

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

THE ANCIEN
RÉGIME

Edited by

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CHAPTER 7

NOBILITY

JOHN SHOVLIN

HISTORIANS of the Ancien Régime long viewed the nobility as a holdover from a feudal age, an antiquated breed condemned to a slow, and ultimately terminal, decline. Nobles were regarded as the casualties of secular political and social transformations: the rise of the absolutist state, which stripped them of political power; and economic transformations, which increased the relative wealth of non-nobles, and empowered them to challenge the nobility's supremacy. Since the 1960s, however, revisionist scholarship has almost entirely jettisoned this view. The nobility is now widely seen as a social group that participated massively in the processes of modernization that transformed seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Through its economic role and values, its service to the monarchical state, its openness to new recruits, and its engagement in the public sphere, the nobility moved with the times. Revisionists also challenged the idea that the French Revolution represented the culmination of deep-seated social conflicts between the nobility and other social groups. The antipathy to nobles that burst forth in 1789, they argued, could as readily be viewed as the product of immediate political struggles unleashed by the calling of the Estates-General, as of long-simmering social resentments.¹

Recent scholarship confirms and deepens many of the principal conclusions of the revisionist perspective, but also challenges certain aspects of this new consensus. Considered as a whole, the nobility consolidated, and may even have increased, its power, wealth, and cultural influence in the century before 1789. Economic conditions brought prosperity for many noble families in the eighteenth century, and newcomers joined the Second Estate in droves, bringing with them their ambition, their skills, and their money. But what was good for the nobility as a social group was not beneficial for all nobles. Recent research has shown that poorer nobles faced a crisis of social reproduction; they struggled simply to preserve their status and their lineages, and many failed. On the question of revolutionary hostility to nobles, some historians have come to question the idea that such sentiments sprang mainly from the political circumstances of the pre-revolutionary crisis. They point to rich veins of anti-noble feeling in the old

regime, and suggest that these must be taken into account if the anti-aristocratic character of the French Revolution is to be properly understood. One factor of particular importance in generating antagonism to nobles, and to nobility as an institution, was conflict over honour. Non-noble elites increasingly demanded that their honour be recognized, and resented noble claims to distinction and superiority. The revolutionary attack on nobility emerged, in part, out of a long-brewing status crisis with its roots deep in the social transformations that remade the French elite over the course of the eighteenth century.

Scholarship on nobles since the 1960s demonstrates that the commercialization of social relations was not inimical to the interests of the nobility as a social group. This was especially the case for the wealthiest nobles who were often well-placed to reap the benefits of the long economic expansion that marked the decades between the 1720s and the 1760s. Rich nobles made use of their economically privileged position to invest in some of the most dynamic, profitable (and often risky) sectors of the French economy. Noble investors were particularly prominent in mining and metallurgy, and in industries dependent on government contracts, such as cannon founding and munitions. Noble capital also played a role in international trade and, to some extent, in colonial production.² While such opportunities were closed to less affluent nobles, who lacked the capital and access to credit that such investments required, many nobles of modest fortune made a successful transition to a world in which their primary social function was as collectors of agricultural rents (and to a lesser extent as agricultural entrepreneurs). Nationally, the nobility owned 25–30 per cent of all French land on the eve of the Revolution and, locally, their position could be even more dominant. In the diocese of Toulouse in 1750, a noble cadre representing 1 per cent of the population owned 44 per cent of the land. As major landholders, the nobility benefited from the steady rise in prices for grain and wood in the eighteenth century, and also from the more fluctuating profits of the wine trade. The wages paid to agricultural labourers did not grow nearly as fast as agricultural commodity prices. Lucrative seigneurial rights could be exploited or leased out to supplement income from rents, and many nobles capitalized on this resource by reviving forgotten or dormant claims. But the long-term trend was for rents to replace seigneurial exactions as the most significant source of noble landed income.³

Provincial noble families, in some regions at least, enjoyed rising mean incomes in the second half of the eighteenth century. A sample of noble magistrates from the Parlement of Aix suggests that, in most cases, their revenues increased over the course of the century, sometimes quite spectacularly. At the beginning of the century in Upper Normandy, 40 per cent of rural noble households had incomes of less than 1,000 livres; by the 1750s this proportion had fallen to 16 per cent in the *élection* of Rouen and 11 per cent in the *élection* of Gisors. In the latter district, median noble income increased by nearly 200 per cent between 1703 and 1788. The trend appears to have continued even in the difficult years after 1770. In the lower Norman *élection* of Alençon in 1766, only 25 per cent of noble families earned more than 3,000 livres annually. Twenty years later, this proportion had increased to 40 per cent. In the town of Abbeville in Picardy,

between 1770 and 1784 the proportion of nobles earning more than 10,000 livres increased from 15 per cent to 25 per cent, while the proportion earning less than 3,000 fell by one-third.⁴

