

THE SOCIAL ORIGINS AND PRIVILEGED STATUS OF THE FRENCH EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NOBILITY¹

By A. GOODWIN, M.A.

PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

CLOSER understanding of the social structure and privileged status of the French nobility in the closing stages of the *Ancien Régime* has, in recent years, been to some extent an incidental by-product of studies primarily devoted to the social and political aspirations of the wealthy middle class and the economic discontents of the peasantry.² The debate on the social origins of the revolution of 1789 has increasingly emphasized the tensions and economic misery which aristocratic privilege and exclusiveness are said to have provoked in the pre-revolutionary period. At the root of those tensions lay three issues which have been re-examined by scholars whose conclusions point towards a revaluation, or at least a reconsideration, of the economic privileges and social attitudes of the French nobility on the eve of its eclipse. The first of these issues was raised by the nobility's fiscal immunities, the extinction of which seemed to contemporaries to provide the key to the solution of the monarchy's recurrent financial problems and to be in line with the growing demands for fiscal equality. The second issue which has received renewed attention from historians is the nature and scope of the so-called "seigneurial reaction", which was long supposed to have been an important contributory factor in the deepening economic distress of the French peasantry in the reign of Louis XVI. The third issue which has come under closer scrutiny is that presented by the alleged social inhibitions and political frustrations of important sections of the professional and commercial middle class in the face of the apparently increasing

¹ A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

² E. G. Barber, *The Bourgeoisie in 18th Century France* (Princeton, N.J., 1955); R. Pernaud, *Histoire de la Bourgeoisie en France* (Paris, 1962), vol. 2; P. de Saint Jacob, *Les Paysans de la Bourgogne du Nord au dernier siècle de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1960); P. Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest* (Le Mans, 1960).

solidarity and social exclusiveness of the whole hierarchy of the judicial, clerical and lay aristocracy. In the view of at least one contemporary polemicist, in 1787 the Notables had defended their privileges against the Throne and in 1788 they had defended their privileges against the Nation.¹ Looking back over the eighteenth century as a whole one could agree that the nobility had indeed stubbornly defended its privileges whenever and however those privileges had been threatened. Nevertheless there are sound reasons for supposing that the extent and reality of the fiscal and other privileges of the French nobility in the later stages of the *Ancien Régime* have been exaggerated and that the degree of social mobility within the hierarchical structure of French society in the pre-revolutionary period has been undervalued. In this lecture my main aim will be to clarify the economic, social and political attitudes of the various sections of the French nobility in the eighteenth century in relation to the initiatives taken by the central monarchy and against the background of social and economic change.

In terms of privilege no institution of the *Ancien Régime*, so we have been repeatedly assured, was more resented by the mass of the French population in the latter part of the eighteenth century than the continued legal exemption of the clergy and lay nobility from certain forms of direct taxation. It is still widely believed that even those direct taxes—the *capitation* and the *vingtièmes*—to which the lay nobility, as well as members of the Third Estate, had been subjected in the course of the eighteenth century were extensively evaded by the nobles with the open or tacit connivance of the fiscal authorities. The powers of self taxation still enjoyed at that period by the quinquennial assemblies of the Gallican church are also thought to have reduced the clergy's voluntary contributions to state revenue to a level much below what in equity—though not in canon law—it should have been.² Above all the continued immunity of the clergy and lay nobility from the most productive source of revenue—the notorious *taille*—is considered to have restricted the incidence of this tax exclusively

¹ A. J. J. Cerutti, *Mémoire pour le Peuple Français*, 1788.

