notaire*, ennobled in 12 courts<sup>70</sup>; the function of *substitut du procureur général* did so in eight others,<sup>71</sup> those of *premier huissier* in ten,<sup>72</sup> and *payeur des gages* in three. The not quite complete listing of entrants to these offices shows, again for 1774-89:

---

<sup>69</sup> For 1784-89 the listing of entrants is derived from AN P 4881-4888; for 1774-83, printed sources for individual courts are cited in notes 52, 55, 57, 60, 66, as well as the *Almanach Royal*. For other courts, La Roque & Barthélemy, and Duhamel, list the officers serving in 1789, sometimes, but not always, indicating date of entry; they do not include entrants who may have left office before 1788. For these offices I have not used the provisions in série V<sup>1</sup> in the AN. As before, Bluche & Durye, *L'anoblissement par charges...* is very useful.

<sup>70</sup> Nine courts – the *parlements* of Aix, Paris, Rouen; *chambres des comptes* of Aix, Grenoble; *cours des aides* of Bordeaux, Montauban, Paris; Grand Conseil – contained 31 of these offices that ennobled, of which 17 in the first degree. Similar offices ennobled in the Parlement of Bordeaux and in the *chambres des comptes* of Bar-le-Duc and Rouen, but I do not know their number. In other courts these offices seem not to have conferred *noblesse* on their holders.

<sup>71</sup> The 36 ennobling offices were in the *parlements* of Besançon, Metz, Paris, Pau, Rennes; the Chambre des Comptes of Nantes; the Cour des Aides of Paris; the Grand Conseil. Three additional offices at Metz were not filled.

<sup>72</sup> In the *parlements* of Besançon, Bordeaux, Paris, Pau, Rennes; the *chambre des comptes* of Nantes and Paris; the *cours des aides* of Bordeaux and Paris; the Grand Conseil. There could be others – only the actual payments of the *marc d'or de la noblesse* (AN P 4881-4883) reveal that these offices in two courts at Bordeaux were ennobling. If registers for payments from 1771 to 1783 were available, perhaps a few more ennobling offices might be found.

	<i>Roturiers</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Over 4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Total
Greffiers	46	2	1	1	1	51
Secrétaires, or Notaires et Sec.s	32	0	0	0	1	33
Substituts du Procureur général	19	5	0	0	2	26
Premier huissier	6	0	1	0	0	7
Payeurs des gages	3	1	0	0	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>121</b>

8. Royal Administration. The *maîtres des requêtes* serving in the Royal Council were at the heart of the central administration. From their ranks were selected the *intendants* whose activities in the provinces built the centralized state by steadily expanding its powers and functions.<sup>73</sup> With them, for convenience, might be placed two courts whose offices also ennobled, but that do not fit easily with the sovereign courts. The Grand Conseil was the body to which was assigned investigations and legal cases that the crown evoked and thereby took out of the hands of the ordinary

---

<sup>73</sup> The fundamental institutional and social study is by Michel Antoine, *Le Conseil du Roi sous le règne de Louis XV*, Mémoires et documents publiés par la Société de l'Ecole des Chartes (Genève, 1970), p. 19. See pp. 247-264, on social recruitment. Social origins of the *intendants* who were serving in 1710-12, 1749-1751 and 1774-1776 are compared and analyzed by Vivian R. Gruder, *The Royal Provincial Intendants*. See also Roland Mousnier et al, *Le Conseil du Roi de Louis XII à la Révolution*, Travaux du Centre de recherches sur la civilisation de l'Europe moderne, fasc. 6 (Paris, 1970), pp. 31-45. M. Antoine is preparing a biographical and genealogical dictionary of the *maîtres des requêtes* who served during Louis XV's reign.

magistrates.<sup>74</sup> To some, the administrative justice it dispensed seemed the essence of arbitrariness, even despotism. Finally, the Châtelet was the *bailliage* court of Paris, and the only one in France below the level of the sovereign courts whose offices ennobled. Its officials often entered young and put in an apprenticeship there in the work of justice and administration before they moved into the network of pure administration. In the period from 1774, these institutions recruited members as follows<sup>75</sup>:

	<i>Roturiers</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Over 4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Total
<i>Maîtres des requêtes</i>	10	13	13	7	23	66
Grand Conseil	17	2	2	0	1	22
Châtelet	37	24	13	5	11	90
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>178</b>

To the preceding enumeration should no doubt be added a few more offices and persons here and there. In the colonies especially: there were in 1789 fifty ennobling offices in the three *conseils supérieurs* of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint-Domingue. Lists of the officers in the first two of those *Conseils* show that 25 entered after 1774.<sup>76</sup> No doubt most were *roturiers*, but they do not appear in the sources used for this study. *Lettres de noblesse* issued in the colonies might also be added, but

---

<sup>74</sup> Bluche, *Les magistrats du Grand Conseil au XVIIIe siècle*, Annales littéraires de l'université de Besançon, vol. 83 (Paris, 1966), for analysis of the institution and list of members with summary information on each.

<sup>75</sup> Lists compiled from the volumes of the *Almanach Royal*, verified and completed from the provisions in AN V<sup>1</sup>; P 4881-4888; and Roton, *Les arrêts du Grand Conseil....*, including the *conseillers d'état*, who almost invariably were recruited from persons who were already in other ennobling offices, would have multiplied the problem of duplication in our enumeration and are omitted.

<sup>76</sup> Bluche & Durye, *L'anoblissement par charges...*, vol. 2, pp. 32-33; lists in La Roque & Barthélemy, *Catalogue des gentilshommes*, and [Duhamel], *État de la magistrature....*, pp. 483-504.

in the absence of fuller data are left out. That said, a summary detailing ennoblements and the genealogical composition of the office holding *noblesse*, 1774-89, can now be made:

	<i>Roturiers</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	3 <sup>rd</sup> generation	4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Over 4 <sup>th</sup> generation	Total
Lettres de noblesse	270					270
Chancelleries	878	5				883
Municipal	100					100
Bureaux des finances	539	12	12	0	5	568
Cours des Comptes, Aides, Monnaies	391	84	58	11	45	589
Parlements, Conseils Souverains	129	83	130	76	262	680
Miscellaneous Sovereign Court Offices	106	8	2	1	4	121
Administration	64	39	28	12	35	178
<b>Total</b>	<b>2477</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>3389</b>

This table measures rather well the proportions of new and old noble families at the upper levels of civilian office holding. What emerges from these figures is the importance of *roturiers* and new nobles in these places, 86% of whose entrants in these years could not have met the army's requirement for entry. Even though the share assigned to *roturiers* in the table is a little misleading, including as it does some men who were their families' second generation in the offices that gave gradual *noblesse*, the evidence for significant continuing recruitment from the Third Estate into the nobility is clear. Of course not all the important civilian offices are included here, only the ennobling ones; those in finance, *bailliage* and *sénéchaussée* courts, or sub-delegations that did not confer *noblesse* are

omitted. Some nobles held those offices, although most were filled by *roturiers*. More important for us to remember is that the numbers shown here, considerable as they are, do not tell the whole story of how many were in the whole pool of nobles of less than four generations, since those serving but who entered their offices before 1774, or those whose service was finished and whose descendants had not yet reached the magical fourth generation of nobility, are not included. It is reasonable to think that the whole number of new nobles against whom the Ségur *règlement* discriminated would have been several times larger than the one shown here. In addition, it should be recognized that some in this group had almost by definition special demographic characteristics – *secrétaires du roi*, in particular, but the acquirers of *lettres de noblesse* and officers in the *bureaux des finances* as well, had no real interest in acquiring their places and new status at their more advanced ages if they lacked male heirs to whom they could pass on the rank. Historical demographers do not often give us this kind of information for specific professional or occupational groups, but a close study of the families in the *chancelleries*, for example, would almost certainly show a number of sons and grandsons disproportionate to that of their peers in wealth and earlier experience. There was, then, a sizable group of new nobles whose sons were and would be looking for something to do.