One factor skewing average noble wealth upward was the ennoblement of wealthy commoners. According to William Doyle, perhaps 10,000 men were ennobled over the course of the eighteenth century, the vast majority through venal office. Every officer who joined the nobility brought his family with him, so 10,000 ennoblements might have entailed 50,000 new nobles. This was a significant influx of new blood, and combined with high rates of ennoblement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it meant that relatively few nobles in 1789 descended from families with immemorial nobility. In Franche-Comté, only 21 per cent of noble families in 1789 had been noble for at least four generations. Two-thirds of the Angevin nobility in 1789 had been ennobled since 1667. In the *bailliage* of Beauvais, among the fifty-eight nobles who met in 1789 to elect a deputy to the Estates-General, almost half came from families ennobled since 1700. Rates of ennoblement were probably not unusually high in the eighteenth century, but access to the nobility had become more firmly tied to money. The most prolific ennobling office—that of *secrétaire du roi*—could cost as much as 120,000 livres by the 1780s. There were 800 such offices, and they brought nearly 4,000 officeholders into the nobility between 1700 and 1789. All of these new recruits were necessarily wealthy men, and in aggregate they must have significantly raised the total income of the Second Estate.⁵

Rising median incomes also derived, in some measure, from a shrinking nobility. While the French population as a whole rose from 21 or 22 million to over 28 million between 1700 and 1789, over the same period the number of nobles, by the best recent estimate, fell from around 230,000 to about 140,000.⁶ This global fall in numbers masks significant regional differences. The *généralité* of Bordeaux maintained its share of nobles, while noble density in the Lyonnais actually increased. The noble population of Languedoc was also growing.⁷ But in most regions the demographic trend was downward. In Brittany between 1667 and 1789, the percentage of nobles in the population decreased from 1.08 per cent to 0.60 per cent; in the Orléanais during the same period, they fell from 1.22 per cent of the population to 0.39 per cent; in Berry there was a 43 per cent decrease in the proportion of nobles in the population, while the fall was over 50 per cent in Lower Normandy.⁸ The number of noble families living in the countryside near Rouen fell by 60 per cent between the early eighteenth century and 1789, while the number of noble households in the town itself declined from 272 to 176—a fall of 35 per cent.⁹ Regional changes in density can be accounted for in part by the migration of wealthier nobles towards the cities. While the noble populations of small Breton towns fell in the eighteenth century, for example, those of Nantes and Saint-Malo grew. However, to account for the global fall in the number of nobles, we must look elsewhere.¹⁰

Many nobles may have slipped, over time, into the ranks of the Third Estate, forced to take up derogating occupations to make ends meet. Such impoverishment appears to have been a significant drain on the nobility, at least in some French regions, during preceding centuries.¹¹ However, though the evidence here is mixed, the most plausible

explanation of the fall in the number of nobles is limitation of reproduction. A significant proportion of all nobles in the eighteenth century remained unmarried, and noble couples were having fewer children. The trend is clearest in the uppermost reaches of the order, among the dukes and peers. Between marriages contracted in the second half of the seventeenth century and those contracted a century later the proportion of childless couples increased from 9 per cent to 35 per cent, while among women who bore at least one child the proportion bearing no more than two rose from 13 per cent to 46 per cent.¹² Natality in French noble families as a whole appears to have fallen rapidly from the second half of the seventeenth century, a trend in line with several other European nobilities.¹³

One way to interpret such dramatic shifts in reproductive behaviour is in terms of a decision to conserve family wealth by limiting the number of children who had to be provided for. If nobles were better off generally in the eighteenth century, the economic burden of merely preserving status was increasing. This was so for several reasons. In earlier times it had been possible for petty gentlemen to sustain a noble identity by serving in the households of greater nobles. This option had almost disappeared by the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ As education and refinement became increasingly important to the identity of nobility, the costs of raising children and presenting an appropriate face to the world increased. Finally, the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century placed noble households under new pressures. Many nobles expressed regret at having to spend so much in order to keep up appearances. Other noble households acquired a taste for comforts and luxuries they could ill afford. Such circumstances pushed noble families further into debt, which exposed them to ruin.¹⁵

The overall shrinkage of the Second Estate and its simultaneous absorption of tens of thousands of wealthy newcomers must certainly be viewed as beneficial to the relative position of the nobility, viewed in aggregate. By the 1780s, nobles on average were wealthier, better educated, and probably more influential culturally than they had been a century earlier. But the same trends invigorating the group spelled desuetude for thousands of noble families who either failed to reproduce, or slipped into the Third Estate. To the latter we should certainly add those thousands of impoverished nobles who were unable to enjoy a lifestyle commensurate with noble status and who therefore suffered social eclipse even if they managed to retain their privileged legal status.¹⁶ These problems of social reproduction gave rise to a bitter chorus of recrimination. Lesser nobles complained that the social order had been undermined by money, that virtue and merit were no longer recognized, and that the polity was corrupted by luxury—a perspective that resonated with significant sections of the order, not just with ruined provincial squires.