² For the nature of this fiscal autonomy see G. Lepointe, *L'Organisation et la politique financières du clergé de France sous le règne de Louis XV* (Paris, 1923).

to the members of the Third Estate. Thus it is often assumed that the total sums paid to the Treasury by the French nobility in the eighteenth century must have been trivial in amount and completely out of relation to its taxable capacity. These conclusions and the assumptions and comparisons on which they are often based have recently been challenged by Miss Behrens.¹

Her detailed arguments necessarily turn on technicalities, but her general conclusions are valuable for the new light thrown on the economic difficulties of the French nobility in the eighteenth century and on the motivation behind its consistent defence of its remaining fiscal privileges. She reminds us, incidentally, that those privileges which were confined to the nobility—such as the right to armorial bearings, the right to wear swords when not in uniform and the prerogative of being tried for certain criminal offences in special courts—were mainly honorific. Much more valuable, however, were the right to own *seigneuries* and thus to levy feudal dues and the right of exemption from the servile obligations of the *taille*, the *corvée* and service in the militia.² These latter privileges were not the exclusive monopoly of the nobility and were, in fact, often possessed by commoners—though in some cases only with special permission and in return for special dues paid to the crown. Similarly, as far as fiscal immunities recognized in law were concerned, the most numerous class of privileged persons and those with the most extensive privileges were not the nobles but the *bourgeois* of the *villes franches* such as Paris and Lyons. The latter, whilst sharing the nobles' immunity from the *taille*, were, unlike the nobility, also largely immune from the other forms of direct taxation.³

Miss Behrens also demonstrates convincingly that the nobility's legal exemption from the *taille* was much less substantial in practice than has often been assumed, because it was "broken through by the facts of economics".⁴ As the result of local custom, royal intervention or the familiar processes of economic friction the incidence of this tax, from which the nobility was technically exempt, came to rest, not exclusively on the shoulders

¹ "Privileges and taxes in France at the end of the Ancien Régime", *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., xv (1963), 451-75.

² *Ibid.* p. 453.

³ *Ibid.* p. 465.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 459.

of the unprivileged, but at least partially on the nobility itself. In those areas of France—the so-called *pays de taille personnelle*—where this tax was levied on other sources of income as well as on that from land and where legal immunity was attached to personal status, the noble's income from arable land was officially only exempted from the *taille* on certain conditions, which were difficult, though not impossible, to circumvent.¹ Such land in order to escape this liability, had to be cultivated by the noble landowner himself with the help of hired labour, that is to say not with the assistance of agricultural workers who were his own tenants.² If arable land were leased out by the noble proprietor immunity from the *taille* ceased. In fact in the eighteenth century most of the estates of the lay nobility and practically all those possessed by the French church were usually leased out either to share croppers (*métayers*) or to tenant farmers, who as non-nobles were subject to the *taille*. Often, however, share croppers were not in a position to pay this obligation, with the result that it was borne at least in part by the noble proprietor. Many tenant farmers also managed to secure remissions of rent by way of compensation and where this happened the burden of the tax was once more passed on to the owner.³ Nor was this all, for the extent of arable land which could legally be farmed by the nobles and thus qualify for immunity from the *taille* was limited by custom and royal regulation to four ploughlands, or about four hundred acres. Any such land cultivated by the noble proprietor in excess of that amount could not claim exemption, though this restriction did not apply to pasture, woodlands and vineyards.⁴

In those areas in southern France where the *taille* was imposed wholly or predominantly on land (*pays de taille réelle*), commoners

¹ For the whole subject of legal immunities from the *taille* see the valuable article by C. Ambrosi, "Apperçus sur la répartition et la perception de la taille au XVIIIe siècle", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, viii (1961), 281-300.

² This restriction was intended to prevent the fraudulent and surreptitious leasing out of land to tenants on the pretence that the latter were cultivating it on the owner's behalf (*ibid.* p. 283).

³ *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser. xv (1963), 458-9.