## **V     Filtering new nobles from old, and civilians from military**

---

This seems to be the world against which the army directed its heightened exclusiveness in 1781, a sizable world that from the army looked relatively homogeneous. Within the groups that made up that world there were enormous differences – the occasional *conseiller* in the Parlement of Paris who, like Anjorant, could claim nine generations of nobility, had little in common with the newest *secrétaire du roi* or *trésorier de France*. But what the army saw was a group united by its wealth – all in it had money enough to buy expensive offices, and all or many had sons who could afford to pay the expense that the officer's military service entailed – and, no less important, united also by being civilians. Some families in it

were fresh from trade; others came through law and service in a judicial court. Almost none was military. If the army, then, had it in mind to eliminate as officers not *roturiers* but nobles of wealth and non-military formation, the Ségur *règlement* was an effective way to begin it. By that stroke the army denied entry as officer to the families of the large majority of the civilian office-holding nobility.

The specific effect of the exclusion is visible after looking again at the army's entering officers, from May 1781 to 1789. We saw above that the nearly 3,000 young men who joined regiments in the infantry, cavalry and dragoons were nobles. But what kind? First, consider those from the *écoles militaires* that placed nearly 500 *élèves du roi* in the line regiments after 1781. Their names appearing in twenty-four randomly selected regiments from all the branches provided a sample of seventy-seven whose genealogies were studied.<sup>77</sup> All had the four or more generations of *noblesse* and fathers with long military service as required by the edict of 1751 creating the school. Two great-grandfathers had been *secrétaires du roi*; one student was ennobled by his grandfather's and great-grandfather's service in the Chambre des Comptes of Montpellier; and another, in the fifth generation of *noblesse*, had had a grandfather *avocat général* in the Cour souveraine of Lorraine and Barrois. In each case long military service by the father intervened between the family's earlier ennoblement and the student's acceptance by an *école militaire*. Among the 77, these were the only cases where an ancestor had either been ennobled or occupied an ennobling position within the previous five generations. Fifty-four of the 77 fathers were in military service.

There are also indications for the fathers of 255 pages who came from families that had proved nobility to 1550 and were placed in regiments during these years.<sup>78</sup> They show a similar absence of new

---

<sup>77</sup> The regiments' registers for the *contrôles des officiers* in the SHD série Y<sup>b</sup>, and the genealogical data for students at the École Militaire in the BNF, mss. Fr. 32060-99, are the sources for this analysis. The regiments examined included 10 from the infantry (Austrasie, Auvergne, Bourbonnois, Bourgogne, Bretagne, Dauphin, La Fère, Lorraine, Piémont, Touraine); 10 from cavalry and dragoons (of which only seven contained students – Mestre-de-Camp Général, Orléans, Penthièvre, Royal Champagne, Royal Étranger, Royal Pologne and du Roi); two artillery (La Fère, Strasbourg); and two *chasseurs* (Auvergne, Gévaudan).

<sup>78</sup> Two cartons, not yet assigned a number when I used them at the [Service Historique de la Défense] in 1964, contained recently assembled dossiers for pages in military service. The *extraits de baptême*, available for all but 14, supply at least



nobles and civilians: only nine of the fathers were in civilian employments at all, of whom none were *secrétaires du roi*, none in *bureaux des finances* or *chambres des comptes* or *cours des aides*. A *président* in the Parlement of Aix (Grimaldy de Raguse), a *conseiller* at Rennes (Piccot de Peccaduc), and an *avocat général* in the Parlement of Paris (Séguier) was the total yield from the ennobling offices. The rest of the 255 were military (101) or without employs and specific functions – simple noble *seigneurs* (111), nobles designated only as “écuyer” (13), or titled nobles (21).

Beyond these, there were also the young men who joined directly from home after Chérin certified their four generations of nobility. Here one might expect to find a more professionally heterogeneous group among the fathers. We do, but only to a limited degree. The 979 fathers included 432 who did nothing, or at least occupied no government or military posts; another 435 were then or had been in military service.<sup>79</sup> A scattering were in courts at the *bailliage* level (11) and in various kinds of administration (19); six were lawyers. A dozen were former pages, *grands baillis*, and so on. But turning to the offices that ennobled, the number of fathers there is small: no *secrétaires du roi*; two members of *bureaux des finances* (both of them *premiers présidents*); none in ennobling municipal offices. The higher sovereign courts did better, but not by so much as might have been expected. The fathers in *chambres des comptes* or *cours des aides* number 19; those in *parlements* 33; together they comprised about 5% of the entrants in this category. A closer look shows, not surprisingly, that eight of the high *robe* fathers were from the courts at Rennes and Nancy; of the rest, 16 were *présidents* or *gens de roi* and the mass of ordinary *conseillers*, *maîtres*, *auditeurs*, and others together supplied 28 fathers who placed sons in regiments. From nine courts none is found.<sup>80</sup>

A final category of entrants would, of course, include no sons of civilians at all. These were the sons of long-serving military men who had

---

sketchy information on the 255 fathers' official functions or employs if they had any. For letting me see these, as for other kindnesses over a number of years when working at Vincennes, I am indebted to Mr. Jean-Claude Devos.

<sup>79</sup> For the source, see note 7 above. The 979 fathers placed a total of 1,102 sons for whom information is available. These do not include the placements in artillery (see note 83 below).

<sup>80</sup> Those nine courts were the *parlements* of Aix and Besançon, the *cours des aides* of Bordeaux and Montauban, the Chambre des Comptes of Rouen, the *conseils supérieurs* of Alsace and Artois, the Châtelet, and the Grand Conseil.

earned the cross of Saint-Louis; they, it will be remembered, were exempt from having to make proofs of *noblesse*. By definition, then, all their fathers were military. In the artillery, where this type seems to have been more common, one-third (49 of 148) of the entrants after 1781 were sons of *chevaliers de Saint-Louis*. As noted earlier, the vast majority of the 49 were noble, some even nobles of four or more generations who found it easier or less expensive merely to use their fathers' military service record to gain entry.<sup>81</sup> Again, in this last, large category of entrants, perhaps as many as 500 of approximately 3,000 for all the line regiments, one will not find representatives of civilian, office-holding families.

It appears, therefore, that none of the newer, and only a handful of the office-holding nobles in general, entered the army as officers after 1781. The 55 who had fathers in sovereign court offices must have felt a little different from the others in an officer corps where they constituted less than 2% of the groups that entered with them. But, perhaps, that was not new. Had the genealogical and professional composition of officers' recruitment really been different earlier? It is conceivable that informally prejudice had always operated to make new nobles feel unwelcome, or they simply had other interests and preferences for careers. In short, if, as we saw earlier, the Ségur *règlement* did not have practical effect in eliminating *roturiers*, perhaps it was equally ineffective in excluding the new nobles who had not been there either. This returns us to the possibility that the Ségur *règlement* was a purely gratuitous act. There was in Tuetey's evidence, discussed above, the sign that some whom he called *roturiers* were, in fact, nobles of less than four generations. Elsewhere we hear about illustrative individual cases, for example, the four Petitjean de Rotalier brothers who in 1778 sought authorization to abandon the less elegant patronymic name of Petitjean and to be known legally as Rotalier; all four were then in military service, sons of a member of the Chambre des Comptes at Dôle who was ennobled by his office.<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, I do not have full, systematic data for treating this question, but what there

---

<sup>81</sup> SHD Y<sup>b</sup> 669; see note 7 above. Of the 148 who entered 1781-89, 47 did so after presenting Chérin's certificate and 33 had presented proofs for entry to an *école militaire*. Toward 1789 notes giving information on individuals in this register become less full and systematic, but it seems that at least 9 of 49 who entered as sons of *chevaliers de Saint-Louis* had four or more generations of nobility and would have been eligible to receive Chérin's certificate.