Nobles were long regarded as the losers in a competition for power with the monarchy in early modern France. In the last thirty years, however, a new understanding of the absolutist monarchy has developed which views it as a form of government based less on the suppression of aristocratic power than on compromise and cooperation between the crown and social elites.¹⁷ Nowhere is the historiographical shift more evident than in scholarship on the court. Versailles was long parodied as an arena where the aristocracy

came to be domesticated, where independent magnates were transformed into simpering courtiers grovelling for imaginary rewards. In recent scholarship, by contrast, the court emerges as the principal national political institution, the site where the multiple networks of patronage which tied the polity together converged, and where their competing claims were managed. Aristocrats came to Versailles because it was the nerve centre for the distribution of power, position, and prestige. The court was the key source of information about opportunities, and the focal point for lobbying efforts. The administration was embedded in the life of the court, and any minister who could not manage court factions did not stay in office for long. Factions exerted influence even in such royal preserves as foreign policy. A clique around the Duke de Belle-Isle helped push France into war in the 1740s, while another, linked to Mme de Pompadour, engineered France's new alliance with Austria in 1756.¹⁸

One of the most striking developments of Louis XV's reign was the presence of *grands seigneurs* in the ministries.¹⁹ From the 1750s, until the King's death in 1774, the ministries of foreign affairs, the army, and the navy were dominated by nobles of ancient extraction. Under Louis XVI, most of the ministers of war and the navy continued to be sword nobles, though foreign affairs was presided over by Charles Gravier de Vergennes, who emanated from a robe family. The distinction between ministerial and courtly power was further eroded as the ministry became a springboard to the highest reaches of aristocratic society. One of the daughters of Germain-Louis Chauvelin, a career magistrate who became Keeper of the Seals, married a La Rochefoucauld and another wed the Count de l'Aigle. One son of Chancellor René-Charles de Maupeou followed in his father's footsteps, another rose to the rank of general in the army, while a daughter married the Marquis de Calvisson. Vergennes's son married the adoptive daughter of the Marshal Duke de Mouchy.²⁰

Royal government, the new perspective holds, depended on a partnership with the nobility; nobles were less the victims of the monarchy than its agents. Aristocratic governors, their lieutenants-general, bishops, and magnates played an informal role in the government of provinces functioning as key channels of influence, patronage, and communication between the monarchy and its provincial subjects. They could induce locals to execute the will of the centre, and they could also advance the interests and perspectives of the periphery in its dealings with the crown. The role of nobles in the *pays d'états* was even more vital because here the king had to negotiate with provincial estates dominated by nobles and their clientele.²¹ Nobles served the monarchy in the courts, in the administration, and especially in the army. Many embraced an ideal of service as a defining feature of their political identity. Military service was such an important component of noble honour that noble officers were willing to take on considerable personal expense in order to serve. In the eighteenth century, nobles were drawn to the rhetoric of patriotism that became such a central aspect of public discourse, claiming *esprit public* as a defining virtue of the Second Estate, and representing their order as an institution essential to the well-being of the *patrie*.²²

Yet as recent scholarship has recognized, the older view that the rise of the monarchical state came at the expense of noble power also captures a part of the truth. Louis XIV

broke the power of noble magnates in the late seventeenth century, at least to the extent that open rebellion became largely a thing of the past. Noble authority and independence decreased in other ways also: proprietary regiments in the army gave way to more centralized control; nobles could no longer sustain large numbers of retainers once they were ensconced at Versailles, and this reduced their influence; the state undermined the power of nobles as seigneurs, especially by weakening lordly justice; and many aristocrats became heavily dependent on the monarchy to supplement their incomes, which reduced their autonomy.²³ Michael Kwass has suggested that the implicit bargain that tied ordinary nobles to the absolutist monarchy was fraying by the second half of the eighteenth century. The terms of this bargain held that nobles should be exempt from direct taxation, indeed that part of the taxes levied on the peasantry be channelled to the nobility in the form of pensions, salaries, *gages*, and interest payments. The monarchy disrupted this redistributive arrangement by introducing universal taxes such as the *capitation* and the *vingtième*—taxes specifically designed to tap the wealth of the privileged. Antipathy to universal taxation was a key source of noble restiveness in the eighteenth century, and a particularly important factor driving the resistance of noble-dominated parlements to the monarchy. Noble magistrates even resorted to a rhetoric accusing the King of behaving despotically. From the 1750s there were calls for the reintroduction of provincial estates which, it was hoped, would restore to the nobility some control over fiscal exactions. The desire for political agency, combined with the diminishing profits of cooperation, may help to explain why so many nobles looked forward with enthusiasm to the reform of the kingdom in 1789.²⁴