⁴ *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, viii. 283.

who had acquired landed fiefs themselves enjoyed immunity from the tax, whereas nobles who owned non-noble land could once more not claim exemption.¹

For these reasons it may be appreciated that the nobility's technical exemption from the *taille* tended in the eighteenth century to be more in the nature of a fringe benefit of which the actual financial advantage would vary according to local circumstances and of which the cost to the Treasury was considerable.²

There can be no longer any doubt also that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the nobility was bearing a substantial and increasing burden in the way of other and more technically efficient forms of direct taxation, necessitated by the rising costs of heavy war-time expenditure. From 1750 onwards the lay nobility was subject to the *vingtième* (or twentieth) which proved a more modern and equitable tax than the *capitation*. Its incidence was preponderantly, though not exclusively, on land: it was levied, not on local communities as a whole, but on individuals, and though the initial rate of 5 per cent. was inadequate, this was subsequently doubled and, for short periods, even tripled. At this higher rate Miss Behrens considers that this tax burden was nominally equivalent to the English land tax at its peace-time rate of 3s. in the £ and that it may, in practice, have amounted to more.³ Recent regional studies of agricultural conditions in eighteenth-century France have also tended to confirm the impression that it was the lack of an accurate land survey or *cadastre* rather than any systematic or successful evasion of the *vingtième* by the nobility which restricted its yield to the Treasury. In the Toulouse corn-growing area, for example, in 1750, at a time when only one *vingtième* was being levied, twelve nobles of moderate means, whose estates have been examined by an American

¹ *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, viii. 282. The *pays de taille réelle* included Provence, Dauphiné, the *généralités* of Auch, Montauban, Grenoble, Agen, Condom and part of that of Bordeaux.

² Sénac de Mailhan calculated that the nobles' immunity from the *taille* only cost the Treasury 2 million *livres* per annum out of a total revenue from this source of 100 millions (*Du Gouvernement, des Moeurs et des Conditions en France avant la Révolution* (Londres, 1795), p. 55).

³ *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., xv. 463.

scholar, were paying, on the average, as much as 15 per cent. of their landed income in tax.¹ In Northern Burgundy also the evidence suggests that the nobles were undoubtedly feeling the financial impact of the *vingtièmes* and in other areas too tax evasion seems to have been practised more successfully by the more prosperous peasants—the *coqs de village*—than by their feudal superiors.²

What emerges from all this is that the French nobility appears to have borne a relatively heavier burden of direct taxation than the British nobility at this period and that the abolition or voluntary surrender of the nobility's fiscal immunities would not have solved the French government's chronic financial problems. This conclusion, in itself, should lead one to take a less censorious view of the resistance offered by the nobility both in the Assembly of Notables of 1787 and in the *Parlement* of Paris to Calonne's proposal for the imposition of a graduated land tax in place of the tripled *vingtièmes*.³ It should be remembered that, despite their ministerial contacts, neither the "administrative" bishops who led the opposition to the government's fiscal reforms inside the Assembly of Notables, nor the judicial aristocracy of the *Parlement* of Paris were, at that stage, fully aware of the financial impact of France's participation in the war of American Independence or of the real origins of the annual deficit.⁴ As public finance had until 1787 been a closely guarded state secret it was hardly surprising that the first Assembly of Notables should have sought an explanation of the government's difficulties in Calonne's own prodigality as Controller-General of Finance. Radical pamphleteers such as Carra and Gorsas did their best to embroider this theme and to rally public indignation in the capital against the

¹ R. Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1960), p. 185.

² P. de Saint Jacob, *Les Paysans de la Bourgogne du Nord* (Paris, 1960), pp. 124 and 302.

³ For the Notables' detailed criticisms of Calonne's land tax see P. Renouvin, *L'Assemblée des Notables de 1787. La Conférence du 2 Mars* (Paris, 1920), pp. 5-37.

⁴ They had been misled also by Necker's famous *Compte Rendu au Roi* of 1781, which had conferred the impression that, at that date, there had been a surplus of revenue over expenditure amounting to 10,000,000 livres, whereas in fact the deficit stood at 46,000,000 livres.

minister who was generally regarded as a charlatan.¹ Professor Egret has also noted that the Notables put forward suggestions, not for the outright rejection, but for the modification of the proposed land tax, which were in themselves reasonable and constructive.² In place of a tax whose yield would have been indeterminate, both as regards its amount and duration, the Notables pressed for a repartitional tax of which the product would be fixed in relation to the proved needs of the budgetary situation and which would be assessed locally by provincial assemblies with executive and not merely consultative powers.³ However insincere the Notables' offers to forego their fiscal immunities may have been on this occasion,⁴ the subsequent insistence of the *Parlement* of Paris on the summons of the Estates General involved a real sacrifice of one of its most cherished traditional privileges and paved the way for the eventual recognition of the principle of popular consent to taxation through properly representative institutions.⁵