<sup>82</sup> Claude Brelot, *La noblesse en Franche-Comté de 1789 à 1808*, Annales littéraires de l'université de Besançon, 134 (Paris, 1972), p. 27.

is suggests that new nobles had been entering in larger numbers before 1781. And there is also reason to think that the number had been rising.

There are convenient records for the artillery that include all the 741 lieutenants who were serving in 1765 or who joined between then and 1781. In the register, beside their names, the clerk wrote briefly what he knew about their families. No doubt it is not complete, but 23 were sons and 12 others grandsons of *secrétaires du roi*, 11 had fathers in *bureaux des finances*, 10 had them in *cours des comptes*, *aides*, or *monnaies*, and 24 in ennobling offices of *parlements*. A scattering of nine other fathers who were *échevins* of Lyon, received *lettres* of nobility, or were otherwise identifiable as having been both recently ennobled and not military by profession brings the number to 89, or 12% of all who served in that period as lieutenants of artillery. After 1781, among the 148 entrants to the artillery, only three (1.5%) had fathers in sovereign courts.<sup>83</sup> Or consider the Maison militaire du Roi. Similar data are available for one of the two companies of Mousquetaires, from 1750 to 1775 when Saint-Germain disbanded it. This was a unit in which were collected old, and rich, *noblesse*, and it offered a favored kind of brief apprenticeship to young men whose family connections destined them to rise quickly to be colonels of regiments. But into it during those twenty-six years came 17 sons of *secrétaires du roi*, 12 sons of *trésoriers de France*, 19 with fathers in *cours des comptes* and *aides*, and 33 in *parlements* – a total of 81, or 10.5% of 765 entrants.<sup>84</sup> For the Cheveau-légers de la garde, the printed summary genealogies for the 489 who entered, 1750-1780, show 53 (11%) ennobled by offices or by letters in the generation of the father or grandfather.<sup>85</sup>

These figures state what was the minimum number of entering new nobles, but we have no way of knowing whether the clerks always had or recorded full information. Overall, throughout the army it is reasonable to surmise that before 1781 the share of civilian and new-noble families that supplied army officer recruits was higher than the 10 to 12 % positively identified. The Chevaux-légers de la Garde had been more

---

<sup>83</sup> SHD Y<sup>b</sup> 669-70.

<sup>84</sup> SHD Y<sup>b</sup> 69.

<sup>85</sup> J. de la Trollière & R. de Montmort, *Les Cheveau-légers de la Garde du Roy, 1592-1787* (Paris, 1953). Among the sons of the 223 *fermiers généraux* of 1726-91, mainly *anoblis* or in process of ennoblement (only 15, or 6.7% had four or more generations of *noblesse*), 20% had entered military service. See Durand, *Les fermiers généraux*, pp. 294-301, 375.

exclusive and demanding than were the line regiments of infantry, cavalry, and dragoons, while the artillery chose especially from those families whose orientation had earlier been technical, and who imposed on their young sons the special and necessary training in mathematics that was not to be found in ordinary schools. In principle other types of units were less demanding socially or technically, and were more open to newer, non-professional military aspirants. The proportion of nobles of less than four generations was probably higher in the line regiments. And it could also have been rising. When Saint-Germain in 1776 and 1777 drastically reduced the military units in the Maison du Roi, he thought he was attacking the waste and extravagance lavished on those now ornamental and militarily useless bodies; he was also attacking the base there in venal offices for opulent court favorites who, after learning the wrong things, used their connections to filter into the line regiments, bringing with them the dangerous and contagious taste for luxury. But in reducing the Gardes du Corps, Chevaux-légers de la Garde and Gendarmes de la Garde, and eliminating the Mousquetaires altogether, he eliminated also places, 870 of them, in fact, that had come to absorb and isolate some of the richest, least serious, most useless officers.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps not all would do it, but this safety valve now partially closed, they might move in even larger numbers to fill places in the regular army units. The baron Pérusse des Cars, who began his army career before the Revolution and had composed works on the “état militaire,” remembered later that the rest of the army disliked the Maison du Roi and that a minister had called it “an establishment intermediate between *robe* and sword.”<sup>87</sup> And the Gendarmes de la Garde and Gardes du Corps were known to contain more new men than the Mousquetaires and Chevaux-légers de la Garde. The Ségur regulation would have been only a partial solution to what might seem a problem, but from the army’s point of view it would help.

At this point, then, several things seem certain. The Ségur regulation did have practical effect in narrowing the social base for recruiting officers. It was not a purely gratuitous act. If not many *roturiers* were there, there was in fact a fairly large group of wealthy and young new nobles whose fathers were not military. If not all, at least some had

---

<sup>86</sup> Latreille, *L’Armée et la nation...*, pp. 75-78; Léon Mention, *Le comte de Saint-Germain et ses réformes* (Paris, 1884), ch. 2.

<sup>87</sup> [Des Cars, Jean-Francois de Pérusse], *Mémoires du duc des Cars, publiés par son neveu* (Paris, 1890), vol. 1, p. 143.

been taking up officerships in the army, and after 1781 they could no longer do so.

Immediately the army gave evidence that it meant what it said. Early in 1782 the young Bergeret, son of a *secrétaire du roi* in the Grande Chancellerie in Paris, secured the nomination to a place in a regiment and went to Chérin expecting to get the genealogical certificate that would allow him to enter.<sup>88</sup> His father, Jean François Bergeret de Frouville, was one of those who had served long in the Chancellerie and no doubt played a role in directing and arranging the financial and banking functions that the company performed for the king. When he resigned all his offices to his then eighteen-year-old son, Adelaïde Étienne, in 1783, those offices included not just the one in the Chancellerie but also his place as *secrétaire ordinaire* of the Conseil d'État Direction et Finances. The young man, if consoled by wealth and the prospect of high places in the king's financial administration, must nonetheless have been disappointed when his candidacy for a place as an army officer was rejected. He was a noble and he had wanted to be in the army. The army, no doubt, wondered in his, as in similar cases, how long he would have stuck at it and how serious would have been his concern for the dull and routine work of training the troops in winter. What made Bergeret's case different than the others, however, was that his legal claim to be an officer was in good order. True, his father was born a *roturier*, but membership in the company of *secrétaires du roi* in Paris gave a number of special and unusual privileges. One of them assured that the *secrétaire du roi* when he entered the office was transformed instantly and magically into a fourth-generation noble. If this did not easily fit the laws of biology, it was at least consistent with *lettres patentes* issued by Charles VIII in 1484 and often confirmed subsequently, several times in the eighteenth century. In the edict of March 1704 the king had stated it simply: "it is our will that our 340 *Conseillers secrétaires* be reputed nobles of four *racés* and capable of being received into all orders of chivalry in our kingdom." Thus, the young Bergeret was not just a noble but a *gentilhomme*; his father a fourth-generation noble, he was in fact in the fifth generation.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Information on this episode comes from AN V<sup>2</sup> 55, letters and notes for the *mémoire* on this subject addressed to the Garde des Sceaux by the Grande Chancellerie.

<sup>89</sup> It was surely this fact and the peculiarities of this office that led Molière to characterize M. Jourdain, even if bourgeois, as "gentilhomme," a status that had a

The trouble was that he could not get the needed certificate. The whole company of *secrétaires du roi* promptly concerned itself with the matter. They gathered the numerous precedents that proved their case. Bergeret *père* himself remembered the time when, in 1750, only two years after he had entered office, the Tribunal des maréchaux de France, whose function it was to handle cases of conflict between nobles on the basis of a graded law that distinguished *gentilshommes* from others, had made trouble for the *secrétaires du roi*. But he also remembered that Louis XV had himself decided in their favor. Thus, when the company's *syndics* gave its *mémoire* on the subject to the Keeper of the Seals (*Garde des Sceaux*), asking him to intervene for them with the Minister of War, they had law, precedent, and the king's deepening financial need working for them. Ségur received the *mémoire* and reported on it to the king at a meeting of the Conseil des Dépêches in September 1782. Unfortunately, we do not know the exact nature of the discussion, but the answer was, if very polite, also very clear. In his letter (14 September 1782) to the Garde des Sceaux, who had also been present at the meeting, Ségur stated: "You have seen that His Majesty, having at heart not impairing the plan that he formed when he made his regulation, did not judge it suitable to consider favorably Sr. Bergeret's request..." He went on to say the usual nice things, in particular that he was sorry not to have been able to be of another opinion on the matter out of respect for the Garde des Sceaux and the company.