Nobles were well-placed to benefit from the greatest cultural transformation of the age—the rise of the public sphere. The emergence of a public, claiming a kind of cultural authority, grounded in new and renovated institutions of sociability, and mediated by the periodical press, would naturally advantage the more educated elements in the population.²⁵ Having evolved from an order defined principally by military values in the sixteenth century to one marked by education, consumption, and refinement in the eighteenth, the Second Estate was well-placed to play a leading role in public debate. Nobles were both major producers and significant consumers of the intellectual production of the eighteenth-century public sphere. They composed over 40 per cent of the membership of provincial academies—learned societies that dominated intellectual life outside Paris. They were disproportionately represented among readers of Enlightenment literature. In the city of Besançon, for example, nearly 40 per cent of the subscribers to one edition of the *Encyclopédie* were nobles. Among the hundreds of authors who published works on economic subjects between the 1750s and the 1780s, a third or more were noble. In the salons of the capital, men of letters validated the norms of aristocratic *mondanité* and were, in turn, admitted to aristocratic patronage networks. And, of course, many of the *philosophes* themselves were nobles: Buffon, Condillac, Condorcet, Grimm, Holbach, Jaucourt, Mably, Montesquieu, Saint-Lambert, and Turgot, to name only the most prominent.²⁶

However, the public sphere also served as a forum, and echo-chamber, for a great deal of anti-noble invective. One set of critics harped on the uselessness and idleness of

nobles, representing the Second Estate as a drag on the French economy. In his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), Voltaire praised the English nobility which, he claimed, was less snobbish about entering trade than its French counterpart. This theme was developed in political economic works published in the 1750s, such as the *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne*, by Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul, which argued that the nobility was a source of depopulation and that aristocratic conceptions of honour were a hindrance to the development of commerce. The full implications of this perspective were spelt out in Gabriel-François Coyer's *La Noblesse commerçante* (1756), which argued that the culture and corporate identity of the nobility was an obstacle to the development of national wealth and that the nobility ought to merge itself into the body of the nation by taking up commerce. Coyer was also an exponent of a closely related criticism—that nobles were bearers of baneful feudal attitudes that had no place in an enlightened polity. He excoriated the domineering spirit of country squires which, he claimed, made them quarrelsome and abusive.²⁷

Ironically, attacks on 'aristocracy' in the old regime sometimes channelled the social resentment of less privileged nobles. In 1788, the nobility of Blois blamed the 'degradation of their order' on the 'fatal influence of the *grands*, the principal and almost unique source of the misfortunes which afflict the kingdom.'²⁸ In 1770, Jean-Baptiste Cotton des Houssayes, a Norman cleric from a poor noble family, rejoiced that 'every shadow of aristocracy' had been rooted out of the Academy of Rouen, and a regime of equality established there among men of learning.²⁹ Some military nobles denounced the army reforms of 1787–8 as the work of 'aristocrats' because they adopted a two-track system of promotion in which middling nobles were channelled into functionally important, but less prestigious, posts in regiments while the plum positions were reserved for courtiers. Such complaints drew on long-standing petty noble resentment that men lacking in 'merit'—often the sons of courtiers or wealthy ennobled commoners—enjoyed better promotion prospects than poorer nobles from families with established military traditions.³⁰ There were also sharp divisions within the nobility over the apportionment of the tax burden. The wealthiest and most powerful nobles were able to use their influence to limit their tax assessments under the *vingtième* and the *capitation*. Middling nobles found it harder to do so.³¹

The most virulent eighteenth-century critics of the nobility directed their ire against court nobles. Pamphlets and *libelles* routinely represented courtiers and *grands seigneurs* as corrupt, degenerate, and venal. Attacks on court women were especially venomous and ubiquitous. At Versailles, aristocratic women lived a public life; they were fully involved in the management of client networks, and in the struggle for rewards, that was the stuff of aristocratic politics.³² In their supposed venality, selfishness, and luxury, court women were held to exemplify the dissoluteness of their class. It should be noted, however, that rather than representing the hostility of other social groups to the nobility, many of these attacks emanated from within Versailles itself. In the course of political struggles for power and the spoils of office, courtiers hired hack writers to publish scurrilous attacks on their rivals. Other sources of such rhetoric were the published judicial briefs, authored by lawyers, which were intended to influence court rulings in favour of

clients who were suing aristocratic defendants.³³ Regardless of the source or motivation of such attacks, however, the vigorous print culture of the old regime allowed these tales of corruption to circulate widely, and to shape perceptions of the nobility.