If the scope and significance of the "aristocratic revolt" of the years 1787 and 1788 may have been exaggerated, recent research has also led historians to be more guarded in their interpretation of the so-called "feudal reaction" of the pre-revolutionary period. In his recent Wiles lectures Professor Cobban has gone so far as to describe this term as a misnomer and he is surely correct when he maintains that a good deal of peasant discontent before 1789 must be ascribed to the penetration of urban financial interests into the French countryside and to the

¹ Mr. R. C. Darnton's Oxford doctoral thesis (1964) "Trends in radical propaganda on the eve of the French revolution", perhaps exaggerates the importance of these pamphleteers in the actual downfall of Calonne.

² *La Pré-Révolution Française, 1787-1788* (Paris, 1962), p. 371.

³ The reason why the Notables insisted that the provincial assemblies should have both deliberative and executive powers was because they wished that their functions should include not only public works and general administration but also a real control over the assessment of direct taxation. See *Journal de L'Assemblée des Notables de 1787* (by the de Brienne brothers), ed. P. Chevallier (Paris, 1960), p. xxxiii.

⁴ The Notables' theoretical adherence to the principle of fiscal equality might, so it has been argued, have been offset in the provincial assemblies if the nobility and clergy had been allowed to dominate them (*ibid.*).

⁵ J. Egret, *La Pré-Révolution Française, 1787-1788*, p. 165.

growing commercialization of agriculture.¹ The renovation of the registers of feudal dues which used often to be regarded as an aggressive and reactionary move on the part of the landed nobility against a defenceless peasantry is now seen more as a defensive response to real financial difficulties attributable to rising general prices and higher taxation, as a consequence of the growing adoption of the methods of scientific agriculture and as a by-product of stricter forms of estate management. Much of the hostility against seigneurial exactions expressed in the *cahiers* was directed not so much against the landed nobility as such, but rather against its middle class agents, to whom the collection of such obligations was often farmed out, and more particularly against the feudal lawyers (*feudistes*), especially those who were employed on a commission basis.² It was not, however, a general practice among *seigneurs* in the eighteenth century to employ *feudistes* on these terms—many and probably a majority paid these experts regular salaries and thus did not afford any artificial stimulus to the collection of feudal arrears or to the revival of obsolete obligations.³ One reason for the renewal of the land registers (or *terriers*) at this period was to facilitate the collection of existing seigneurial and feudal dues rather than to resuscitate those which had long fallen into disuse. Sometimes the primary aim was simply to reduce the expense of costly legal proceedings against recalcitrant tenants who could often successfully resist the payment of dues when these had not been strictly defined. Where, as in the West of France, the payment of feudal dues and rents was a collective obligation and where the land was divided among a wide range of tenantry, some of whom were middle class non-residents, the renovation of the registers of feudal dues actually tended to prevent the absentee tenants from defaulting and thus helped to alleviate the burdens of the resident community of peasants.⁴

In the northern parts of the province of Maine, where feudal obligations were in any case not oppressive, the revision of the

¹ A. Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 52.

² *Ibid.* p. 49.

³ A. Aulard, *La Révolution Française et le Régime Féodal* (Paris, 1919), p. 61.

⁴ P. Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest* (Paris, 1960), p. 392.

terriers was incidental to the movement, in the second half of the eighteenth century, for the enclosure of the waste. Once such land had been enclosed it was often let out on perpetual leases to tenants, whose rents in kind sometimes amounted to as much as one third of the estimated yield of their holdings after they had been brought under cultivation. These contracts were too remunerative for them to be allowed to lapse and the documents recording them were equivalent to new land registers. In some cases local *seigneurs* seized the opportunity thus presented to include in these documents up-to-date surveys of existing feudal dues.¹ In such instances the renewed documentation of seigneurial obligations appears to have been almost an afterthought and can hardly be accepted as evidence of a "feudal reaction", as formerly understood.