## VI The military outlook: caste as reform

---

This then was to be a law to which, for once under the *ancien régime*, there would be no exceptions for the wealthy and powerful and influential. To understand the army's zeal there is needed more than Dollot's easy characterization of Ségur as "the plaything of a coterie of reactionary *gentilshommes*," a simplified view that will not bear much explanatory

---

more technical and precise meaning in his day than our own. M. Jourdain's pretensions went beyond those of the ordinary *anobli*.

weight.<sup>90</sup> Ségur's own son, an officer with the French forces in America when the *règlement* was issued, contributed to this simplification when, writing his memoirs much later, in the nineteenth century, he stated that although the *règlement* had been reactionary, his father was not. He said that the genealogical requirement had been forced on his unwilling father by the selfish and shortsighted aristocrats around him.<sup>91</sup> But this does not tell us much, and is, I think, misleading by missing the essential seriousness of Ségur, his colleagues, and their *règlement*. The members of the committee that proposed it were professional military men as well as aristocrats.<sup>92</sup> What we must do is to enter the narrower but pervasive culture that infused the institution where they worked. If the *règlement* was reactionary, as no doubt it was in many ways, we need to see in what terms the army leaders could understand it as nonetheless appropriate to the situation. For all to some degree, and for some to a large degree, simple snobbery may have moved them, but that sentiment was not new in 1781. Other ideas were needed to make the writing into law of snobbery seem necessary, proper, and legitimate. One must include in the explanatory equation the tone and substance, the not-always explicit ideas and underlying assumptions, that were contained in printed works and the piles of manuscript *mémoires*, some solicited and many not, that arrived at the Ministry of War. Here, in works addressed to a military audience, are found the terms and limits to discourse and argument within the army.

---

<sup>90</sup> L. Dollot, *La question des privilèges dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1941), p. 54.

<sup>91</sup> Louis Philippe, comte de Ségur, *Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes* (Paris, 1890), vol. 1, p. 159.

<sup>92</sup> The committee organization that Ségur set up is described in [Pierre Marie Maurice Henri], comte de Ségur, *Le maréchal de Ségur (1724-1801), ministre de la guerre sous Louis XVI* (Paris, 1895), pp. 234-36; Latreille, *L'armée et la nation*, pp. 179-81. Four committees specialized by areas of technical expertise were headed by *lieutenants généraux* (de Besenval, de Caraman, du Châtelet, and de Poyanne) who met as a superior committee under the maréchal de Contades to make recommendations to the minister for changes in the army. The *procès-verbaux* of that committee's meetings, known in 1840, were, unfortunately, lost by the time when P.-M.-M.-H. de Ségur wrote his book in 1895 (p. 236) and have evidently not been recovered since. [N.B. I found these records later in the manuscripts of the Bibliothèque du Ministère de la Guerre. For their use, see my article: "The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction and Revolution", *Past and Present* 85 (1979), 68-98.]

In the army most shared the more general concern that ranks and orders were too much mixed and confused.<sup>93</sup> From within came frequent complaints that new men were arriving to take up the old military occupation. Since 1789, and in our own day, most people are inclined to think that a steady infusion of new blood is the sign that institutions recognize and reward talent and competence. This was not how the reasoning went in the army, or more broadly in French society, at the end of the *ancien régime*. New men were not believed to be professionally serious. They did not serve long, and they paid little attention to the needs of dull but essential routine. They seemed frivolous, and frivolity was the enemy. But persons who were frivolous were also likely to be rich; they often came out of cities, and at least some of them were thought to have had a fairly recent family origin in commerce. If some writers were arguing that commerce was gentle and civilizing in its effects, the army saw in its practitioners low motives tied to egoism and cupidity, conditioned by a private rather than public definition of self-interest. The new and wealthy men had usually had a good education of the traditional kind: they studied in *collèges*, knew Latin, and could turn a phrase, perhaps even make verses. Retaining as they did their ties to cities and non-military families, they always had in civil activity and employment an alternative to long service in the military camp. At home they did not find on their walls the portraits of ancestors and great-uncles in uniform to reproach by their gaze the failure to serve well or long. Long and serious service was the critical point, and only men who were for one reason or another both dependent on the institution and shamed if they failed to perform well were likely to provide it. In this view, something called “talent” was important, but it was thought to be inspired by character and

---

<sup>93</sup> My sense of the character of argument and implicit understanding within the army, as expressed briefly in this and the next paragraph, derives from reading in practical and “technical” military writings and proposals. The series M and MM that contain documents on the *École militaire*, and K where the Broglie papers are found are the important sources at the AN; the series “Mémoires et Reconnaissances” [1M] and A<sup>1</sup> at the SHD are, of course, even more important. More careful and detailed analysis is needed. In general, if Emile Léonard’s understanding of military exclusivism in the 1780’s seems to me not quite right, his presentation of the development of thought in the army during the eighteenth century is excellent. See *L’armée et ses problèmes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1958). Much can be gleaned also from Tuetey, Latreille and Hartmann (see note 4, above).



will rather than by sheer intelligence, and was acquired with experience by anyone who was zealous. Only later, with the Romantics, would men imagine talent to be innate, inborn, unique, something involving rare and special individual skills. In the Enlightenment, talent seemed more a thing to be acquired, a matter of adapting to efficient routine, developing good habits, working hard and continuously, and paying steady attention to detail. Almost anyone could attain it if he really wished to. These views were set in the rising wave of secular puritanism that has marked the military mind in modern times.

Such thoughts about officers and their deficiencies seemed at the time fully consistent with the environmentalist ideas that were central to the French Enlightenment. The problem of officers' recruitment, although only one of many practical matters with which the army concerned itself in its effort to renovate the institution, was understood in a context of ideas that were fully up-to-date. In the Enlightenment many contemporaries, and not just the *philosophes* and professional writers, were placing heavy emphasis on the environmental formation of men – Condillac and Helvétius less produced than reflected the current ideas that, at one level, were shared by both liberals and conservatives who would quarrel instead about other things. Locke had observed that nine parts of ten among the things that distinguished one man from another were put there by education, and in the Enlightenment most Frenchmen agreed. But now, for the army, everything seemed to work in the same direction. Environmentalist ideas fitted nicely with aristocratic assumptions, and together they combined to place ever-greater stress on the role of the family in determining and fixing the character and the special orientation of individuals. The first and most formative part of the environment, after all, was family. In the army there was much discussion about the proper form of initiation and practical training for officers, whether in military schools or through apprenticeship in the regiments as cadets or special *sous-lieutenants*. But formal, specialized training and education could be useful only when it built on the inclinations and habits that had been placed there already when the boys were very young.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> The rising importance of sentiments surrounding the family in the eighteenth century is difficult to measure, but is observed everywhere. Seen often in Greuze and Diderot, sometimes called “bourgeois” in inspiration, change in these sentiments was surely more broadly cultural and general than the narrower class analysis supposes. See Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960), part 3.