Another criticism levelled against court nobles was that they were corrupted by luxury—that venality rather than virtue had become their defining ethos. Such criticisms were plausible because of the fantastic wealth of many court nobles and the spectacular fashion in which they spent it. Over the course of the century, expenditure on clothing by Paris nobles more than tripled. It was not uncommon for court families to spend 10,000 livres or more a year on dress. Charges of luxury also referenced the notorious fact that court nobles had financial stakes in the tax farms and marriage alliances to financiers (the quintessentially luxurious class). In the words of the moralist Charles Pinot Duclos, 'people of condition have already lost the right to despise finance, since there are few who are not allied to it by blood.'³⁴ But it was not just courtiers who were vulnerable to the charge of venality. Over the course of the eighteenth century the nobility as a whole became more obviously defined by wealth. High levels of ennoblement, in William Doyle's words, transformed the nobility into 'a sort of open plutocracy'. As capitalists became nobles and nobles became capitalists there was little to distinguish members of the Second Estate from other landowners and entrepreneurs. The consumption practices of provincial nobles were different from those of the court aristocracy; in the words of Robert Forster, 'sobriety, not profligacy, was the dominant note in the provincial noble family'. But luxury is in the eye of the beholder, and even the more modest spending habits of ordinary nobles might have appeared extravagant to their less affluent neighbours. The rising average wealth of nobles, combined with the gradual disappearance of poorer nobles, may have contributed to a sense that money had become the defining feature of the order.³⁵

The increasingly plutocratic cast of the nobility was a liability because it conflicted with what was perhaps the most compelling rationale for noble privilege in an eighteenth-century context. Nobility remained an attractive ideal in the eighteenth century in part because it represented a kind of antidote to the acquisitiveness and pettiness of an increasingly commercial society. Commerce in the last decades of the old regime elicited a double cultural response, both positive and negative. The benefits of trade to national power, and its links to processes of refinement and civilization, were recognized and celebrated. Simultaneously, the profit motive on which commerce depended aroused suspicion as a disposition that might be incompatible with patriotic virtue and cultural achievement. Social and cultural critics valorized disinterestedness, the reverse of mercantile acquisitiveness. Nobles were supposed to exemplify a disinterested attitude, to serve as a reservoir of the kind of qualities a commercial society needed to preserve its virtue and its vitality. A nobility infected with the virus of venality could not reasonably be viewed in such a light. Nobility remained a powerful ideal in the eighteenth century, but one to which actual nobles had difficulty measuring up.³⁶

What was the significance of the anti-noble feeling that historians have identified in the last decades of the old regime? The representation of the 'aristocrat' that took shape during the French Revolution was a compound of all these anti-noble elements—the

proud idler, the degenerate intriguer, and, perhaps most of all, the man of luxury. But did such old regime critiques actually bring about the revolutionary attack on nobility? The prevalence of overt hostility to nobles in the last decades of the old regime is surely important, but may have diverted our attention from less obvious, and ultimately more important, long-term social and cultural developments which played a role in producing the great anti-aristocratic convulsion of the 1790s. I have in mind a slow-building conflict over status and honour created by the social and cultural transformation of the early modern elite.

In one of the most important revisionist works of the 1970s, Colin Lucas argued that the revolt of the Third Estate in 1789 derived in part from a status crisis sparked by the calling of the Estates-General in the traditional forms of 1614—that is, in three separately voting chambers. The differences between nobles and non-noble elites had been disappearing over the course of the eighteenth century, Lucas pointed out. With the calling of the Estates, however, ‘the frontier between noble and non-noble, which had been of diminishing importance, was suddenly and artificially reimposed’. The upheaval that ensued was ‘a revolt against a loss of status by the central and lower sections of the elite’. They bridled at their symbolic exclusion from society’s superior ranks—at being thrust into the same social category as peasants and manual labourers.³⁷ Lucas’s argument remains a powerful one, but his claim that the distinction between noble and non-noble had been diminishing in importance is only partially true. What had been diminishing constantly were many of the objective differences—economic, political, professional, educational, and legal—between nobles and elite non-nobles. However, as these differences lessened, the symbolic weight attached to formal noble status seems to have endured, if not increased. The high and rising price of rapidly ennobling venal offices testifies to this.

So does the conception of noble identity that appealed to many members of the order in the late eighteenth century. Despite the fact that the nobility had been totally transformed by ennoblement—or perhaps because it had been—many nobles adopted an archaized vision of their order. A number of historians have recently noted the renewed appeal of chivalric ideas and images in France from the 1760s.³⁸ This resort to the past exalted noble heroes and noble values, and was avidly consumed by the latter-day knights of the Second Estate. Timothy Tackett notes of the noble deputies elected to the Estates-General that ‘the majority was strongly penetrated with a military, even feudal sense of honour and duty. There were frequent references in their writings and speeches to models of noble courage and chivalry from the past.’ One clerical deputy complained of ‘a conversation with a noble delegate from his *bailliage* who “spoke of serfs and vassals like a baron of the fourteenth century.”’ Nor were such expressions meant only for public consumption. According to Tackett, ‘the chivalric vocabulary of defending one’s honour and proving one’s loyalty to the king permeated the Nobles’ letters and diary entries, and increasingly dominated over all other motives in the Nobles’ appraisal of their situation.’³⁹