Greater attention has also been paid recently to the ways in which, in certain regions of France in the eighteenth century, the provincial nobles were adopting more modern methods of careful estate management. Such methods may have been forced on the less wealthy, but by no means impoverished, members of the provincial nobility by the necessity of providing for dowries and portions for daughters and younger sons under the terms of family settlements.² In the areas around Toulouse, Bordeaux and Rennes, however, these methods have been viewed as "a comprehensive adaptation of the noble estate to an expanding market for farm produce".³ Such processes included stricter accounting, the reduction of labour and middleman costs through alterations in leaseholds, and land clearing to increase farm production. Some of the features of the "feudal reaction" become more intelligible when studied in this sort of context. It was, for example, mainly in order to consolidate and enlarge their own domain holdings that noble estate owners were at this time using the arrears of seigneurial dues as a means of forcing the foreclosure of mortgages on small peasant proprietors.⁴ When

¹ P. Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest* (Paris, 1960), p. 391.

² For this see R. Forster, *The Nobility of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1960), chap. vi.

³ R. Forster, "The Provincial Noble: A Reappraisal", *American Historical Review*, lxxviii (1962-3), 684.

⁴ *Ibid.* lxxviii. 685.

these activities are borne in mind the traditional picture of the impoverished provincial nobility of the eighteenth century, eking out a proud but wretched existence on the proceeds of their feudal dues, seems hardly more than a literary travesty, at least when it is taken as representative of conditions in France as a whole.¹ In the regions which have been studied by Mr. Forster the provincial noble appears to have been an active, shrewd and prosperous landlord intent on making his domain lands yield a maximum return. Similar preoccupations were displayed by those noble magistrates of the provincial *Parlements* who had invested the wealth which their ancestors had accumulated in commerce in landed estates.² In this sense the "feudal reaction" has been aptly described as less a reversion to the feudal past than "the application of new business techniques to old relationships".³

The third major issue which has been reconsidered by historians in recent years is that of the social and professional aspirations of the upper échelons of the French bourgeoisie in the pre-revolutionary period. It has been argued that the nobility had, in the second half of the eighteenth century, so used its influence in government circles as to close careers to talent in the higher ranges of the law, the church and the army and that it was the resulting exasperation of the more wealthy and intelligent members of the middle class which made the demand for social and political equality irresistible in 1789. It is no part of my purpose to investigate the merits or limitations of this interpretation in detail. I should doubt myself whether it applied to the richer merchants and financiers, whose objectives were not so much careers open to talent as the attainment of noble status, which was well within their grasp. Once nobility had been achieved the characteristic reaction of the successful merchant or financier was to become assimilated as quickly as possible to the

¹ The term "hobereau" (small falcon), to designate such nobles seems to have been used for the first time by Buffon (G. Zeller, "La Vie Aventureuse des classes supérieures en France sous l'Ancien Régime: Brigandage et Piraterie", *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, xxviii (1960), 21).

² M. Bloch, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (New edition, 1960), i. 131-54.

³ F. L. Ford, *Robe and Sword. The Regrouping of the French aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 167.

nobility by accepting its social values and traditional outlook. It is worth remembering that the merchant economy of the period was still in principle compatible with the external forms and social attitudes of semi-feudalism, and that there were few if any "captains of industry" in eighteenth-century France.¹ Does this mean, as Professor Cobban suggests, that the revolutionary bourgeois can be identified with the class of venal officers and the members of the liberal professions?² It would be an interesting conclusion, but the evidence for its validity has still to be produced.

What I shall attempt in the concluding part of this lecture is rather to explain the reasons for the economic and social attitudes of the French nobility which lay behind the various expressions of its caste exclusiveness. The classic examples of its class consciousness at this period were the increasingly aristocratic composition and demeanour of the *Parlements*, the stricter regulations for the grant of *les honneurs de la cour* imposed in 1759 and the much debated royal declaration of 1781 limiting direct commissioned entry into the army. These demonstrations of aristocratic conservatism can perhaps best be understood by considering the situation and attitudes of the high judicial magistracy, the court nobility and the provincial aristocracy, as they were affected by royal policy or economic conditions.