Family, therefore, was crucial to the army's understanding, and the kinds of families that they would choose to recruit, thinking their sons more assimilable by the army, were military ones. The best officers, it was thought, would come from families where the spartan virtues were taught at home by precept and example. In these terms, sons of old *militaires* would make the best new ones. Guibert, in his report to the Conseil de la Guerre on 28 October 1787, a report that almost unchanged became the new *Ordonnance sur la hiérarchie* in 1788, expressed this common point of view.<sup>95</sup> In connection with his plan to restore the place of *cadet gentilhomme* in the infantry regiments, he discussed the recruitment of young officers generally. In the infantry, nearly half the new *sous-lieutenants* would come from the *écoles militaires* and pages – where military families, it will be remembered, were heavily represented. The other places, said Guibert, would be left to the colonels to fill as follows:

...to supply the requests of... this precious class of sons or brothers of the old officers in the regiments, a type to which it is so essential to assure places because it furnishes a great many good officers, and because it is the one that puts into units the spirit of family which attaches to the king's service fathers by sons and sons by fathers.<sup>96</sup>

This view of the importance of recruiting from military families was accepted by the Conseil de la Guerre and seems to have been widespread. We met earlier de Cessac, one day to be the president of the Assemblée Législative after playing a central role in its military committee, and to die as a Pair de France, but then a captain in the Dauphin infantry regiment to whom the editor assigned the writing of important articles for the military volumes of the *Encyclopédie méthodique*. His ideas are the more interesting because he was himself a *roturier*. In the article "emploi" published in 1785, he elaborated more fully and explicitly the notion that narrow recruitment among military families was essential to the good functioning of the regiments.<sup>97</sup> He spoke of, and concurred in the frequent complaints that the army was beset by ills tied to egoism, disunion, and a lack of patriotism among its officers.

---

<sup>95</sup> The report is printed in full by Albert Latreille, *L'armée et la nation*, pp. 393-453.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>97</sup> *Encyclopédie méthodique. Art militaire*, vol. 2 (1785), pp. 249-51.

The problem was how to bind them together as a corps, to produce a healthy “esprit de corps.” What was the source of the disorder and how could it be cured? He explained: “the real source is found in the spirit of our century: since it is nearly impossible to change that, let us try to modify its effects by opposing to the spirit of egoism that divides, the spirit of family and kinship that unites.” Instead of naming to *emplois* persons chosen indiscriminately from all provinces who had no prior connection with one another, “let us apply ourselves to subordinating to a single leader as many sons, brothers, relatives, and friends as we can find.” To this end, that of reestablishing a “spirit of patriotism,” de Cessac would limit the freedom of the colonels of the regiments to nominate to vacant places, this by requiring them to name new men only when all serving officers’ sons, brothers, nephews, cousins, or other relatives – in that order – had been exhausted as possibilities. The young *gentilshommes* whom the regiment had to expel or who simply left early were nearly always, according to our writer, those who had no relatives in the regiment and who thus were free to turn quickly to vice and irresponsibility. How much better to have in a regiment many members of the same families who formed a chain binding together the various parts and grades in the corps! How much more respectful the young officer toward all the older officers when his father was also there! In battle, ties of blood guaranteed ardor and cooperation. What a gain with a new spirit that would make “each answerable for the honor of all, and all answerable for the honor of each.”

Family, then, was central to the army’s thinking about recruitment, but it was difficult to guarantee that the right families would come in. The *École militaire* helped. But exclusion and inclusion before 1781 on the basis of simple proofs of nobility clearly was not working. It failed in two ways: not all nobles, even those of ancient lineage, came from military families, and a number of new nobles and a few *roturiers* did. The second problem was easier to treat than the first. Families, when they were military, could be exempted from having to make the proofs of nobility. As we saw, the regulation of 1781 provided that sons of *chevaliers de Saint-Louis* could enter on simple presentation of evidence for their fathers’ services. Even the attempt in 1787-88 to define and limit that exemption illustrates its intent. After insisting, without meeting resistance, on maintaining the system of proofs, Guibert spoke in his report about what he called abuses in the exemptions. It was “a misunderstood and badly contrived rule” that admitted sons of *officiers de fortune* who had remained simple lieutenants, sons of essentially civilian *commissaires des guerres*, retired *gendarmes*, officers of the *maréchaussée*,

or “persons of an even more inferior *état* or type who became *chevaliers de Saint-Louis*.” These were admitted, he continued, “while the son of an *intendant* if he does not have four generations, of a first president, the grandson of a *lieutenant-général* whose son had not served... were excluded from service.” The solution to this problem, however, was not to admit the second group, but to exclude the first, this by requiring that the *chevalier de Saint-Louis* must have been at least a “*capitaine en pied dans les troupes du Roi*” in order for his son to be freed from the four-generation requirement. Guibert and the army thus moved to assure that the exemption applied only to those sons whose fathers’ service had been professional and serious in the line regiments. And in the process Guibert expressed pleasure that by this means, and awaiting reform in the Order of Saint-Louis to deny the cross to all non-military types, “we will exclude definitively, and without saying it, all the classes of people mentioned above, we will purify the composition of the officers...” New nobles could and should remain, but only the right type.<sup>98</sup>

If they could have had their way, then, some in the army would have recruited new army officers almost exclusively from the sons or relatives of old ones. To achieve that by law, however, and to require it, or even come close to it, they would have had to offend a number of powerful people. Some were prepared to do it. De Cessac, for example, who wanted legal priority assigned to officers’ relatives for entry, simply noted that many of the rich nobles at Court would be excluded and thus injured, but times change and new needs arise. Those excluded, after all, retained “a great many objects” with which to console themselves. All families for which military careers had not yet been opened would complain about their exclusion, he wrote, but their exclusion will profit the “*maisons militaires*” and the state. The excluded families “will settle the activity appropriate to their talent, or their ambition, on some career that is just as important and perhaps too neglected.”<sup>99</sup> Another writer, also a *militaire*, or advertising himself as such, addressed his *Ouvrage d’un citoyen, gentilhomme et militaire* to an audience in the army. Like the others, he was against luxury and the mixing of ranks. Within the nobility, with one notable exception, he wanted a kind of democracy – he favored small distinctive marks to indicate the age of a man’s nobility, this so that in the real world of institutions other useless forms of personal display,

---

<sup>98</sup> Guibert’s report in Latreille, *L’armée et la nation*, pp. 450-51.

<sup>99</sup> *Encyclopédie méthodique. Art militaire*, vol. 2, p. 251.

among which he included unmerited appointments and promotions given for purposes of social prestige, could then be eliminated. Only merit and performance should count. What is interesting, however, is the one exception he set up. He divided new nobles, that is, those of less than 100 years standing, into two very unequal groups. The smaller one was composed of families ennobled by *lettres* for special merit or service, and of persons from families whose nobility came originally from an office but in which descendants had taken up military service, earning the *croix de Saint-Louis*. The second, larger group included all those ennobled during the preceding 100 years and whose families had either remained in offices, or had left offices “without entering the *état militaire*, or at least without really being attached to it.” The first group would be eligible to send its sons into the officer corps; the second would not. The writer added that “the necessity for not mixing up these two classes is obvious. Everyone complains that in the *robe* there are too many means for acquiring nobility through offices and money.”<sup>100</sup> Blocked in this way, and marked for 100 years by a special black ribbon, perhaps the new families would henceforth be less avid for offices and heightened status.

It was, of course, easy for writers to write, but much more difficult for the army’s leaders to act openly on those principles. Why did they not demand 100 years of nobility? Or insist that only sons of army officers could enter? Or both? For, after all, four generations could represent a quite short period. Entering *secrétaires du roi* often had living grandsons, and occasionally even great-grandsons – born *roturiers* but fourth-generation nobles at adolescence. And what about the eligible *parlementaires*? By the army’s standards, the professional orientation of their home environments was not very military. It is hard to know how far the army would have been willing to go in excluding outsiders formally, but they did not hesitate to make strong recommendations along these lines. In the *ordonnances* of 1788 in which they recreated the places of *cadets gentilshommes* in the regiments, they added that “His Majesty recommends that the colonels propose preferentially to fill them with the sons, brothers, or nephews of the old officers in their regiments, a precious

---

<sup>100</sup> *Ouvrage d'un citoyen, gentilhomme et militaire, ou lettres sur la noblesse, qui présentent le tableau de son origine, de ses droits, dénonçant les abus, en indiquant les moyens d'y remédier et d'opérer des changements importants pour ce corps et la patrie, à MM. les Notables* (Londres, 1787), pp. 140-41.

type that he had in mind when creating these positions.”<sup>101</sup> Still, they surely recognized practical limits to what they could do. Guibert said it himself when he reported that limiting the exemptions from proofs of nobility for sons of *chevaliers de Saint-Louis* would be effective in excluding non-military types “without saying it.”