This noble investment in chivalry and feudalism might be regarded as a kind of invented tradition, a set of symbols that established a largely fictive continuity with a suitable historical past—one that emphasized the distinctive character of the group in

the present.⁴⁰ Far from being a sign of the traditionalism of the nobility, such a construction of identity bore witness to its modernity. The way a self-conscious 'traditionalism' could appeal to very 'modern' nobles is exemplified by the Duke de Croÿ. An aristocratic magnate, Croÿ was obsessed with his family history and genealogy. During sojourns on his estates in Picardy he spent much of his time travelling to sites linked with the bygone glory of his family. He engaged in extensive genealogical research in an effort to prove his descent from medieval kings of Hungary. Yet for all his apparent obsession with the past, Croÿ was a founding shareholder of the Anzin mining company, one of the largest industrial concerns in Europe.⁴¹

If the narrowing of objective differences between nobles and elite commoners prompted the former to identify with a chivalric past, on the part of non-nobles the same convergence generated a demand for collegial treatment, an increased sensitivity concerning their own honour. This desire for parity of esteem—or at least for a modicum of respect—was manifested in a wide variety of ways. For many non-nobles, patriotism was an ethos that promised to override distinctions of estate and to give non-nobles a place of honour beside nobles in the shared title of Frenchman. (Nobles, by contrast, tended to see patriotism as another realm of noble distinction.⁴²) An aspiration for an egalitarian ethos that would override social distinctions was also expressed in Freemasonry, which enjoyed tremendous success in France, and which drew large numbers of non-noble elites to its lodges and its rites. It became increasingly common in the decades before 1789 for economic writers to demand that the monarchy confer honours on quotidian activities such as trade or farming in order to reward and encourage them. Such arguments acknowledged the sentiments of honour possessed by farmers and merchants, and implicitly faulted a social order that failed to give them the honour that was their due.⁴³ Non-nobles criticized privileges they perceived to be dishonouring. 'That, for example, a noble guilty of a certain crime should have his head cut off, while a non-noble guilty of the same crime should die hanging from a gibbet', complained one *cahier* in 1789, 'indicates that there are base executions and others that are not, that the noble belongs to a privileged class, and that the commoner belongs to the despised class of citizens, the class disfavoured by the laws, and whose honour is totally degraded by the laws.'⁴⁴ According to Tackett, in the pre-revolutionary writings of numerous Third Estate deputies there was 'indignation over questions of status.'⁴⁵

It was not simply the non-noble elite who rejected the nobility's right to special treatment on the grounds of its innate superiority. In the villages of France, peasants increasingly contested lordly rights, and feudal jurisdiction, in the royal courts. Such legal contestation had been going on for centuries, but it intensified in the eighteenth century as lords sought to revive forgotten seigneurial claims or to exploit existing rights more efficiently. Briefs produced in these courtroom battles sometimes went so far as to contest the very foundation of such lordly privilege, implicitly questioning the special status of the *seigneur*. The counterpart of these legal struggles was a spate of violent incidents—over 300 between 1760 and 1789—in which crowds or small groups challenged the rights or the symbols of lordship. While it would be inaccurate to see these acts as assaults

on nobility *per se*, they certainly help to explain the explosion of popular attacks on seigneurialism in the summer of 1789.⁴⁶

The social vision of nobles and non-nobles came into direct conflict with the calling of the Estates-General and the subsequent struggle over whether the assembly should debate and vote as one body. Nobles perceived the call for voting by head—that is, the merging of the social orders into one body—as a symbolic attack on their social distinction and special status. A majority of nobles were willing to give up their tax privileges, whittled away in any case by the *vingtième*, the *capitation*, and the increasing weight of indirect taxation. What they could not imagine losing, and what drove many into opposition to the Revolution, was their symbolic status. The same tension was manifest in noble attitudes to seigneurial rights. While noble *cahiers* expressed a willingness to give up lucrative rights in return for indemnification, most wished to retain honorific rights. Moreover, there was a close correlation between the desire to protect honorific seigneurial privileges and the desire to keep the three orders separate in the Estates-General.⁴⁷ In Tackett's words, 'It was on the question of symbols and honorific rights, those symbols "which most recall the feudal system and the spirit of chivalry", that the nobility would draw the line against cooperation with the Revolutionary regime.'⁴⁸