The high judicial magistrates of the sovereign appeal courts or *Parlements* formed only a minute fraction of the nobility as a whole and yet in the eighteenth century they attained a unique position as the foremost champions of its privileges.³ The political ascendancy of these high court judges within the order of the nobility arose partly from their right to register and to remonstrate against royal legislation, partly from the failure of the Dukes and peers to assert their own claims to aristocratic leadership at the time of the Regency and partly from the increasing recognition among the provincial nobility of the importance of the *Parlements* as protectors of provincial liberties against the crown.⁴

¹ L. Althusser, *Montesquieu. La Politique et l'Histoire* (Paris, 1959), p. 107.

² *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, p. 61.

³ See especially F. L. Ford, *Robe and Sword*, chap. 10. ⁴ *Ibid.* chaps. 5 and 9.

This judicial defence of aristocratic privilege derived, however, not merely from the institutional prerogatives of the *Parlements*, but also from the determination of the magistrates, conscious to some extent of their relative social inferiority, to assimilate themselves, on a basis of equality, with the nobility of ancient descent. Although there could be no doubt, in strictly legal terms, about the noble status of the judicial magistrates, their social origins were diverse. Many of the magistrates owed their nobility to wealth derived from commerce but invested by their ancestors in the purchase of the expensive sinecure office of king's secretary, tenure of which conferred privileged status forthwith and hereditary nobility after the expiry of twenty years.¹ Some were the sons or grandsons of men who had started their careers as humble officials in the subordinate provincial courts and who had later purchased judicial office as councillors in one or other of the *Parlements*.² Owing to the mechanism provided by the sale of public offices it had become possible, and not infrequent, for members of the middle ranges of the Third Estate to attain hereditary nobility in two generations and even for families of peasant stock of outstanding ability to do so in three generations.³

A recent study of the social origins and family connections of the members of the *Parlement* of Paris between 1715 and 1771 has demonstrated not only how overwhelmingly aristocratic its composition was at that period but also how comparatively recently this noble status had been acquired. Of the 590 judicial families surveyed no less than 512 were already noble when their first representatives had entered the corporation.⁴ In 1715 90 per cent. of the Parisian magistrates possessed either personal or hereditary nobility and in 1771, on the eve of Maupeou's reforms, that proportion was still unchanged.⁵ Significantly, however, 241 of these magisterial families had derived their noble status and privileges from the comparatively recent purchase of the office of king's secretary and their members were thus regarded as "new men", in the sense that their ancestors had had no previous

¹ F. Bluche, *Les Magistrats du Parlement de Paris au XVIIIe siècle (1715-1771)* (Annales Littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, 35, Paris, 1960), pp. 109-12.

² *Ibid.* p. 115.

³ *Ibid.* p. 109.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 87.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 83.

connections with the legal profession.¹ Despite the concern which most of the *Parlements* displayed in the eighteenth century about their recruitment from aristocratic and judicial families the infiltration of "new men" into their ranks continued. Even when, in the middle years of the century, the *Parlements* of Nancy, Grenoble, Aix and Toulouse conformed to the example set by the *Parlement* of Rennes by excluding commoners from their ranks, this did not mean that their members were henceforth drawn exclusively from the traditional magisterial families.² It has been shown that of the 426 lay councillors of the *Parlements* appointed during the last fifteen years of the *Ancien Régime* no less than 266 were *hommes nouveaux* in this sense.³ Like the French nobility as a whole, therefore, the judicial aristocracy at this period had social origins which cannot be reconciled with the traditional view that it had become a closed and self-perpetuating caste.