But the obstacles to more explicit exclusions were formidable. First, there was the Court. The least common denominator of the persons there was not ancient noble lineage, but money. It was possible, through the Ségur *règlement*, to stop the placing in the regiments of new-noble Court protégés by a general law that applied to all and affected only some of the larger body of favorites. But the rule could not easily have been extended to apply to all these favorites, as de Cessac wanted. The men and especially the women with influence and power at Court did not understand honor in the same way that army professionals did. Any noble, or at least any old noble, surely had it as his birthright, and specific attitudes toward professional work did not affect that. After all, was military skill really anything more than knowing how to ride a horse and command gracefully and die bravely? To explain convincingly at Court the newer, more mechanical, unheroic, almost bureaucratic vision of honor would have been impossible.

If the Court was a problem, so were the *parlements*. The Ségur *règlement* was of course a matter of internal discipline for the army, and did not require registration in the sovereign courts. Thus it received little public discussion. But no one could have had any doubt about what would have been the sentiment and reaction of the *parlements* if the restrictive act had been put in any other form than the one it received. Ten years earlier the nobility in the Estates of Languedoc had adopted new regulations for itself. In a burst of aristocratic pride, they demanded, in article 7, that the new acquirer of a barony that was entitled to permanent representation in their body could henceforth no longer sit with them “if he is not in the profession of Arms; and he will be held to the preliminary requirement of presenting proofs of Noblesse Militaire on the paternal side for four hundred years, instead of four generations...” The rigor of proofs was softened on the mother’s side – she need only have been a simple noble of one degree. It is hard to see who other than the king could have been admitted under those conditions, but it was clear that all the

---

<sup>101</sup> “Ordonnance concernant la Constitution de l’Infanterie Française, 17 mars 1788,” in *État militaire de France pour l’année 1788*, p. 429.

*parlementaires* could not. The Parlement of Toulouse reacted promptly and at length. Their *arrêt* declaring null the article runs to eighteen angry pages in print.<sup>102</sup> They argued that, unlike those of other countries, all nobles in France were equal, and “it is this equality that forms their courage and strength... the nobility is no less pure in its source, nor less fertile in its performance, whether it originates in the ministry of the Laws, or in the professions of Arms...” To think anything else was to hold a prejudice that was “a residue of the old barbarism.” Neither *robe* nor sword was a separate order, the Parlement insisted, and they collected pages of precedents to prove it. If the king chose to honor especially persons of old and distinguished birth at Court or in other ways, that was up to him, but public law could not recognize such distinctions. The Parlement moved on to defend property and the whole order the magistrates thought to be threatened, attacked the Estates for being generally unrepresentative, and forbade that body to make a similar *règlement* in the future. The Estates, of course, denied the Parlement’s authority to act, and dispatched its syndic to seek the Royal Council’s *arrêt* quashing the one that the Parlement had issued. He obtained it, but the Estates compromised on the issue by stating that they had meant to say that only the person entering their body must “be in the profession of arms,” not all his ancestors.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, the *parlements* were touchy, and everyone knew it. There was no chance that the Royal Council would have risked a struggle over this issue when it was trying to raise taxes and float loans for which it would need the cooperation of the sovereign courts. There were places where the *parlementaires* as such were formally not welcome, but the army had not been one of them. By the 1770s men of the *robe* could not place their sons in the pages. Hozier, then the royal genealogist, wrote in 1774 to the Grande Écurie to say that he wished he could send the certificate that de Ricouart needed to join the pages there, “but his family being of the *Robe*, I cannot do it.” The next year, the Grand Écuyer, the prince de Lambesc, had to replace by others two more young men whom he had accepted to be pages when it was discovered, as his assistant put it,

---

<sup>102</sup> BNF, Fonds Joly de Fleury, 453, f<sup>o</sup> 58 et suiv., *Arrêt de la Cour du Parlement, du 14 Juillet 1770. Qui déclare les Articles VII et VIII des nouveaux Réglemens faits par les Gens des Trois-Etats de la Province de Languedoc Nuls, comme étant faits au-delà de leur pouvoir.*

<sup>103</sup> Archives départementales de la Haute Garonne, C 2414, f<sup>o</sup> 151 (22 novembre 1771).

that “they are both from families originally from the *robe*.”<sup>104</sup> After 1781 only two members of *parlements* qualified, one of them de Séguier, son of the *avocat général* in the Parlement of Paris. In the Grande Écurie they joined 117 other pages, of whom 59 had fathers in military service.<sup>105</sup> Sons of *parlementaires* were not eligible to be *élèves du roi* in the *écoles militaires*. But whatever their private feelings, the *parlementaires* did not make an issue over these matters that seemed to pertain to the king’s prerogative to establish purely honorific distinctions. Their formal and systematic exclusion from the army officer corps, however, would have been quite a different matter.

Séguier, who only shortly before 1781 had been expressing resentment of the intrusion into army affairs by Vergennes, an *homme de robe*, shared with Besenval and the other members of the army’s committee in 1781 a distrust of the *parlements*.<sup>106</sup> Others no doubt agreed with the views of the future general Dommartin. Writing from garrison with his artillery regiment at Metz in October 1788, he described in a letter the return from exile of the *parlementaires*, “these shrimps who for 30,000 *francs* claim to be sovereigns.” He expected that they “will be abolished everywhere.”<sup>107</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s probably unfair caricature of the young magistrate in the 1780s expresses a current perception: not serious in work, speaking only of girls, spectacles, horses and battles; shunning the black clothes traditional to his profession, he “fears nothing so much as to pass for what he really is... in the fear of being considered a *robin*, he takes on the tone and airs of the military man.”<sup>108</sup> But whatever their views, few wanted an open fight. The requirement of four generations of paternal nobility was a reasonable compromise. It was consistent with what some *parlements* themselves were demanding in cities – Aix, Grenoble, Toulouse – where the presence of other courts or

---

<sup>104</sup> AN 0<sup>1</sup> 972, no. 94, *minutes de lettre*, 16 décembre 1774, Hozier to unknown; 0<sup>1</sup> 866, f<sup>o</sup> 51, *lettre*, 14 octobre 1775, Müller to président Hozier.

<sup>105</sup> AN 0<sup>1</sup> 955, “Catalogue des noms et surnoms des Pages qui ont été reçus dans la Grande Écurie du Roy, depuis l’année 1751.” In the 1780s, then, 50% of the pages’ fathers had military careers, whereas earlier the number had been much lower: 8% (11 of 141) in the 1750s, and 23% (31 of 134) in the 1770s.

<sup>106</sup> Comte de Séguier, *Le maréchal de Séguier*, p. 254.

<sup>107</sup> A. de Besancenet, *Un officier royaliste au service de la république d’après les lettres inédites du général de Dommartin, 1786 à 1799* (Paris, 1876), p. 23.

<sup>108</sup> From *Tableau de Paris...*, as quoted by Yves Durand in *Les fermiers généraux...*, p. 211.



special municipal forms led to a particularly rapid ennoblement of new families. If these *parlements* did not always observe their own *règlements*, they could hardly quarrel with the principle. Moreover, the demand for four generations was one that would split most *parlements*, and it was not a matter that, outside Rennes and Nancy, the majority of members would want to discuss lest it draw unnecessary attention to the newness of their nobility. Finally, many of the oldest *robe* families were attached to traditions that directed most of their sons into the sovereign courts. In practice, the army would have no serious difficulty in absorbing the fifty-five sons of sovereign court members who were nearly lost among the 3,000 entering officers after 1781.