Explaining why the French Revolution took on such a markedly anti-aristocratic cast was one of the abiding puzzles generated by revisionist scholarship on the nobility in the 1960s and 1970s. Why did such bitter conflict erupt between nobles and elite non-nobles if the two groups had come to form a functionally unified ruling class? That antagonism between the two groups was brought to a head by the power struggle of 1788–9 must surely be a key component of any explanation. The other critical factor, this one structural rather than conjunctural, was the divergent effects on noble and non-noble identity produced by the objective narrowing of social differences between the Second Estate and the upper part of the Third. If nobles and notables were united in their possession of property, wealth, education, legal privilege, and a common culture, nobles nevertheless continued to insist on their distinctiveness and superiority. Simultaneously, non-noble elites yearned for fraternal relations with nobles and increasingly felt that such was their due. The conflict this tension produced might never have given rise to a wholesale assault on aristocracy without the catalyst of political events that directly raised the question of noble distinctiveness, but there is little doubt that, in substance, the struggle between nobles and non-nobles in 1789 had roots deep in the social fabric of the old regime.

NOTES

1. For the traditional view of the nobility, see Jonathan Dewald, 'French Nobles and the Historians, 1820–1960', in Jay M. Smith (ed.), *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches* (University Park, Pa., 2006). For the revisionist view, see esp., Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La Noblesse au xviii^e siècle: De la féodalité aux Lumières* (Paris, 1976); William Doyle, 'Was there an Aristocratic Reaction in Pre-Revolutionary France?', *Past and Present*, 57 (1972), 97–122; Robert Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the*

- Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, Md., 1960); Colin Lucas, 'Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution', *Past and Present*, 60 (1973), 84–126; Guy Richard, *Noblesse d'affaires au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 1974); George V. Taylor, 'Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution', *American Historical Review*, 72 (1967), 469–96.
2. Mathieu Marraud, *La Noblesse de Paris au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 2000), 309–18; Richard, *Noblesse d'affaires, passim*.
 3. Michel Figeac, *L'Automne des gentilshommes: Noblesse d'Aquitaine, noblesse française au siècle des Lumières* (Paris, 2002), 135–82; Forster, *Nobility of Toulouse*, 36; Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1996), 70–1. On nobles as agricultural entrepreneurs, see also Michel Combet, 'Agronomes, physiocrates, les nobles et le progrès dans les campagnes françaises dans la seconde moitié du xviii^e siècle', in Jaroslaw Dumanowski and Michel Figeac (eds.), *Noblesse française et noblesse polonaise: Mémoire, identité, culture, xvi^e–xx^e siècles* (Pessac, 2006); and Monique Cubells, 'Un agronome aixois au xviii^e siècle: Le Président de la Tour d'Aigues, féodal de combat et homme des Lumières', in Cubells, *La Noblesse provençale: Du milieu du xvii^e siècle à la Révolution* (Aix-en-Provence, 2002).
 4. Monique Cubells, *La Provence des Lumières: Les Parlementaires d'Aix au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 1984), 124–6; Jonathan Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre 1398–1789: Lordship, Community, and Capitalism in Early Modern France* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), 114–15; François-Joseph Ruggiu, *Les Élités et les villes moyennes en France et en Angleterre (xvii^e–xviii^e siècles)* (Paris, 1997), 179–82.
 5. William Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1996), 165; Claude Brelot, *La Noblesse en Franche Comté de 1789 à 1808* (Paris, 1972), 22–3; Laurent Bourquin, 'Les Mutations du peuplement nobiliaire augevin à l'époque moderne', *Histoire, Économie et Société*, 17 (1998), 241–59; Pierre Goubert, *The Ancien Régime: French Society 1600–1750*, tr. Steve Cox (New York, 1973), 189; David Bien, 'Manufacturing Nobles: The Chancelleries in France to 1789', *Journal of Modern History*, 61/3 (1989), 445–86.
 6. Michel Nassiet, 'Un chantier en cours: Les Effectifs de la noblesse en France et leur évolution du xvi^e au xviii^e siècle', in Dumanowski and Figeac (eds.), *Noblesse française et noblesse polonaise*.
 7. Michel Nassiet, 'Le Problème des effectifs de la noblesse dans la France du xviii^e siècle', *Traditions et innovations dans la société française du xviii^e siècle: Actes du colloque de 1993* (Paris, 1995); Didier Porcer, 'La Noblesse languedocienne en 1789: Définition d'un groupe social, esquisse numérique', *Bulletin de l'Histoire de la Révolution française* (1984–5), 47–55.
 8. Nassiet, 'Problème des effectifs'.
 9. Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre*, 114.
 10. Noble lineages in all European countries had a tendency to die out at a steady rate over time because of failure to produce surviving male heirs. Only constant new ennoblement could sustain a constant, or rising, number of noble families. See M. L. Bush, *Rich Noble, Poor Noble* (Manchester, 1988), 97–100. In 18th-cent. France, however, it was not a question of the extinction of noble lineages only but of a significant decrease in the size of the whole social group.
 11. Michel Nassiet, 'Histoire sociale et méthode lignagère: L'Exemple de la petite noblesse de Haute-Bretagne', *Histoire, Économie et Société* 9 (1990), 545–54. See also Figeac, *L'Automne des gentilshommes*, 113–21.
 12. Claude Lévy and Louis Henry, 'Ducs et pairs sous l'Ancien Régime: Caractéristiques démographiques d'une caste', *Population*, 5 (1960), 807–30. The figures refer to women who entered marriage by the age of 20, a majority in all periods.

13. Stéphane Minvielle, 'Les Comportements démographiques de la noblesse française de la fin du xvii^e siècle à la Révolution française: Une tentative de synthèse', in Dumanowski and Figeac (eds.), *Noblesse française et noblesse polonaise*, 327–56; Bush, *Rich Noble, Poor Noble*, 98.
14. Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1986), 213–23.
15. Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre*, 210–11; Ruggiu, *Les Élités et les villes moyennes*, 210; Yves Castan, *Honnêteté et relations sociales en Languedoc (1715–1780)* (Paris, 1974), 351–2; Philippe Béchu, 'Noblesse d'épée et tradition militaire au xviii^e siècle', *Histoire, Économie et Société*, 2/4 (1983), 507–48; Valérie Piétri, "'Sage mesnage" ou dissipation: Consommation nobiliaire et crédit d'après les livres de raison dracénois au xviii^e siècle', *Provence Historique*, 52 (2002), 87–104.
16. Michel Figeac, *La Douceur des Lumières: Noblesse et art de vivre en Guyenne au xviii^e siècle* (Bordeaux, 2001), 258–66.
17. This literature is surveyed in William Beik, 'The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration', *Past and Present*, 188 (2005), 195–224.
18. Peter R. Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France 1720–1745* (London, 1996); Bernard Hours, *Louis XV et sa cour: Le Roi, l'étiquette et le courtisan* (Paris, 2002); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jean-François Fitou, *Saint-Simon, and the Court of Louis XIV*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 2001); Munro Price, *Preserving the Monarchy: The Comte de Vergennes, 1774–1787* (Cambridge, 1995).
19. Julian Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995), 49–50.
20. Arnaud de Maurepas and Antoine Boulant, *Les Ministres et les ministères du siècle des Lumières (1715–1789): Étude et dictionnaire* (Paris, 2000), 134, 101; Price, *Preserving the Monarchy*, 72.
21. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients*; Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 1988).
22. On service and noble identity, see Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750–1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (New York, 2002); Jay M. Smith, *Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, 1996). On expenses incurred by army officers, see John A. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610–1715* (Cambridge, 1997), 251–4; Guy Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661–1701* (Cambridge, 2002). On nobles and patriotism, see Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).
23. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, 284–87; Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients*, 213–23; Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre*, 211–12; Marraud, *La Noblesse de Paris*, 308.
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25. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002).
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27. Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, tr. Ernest Dilworth (Indianapolis, 1961), 39–40; Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul, *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne, par rapport au commerce, & aux autres sources de la puissance des Etats* (Leiden, 1754), 16–17, 31; Gabriel-François Coyer, *La Noblesse commerçante* (London, 1756).
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29. Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre*, 121.
30. David Bien, 'The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction and Revolution', *Past and Present*, 85 (1979), 68–98; Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750–1820*, 42–4.
31. Mager, 'De la noblesse', 498–9.
32. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 30; Jeffrey Merrick, 'Sexual Politics and Public Order in Late Eighteenth-Century France: The *Mémoires secrets* and the *Correspondance secrète*', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1 (1990), 68–84; Sara Chapman, 'Patronage as Family Economy: The Role of Women in the Patron-Client Network of the Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain Family, 1670–1715', *French Historical Studies*, 24 (2001), 11–35.
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35. Doyle, *Venality*, 319; Robert Forster, 'The Provincial Noble: A Reappraisal', *American Historical Review*, 68 (1963), 681–91.
36. John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 175–81. The idea of the noble would go on to enjoy an immense popularity in the century after the French Revolution where it was viewed as a corrective to what was perceived to be the increasingly materialist orientation of French society. See Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians* (Cambridge, 1998); Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Oxford, 1993).
37. Lucas, 'Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution'.
38. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 156–66; David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 81, 110–19. See also Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *Nobles jeux de parc et loges maçonniques dans la France des Lumières:*

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39. Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton, 1996), 136–7.
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 44. Quoted in George Armstrong Kelley, 'Dueling in Eighteenth-Century France: Archaeology, Rationale, Implication', *The Eighteenth Century*, 21 (1980), 236–54.
 45. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 107–10.
 46. Hilton L. Root, 'Challenging the Seigneurie: Community and Contention on the Eve of the French Revolution', *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), 652–81; Jean Nicolas, *La Rébellion française: Mouvements populaires et conscience sociale, 1661–1789* (Paris, 2002), 216.
 47. John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Pa., 1996), 190, 197.
 48. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 294–5.

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