One form of the army's professional reaction or reform, then, the choice of word here depending on how one wishes to see the process, was the requirement of four degrees of nobility, a requirement that was not applied, however, to military families. Its effectiveness in keeping out newer and civilian nobles, which is what the army leaders intended, has already been discussed. It would, of course, be a mistake to think that for military leaders the matter of genealogical proofs was a constant obsession, a matter that took precedence in their thinking over other things. They spent more time on questions of soldiers' discipline and pay, supply, the hierarchy and structure of command within the officer corps, the internal organization of regiments and their possible combinations in divisions, new tactical formations, and so on. Most of their work was internal and technical. Officers and their recruitment were but a part, although an important one, of a larger story of military organization and reform. Further, the exclusion of some social and professional types was, in turn, but a part of their thinking even about officers.

For recruiting officers, the total program involved excluding some persons and assimilating others more slowly so as to militarize them the more effectively before they entered or rose very high. Older nobles who lacked the military formation in their families were still coming in, and nothing could be done to prevent it. Court influence and wealth would still operate to place in high ranks very young men who might or might not be competent. Mere oldness of nobility was no guarantee of anything. To deal with them, various other programs were devised and applied. The army broadened and extended the system of military education in 1776 by dispersing eleven of its schools through the provinces. In them, the king continued to support the cost of raising for the army the old noble sons of poor army officers, but he also opened those schools to sons of other parents who could afford to pay their own expenses. In Paris, the *École*

militaire, closed in 1776, reopened in 1778 in a new form. Its better-known role, owing to Bonaparte's presence there, was to educate further the ablest of the less well-off *élèves du roi* from the provincial schools. But it became also an institution where wealthy and old nobles placed for several years' training their sons who were by birth the future colonels and destined to rise to very high rank. There, in the company of cadets, they received for the price of 2,000 *livres* a year some acquaintance with military science before they joined the troops. For others, as noted above, the army experimented also with the system of *cadets gentilshommes* in the troops, tried and rejected in different forms earlier, in order to teach new officers about army life from the bottom. It created the new, special grades of *colonel en second* and then *major en second* in order to slow the rise of the young *gentilshommes* from the Court and to see that they learned something before they commanded regiments.<sup>109</sup>

In short, as it became more professional, the army was trying to seal itself off, to insulate itself from a civilian society that looked corrupt and threatening to the health of the military institution. On the one hand, it attempted to make longer and more serious the apprenticeship that older nobles had to serve. And, on the other hand, it excluded entirely the newer, non-military nobles who were thought, by their formation in the family, not to be assimilable to the new army. Whether the efforts succeeded and began to produce a better army we have no way of knowing – probably, many of the older nobles with only a smattering of military education or a longer apprenticeship were not very different from their predecessors. But for our purposes that does not much matter. What does matter for our understanding of the background of revolution, and of important aspects of the Revolution itself, is placing the army's actions in the proper institutional, social, and mental context. The army, wanting to close itself off, thought that it could reform only by becoming more self-perpetuating, internally regulated, corporatist. However uncongenial to us its method, however much it both dignified snobbery by institutionalizing it and thereby generated an opposing democratic awareness, the army in its genealogical restrictions was expressing one side of what at the time seemed broadly modernizing and reformist tendencies. In the process it was struggling mainly not against *roturiers*, but against other, non-military parts of the nobility. Its tendency was toward the formation of caste in an aristocratic society; its ideas and assumptions were the ones derivable

---

<sup>109</sup> See Latreille, *L'armée et la nation*, pp. 188-99, 209-10, 248-61.

from that society and even the Enlightenment. But what needs to be seen above all is that the caste was to be military, and would divide the nobility almost permanently into functionally separate parts. In this sense, the “aristocratic reaction” in its most conspicuous appearance in the army was also highly professional.

## VII Some conclusions

---

In a broader way, what does it all mean? It would be a mistake to overstate conclusions, and my thoughts are tentative. No doubt, more and other kinds of evidence are needed. Nonetheless, several suggestions for ways of thinking about problems of development before and in the French Revolution come to mind. One has nothing to do with the army at all. This is that the rapid and continuing movement of families into the nobility at the end of the *ancien régime* bears on the character of the Revolution and in what sense it may be said to have been “bourgeois.”<sup>110</sup> That it was

---

<sup>110</sup> The character of the Revolution in this sense has, of course, been much discussed in recent years. Readers of the *Annales* will know that the matter has been raised in F. Furet’s article (“Le catéchisme de la Révolution française,” *Annales E.S.C.* 26 (1971), 278-89), whose notes detail the relevant earlier literature to which specific and detailed reference need not be included here. Because some of my thoughts about this are known – Furet cited and summarized them from the unpublished paper that sketched a portion of the present study – fairness requires that I call to the reader’s attention another article (G. Lemarchand, “Sur la société française en 1789,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 19 (1972), 73-91) that summarizes other writings in defense of an opposite conclusion. Several writings in the English language have been important to the discussion: A. Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, “Who Intervened in 1788? A Commentary on ‘The Coming of the French Revolution’,” *American Historical Review* 71 (1965), 77-103; the conclusion to Gruder, *The Royal Provincial Intendants*; and especially, George V. Taylor, “Non-capitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 72 (1967), 469-96. R.R. Palmer wrote a summary of these and other developments in the dispute in the English-speaking world: “Polémique américaine sur le rôle de la bourgeoisie dans la Révolution française,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française* 189 (1967), 369-380.

mainly *roturier* and democratic is not at question, nor is there any doubt that by clearing the undergrowth of corporatism and privilege the Revolution made possible an economic development that could be described as modern. But considering the rate at which the wealthiest *roturiers* were entering the nobility, locating leaders or a vanguard of revolution among great capitalists will not be possible. There were great capitalists in France, it is true, but most were in the group that became a de facto *noblesse commerçante* – new nobles who remained during the eighteenth century in ever larger numbers in that peculiar French mixture of activities connected with trade, state finance, and office holding that has baffled the social historians in their best efforts at classification.<sup>111</sup> In any case, the study of the Revolution is surely complicated by the fact that so much of the *grande bourgeoisie* in 1789 was noble, and thus with few exceptions, did not play the great role in initiating and leading the Revolution that might have been expected of it.

A second point to suggest is that beneath the surface the French nobility was quite divided in 1789, just as Necker said it was. Historians have for long taken note of the nobility's division into groups of rich and poor, Court and country, new and old. For all that, as a class the nobility has seemed fairly unified in its interests, in its attachment to traditional agrarian arrangements, in its monopoly of the important jobs. But if a unity did at last develop, it came more slowly than has been thought and in the Revolution itself, only after it became clear that the principle of

---

<sup>111</sup> The works of George Taylor, "Non-capitalist Wealth..." and Herbert Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la Révocation de l'Edit de Nantes à la Révolution* (Paris, 2 vol.s, 1959-61) are of course essential for this point; Jean Bouvier and Henry Germain-Martin, *Finances et financiers de l'ancien régime*, "Que sais-je?", no. 1109 (Paris, 1964), ch. 3, gives a convenient summary of Lüthy's work. For the existence and growth of this world of commerce and finance, see also Maurice Garden, *Lyon et les Lyonnais*, pp. 204, 392-398; Georges Lefebvre, *Études orléanaises*, t.1; *Contribution à l'étude des structures sociales à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, Commission d'histoire économique et sociale de la Révolution, Mémoires et documents, vol. 15 (Paris, 1962), pp. 154, 175-188, 200-201; from *Information historique*, three articles by Guy Richard (1957, no. 5, 185-89; 1958, no. 5, 185-90, 201; 1959, no. 4, 156-60) and one by Pierre Léon (1958, no. 3, 101-105). The world of the *anobli* and *financier* is well described and analyzed in Yves Durand, *Les Fermiers généraux au XVIIIe siècle*; and by Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret in his *Gens de finance au XVIIIe siècle*, Collection Bordas-Connaissance, série Université (Paris, 1972); and in his *Les financiers de Languedoc au XVIIIe siècle* (S.E.V.P.E.N., Paris, 1970).

nobility itself was under attack. Just as it took a little time for guild masters, small-town lawyers, non-commissioned officers in the army, and *vicaires* in the church to discover what they shared, what it was in democratic principles that held them together and required solidarity, so too were nobles not immediately aware that they all had common interests that in the end most would want to defend jointly. Before the Revolution various, only partially overlapping groups within the nobility, not anticipating what the Revolution was really to bring, were looking at one another suspiciously. The *noblesse commerçante* was one such group whom many distrusted. The badly studied local notables, entrenched often with *roturier* colleagues in *bailliage* administrations and defending their jurisdiction against the expanding claims of *parlements*, were another. The *parlementaires*, quoting Montesquieu and looking to England or the almost primeval German woods for constitutional principles, were still a third; to others these men who claimed to speak for the whole nobility often seemed merely domineering and self-serving. When it came time to select the 454 deputies and their alternates to represent the Second Estate at Versailles in 1789, only 39 (or 8.6%) came from the sovereign courts, their number submerged in a rising tide that carried in 307 (67.6%) who were officers in the army or navy.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, looking out from their bases in the *parlements* there were many magistrates in whom the Church evoked visions of fanaticism and the army the spectre of military despotism. Below the top-most levels association in a common point of view did not come automatically or easily to nobles before 1789.

The case of Bretagne is instructive for the contrast that it represents. It is surely no accident that radicalism appeared first and most strongly there where an older, unified and relatively homogeneous nobility had for long dominated the important institutions, especially the Estates and Parlement whose members more than elsewhere mixed easily and interchangeably with those in military institutions. In Bretagne the old nobles managed to radicalize by their exclusivism even a *secrétaire du roi*, Jacques Cottin. But Bretagne was the exception, together with Béarn and

---

<sup>112</sup> Tabulated from Armand Brette, *Les Constituants. Liste des députés et des suppléants élus à l'assemblée constituante de 1789* (Paris, 1897). For hostile reactions by some other nobles to the *parlementaires* at the time of the coup against the courts in May 1788, see Égret, *La Pré-Révolution française*, pp. 295-99.

possibly Artois.<sup>113</sup> Elsewhere the nobility was not unified, and its internal divisions surely weakened that body's capacity to express itself and to act politically in 1789. This, of course, does not mean that a divided aristocracy was in any sense moribund, weak economically, troubled by bad conscience, and ready to be pushed over at a touch. Quite the reverse! Many in the army, at least, were the tougher and more determined for their confidence that aristocratic principles of recruitment and exclusion by birth, as they understood them, represented reform and the future. As R.R. Palmer argued and showed, in a context and from evidence different than my own, the Revolution was a struggle between two forces – aristocracy and democracy – that were rising.<sup>114</sup> There is no reason to suppose a law of conservation of social forces that would lead to matching a rising Third Estate with a necessarily declining nobility. The nobility in 1789, if fragmented in many ways, was also in its separate parts tough and confident. It lost, but only after real, massive, bitter struggle between forces that represented opposing and conceivably viable (practically, if not morally) conceptions of the future and modernity.

The third and final point follows from what precedes and has to do with the broader understanding of social conflict, and the relation to it of diverse occupational groups. The point is not easy to make without overstating it. It is surely not true to say that there was no bourgeoisie, or that the categories of *roturier* and noble did not matter. Of course they did, and in many of the ways that have long been assumed. But it is always too easy to apply categories for analysis taken from one period to others where they do not fit. In this instance there arises a difficulty. The nineteenth-century understanding of social and economic class has been interposed between us and the eighteenth century, and it has led to a tendency among historians to collapse various smaller categories into the larger ones seen as operative in large-scale class conflict. In the process, the professions can get lost or be seen as anomalous. In pursuit of the creation of classes one may not notice some profound changes in outlook during the eighteenth century that were making occupations the more important by

---

<sup>113</sup> In Artois in 1755 the *corps de la noblesse* of the provincial estates asked for and received permission to raise from four to six the number of generations of *noblesse* on the paternal side that new persons who wished to sit with them must present. In 1770 they persuaded the king to allow them to apply the same requirement to the maternal side. See registers of correspondance of the Minister of War in AN E 2772, f<sup>os</sup> 71, 76; E 2778, 24 Octobre 1770.

<sup>114</sup> *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, vol. 1, *passim*.

slowly altering throughout society the very sense of status that contemporaries held, and the forms that they used to assign rank. Since the change was broadly cultural, affecting churchmen and magistrates, teachers as well as army officers, it was a matter that did not generate quarrels. Thus, it did not give rise to discussion or produce a large literature on the subject. The change can be seen, however, through shifting usage of the word “état.” In the 1694 edition of the French Academy’s great dictionary the word meant, among other things, the status or condition of a person in the sense of whether he was noble or *roturier*. In the 1762 edition the definition of the word was almost the same as earlier, except that there was added, “*État* means also Profession...”<sup>115</sup> Then, looking up the word “profession,” we find that it had the current, modern definition at both times, meaning magistracy (“robe”), surgeon, soldier, lawyer and so on. What was added to the meaning of “état” was very significant, reflecting a fundamental change in self-awareness. Almost reflexively, without thinking about it consciously, contemporaries were coming to associate status and rank with profession, function, or job. In eighteenth century usage, *état* in the same sense of rank or status came increasingly to mean what one did.

Now, at the end of the eighteenth century, when social conflict grew in intensity, it would have been surprising if men’s occupations had not had a growing and central place in their thoughts and actions. Where men stood in the social matrix – the image of ladder is sometimes misleading – was increasingly tied to the consciousness of themselves as doctors, engineers, lawyers, shopkeepers, or even as writers. The framework of understanding tied to categories of noble, bourgeois, and later proletarian was, and is, relevant, but the sense of conflict defined in those terms was episodic – the very obsession of Marx and others in the nineteenth century with problems and difficulties in the formation of class and revolutionary consciousness suggests that a deeply-rooted reality disturbing to them lay in a development of quite a different kind, one that would fragment class along lines of profession. Both things, of course, were real: broad divisions of wealth, legal status, and privilege, the background of class conflict, also mattered. But if, in the effort to understand development from at least the mid-eighteenth century, we

---

<sup>115</sup> *Le Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, dédié au roi* (Paris, 2 vol.s, 1694), vol. 1, pp. 402-403; “Estat,” *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, quatrième édition (Paris, 2 vol.s, 1762), vol. 1, pp. 674-75. [I noted later that the “modern” definition of *état* was also in the 1740 edition of the *Dictionnaire*.]

combine too frequently, too soon, and too continuously the occupational categories into the larger ones of class, we are likely to distort the historical process. In this instance, it is no doubt true that the general level of awareness of aristocratic assumptions was raised in the background of the revolution, and in turn, this certainly had much to do with generating its opposite in democratic and egalitarian revolutionary sentiment. But the actors in the struggle were not simply *roturiers*, bourgeois, and nobles; they were churchmen, magistrates, lawyers, merchants, shoemakers – and army officers. The associations that they represented need to be understood as social, as well as professional, groups and fitted into the model of social conflict. The habits and values of aristocratic society, in the case examined here, contributed heavily to the forms – exclusion on the basis of birth, and acceptance of tendencies toward the formation of caste – that the army thought appropriate to the effort to change itself. In 1789, as today, this effort and these forms seem unacceptable to the large majority who, differing on other things, share the democratic principles embedded in the Revolution. But if one wishes to understand the reality of struggle in 1789 and after, the view that Ségur was no more than the agent of reactionary *gentilshommes* who just happened to be in the army, random expressions of generalized aristocratic reaction, will not get us far. Instead, it was the specifically military impetus to, and form of, reaction against other parts of the nobility – a reaction engineered by men whose sense of their own status was increasingly derived from the institution – that unwittingly contributed to revolution.