Those magistrates who were conscious of descent from non-judicial families naturally did their best to extinguish the taint by adopting the corporate ethos and political and social prejudices of their more aristocratic colleagues and by intermarriage with the powerful judicial dynasties.⁴ These *parvenu* members of the judicial aristocracy became in this way militants in the defence of the corporate privileges of the order of nobility as a whole. It was their membership of these powerful and privileged judicial corporations, rather than their wealth, which enabled them, with the passage of time, to give reality to their claims to social equality with the members of the *haute noblesse*. The more ambitious of the Parisian magistrates, however, used the *Parlement* as a springboard for the pursuit of careers in the royal administration, seeking promotion and social advancement as *intendants*, as Councillors of State and ultimately rising, in some cases, to ministerial rank. Whereas, in the previous century, the high judicial magistracy of the capital had tended to remain as members

¹ *Revue Historique*, ccxxviii (1962), 485.

² In most cases these provincial *Parlements* exacted four generations of nobility in the male line for admission. The Breton *Parlement* had taken the initiative by a regulation of 2 January 1732 (F. Saulnier, *Le Parlement de Bretagne* (Rennes, 1908), i. p. lxi).

³ J. Egret, "L'aristocratie parlementaire française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime", *Revue Historique*, ccviii (1952), 6.

⁴ Bluche, *op. cit.* pp. 133-8.

of the *Parlement* throughout their professional careers, at this period many of them enlarged their horizons and became candidates for the highest positions of state in the fields of administration and diplomacy. In the eighteenth century the *Parlement* of Paris provided no less than thirty members who attained to ministerial office.¹ In their quest for social recognition many of the judicial magistrates also encouraged their offspring to seek commissioned rank in the army and it was a further mark of the growing assimilation of the *noblesse de robe* with the *noblesse d'épée* that service in the army and the higher branches of the law was regarded with almost equal favour by the grandsons of men who had risen to eminence in the world of commerce.²

The harshest criticisms of the so-called privileged orders in eighteenth-century France were reserved for the court nobility, that glittering circle of parasites which had been domesticated by Louis XIV, demoralized by the Regent and entrenched in its social pretensions by Louis XV. Monopolizing royal pensions and places their families and associates enjoyed special opportunities, through residence at Versailles, of intriguing for high military commands and ecclesiastical preferments.³ This is a group within the French nobility which has so far not received from historians the detailed investigation that it deserves. It may be that closer study of its attitudes and behaviour will reveal certain features which do not correspond neatly with our preconceived ideas of its social exclusiveness. Contemporaries were quick to note that the court nobles were forced by the extravagant style of living at Versailles into dependence not only on the sovereign but also on rich financiers of bourgeois origin with whose daughters they formed *mésalliances*.⁴ Marriages between the court aristocracy and the families of rich war contractors or

¹ The actual figures were 13 *Contrôleurs-Généraux des finances*, 4 Chancellors, 6 Keepers of the Seal, 3 Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs, 1 Minister of Marine, 1 War Minister, and 1 Minister of State under the Restoration and 1 Minister of the Royal Household (*ibid.* p. 67). ² *Ibid.* pp. 315-19.

³ For a study of the advantages possessed by the court nobility in ecclesiastical preferments see P. Chevallier, "Une Promotion Episcopale sous Louis XV (1752-1753)", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, vi (1959), 211-25.

⁴ C. P. Duclos, *Considérations sur les Moeurs*, ed. F. C. Green (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 124-5.

Fermiers Généraux, who had themselves been recently ennobled, were indeed a much noted feature of the whole eighteenth century. Nor were the court nobles, despite their *hauteur* towards the *noblesse de robe*, averse to inter-marriage with ancient or wealthy judicial families and some members of the *noblesse d'épée* did not disdain to become judicial magistrates themselves.¹ We have the evidence of the Comte de Ségur that, on the eve of the revolution, some of the younger members of the court nobility were dissatisfied with their useless existence when they compared it with the active political role of the British peerage.² The Comte de Saint Simon, the future Utopian socialist and relative of the snobbish court chronicler of the age of the *Grand Monarque*, not only fought for the American colonists but also laid aside his titles of nobility. The French Liberal aristocracy which supported the claims of the Third Estate in 1788-9 numbered not a few of its members among this court nobility. Such men were probably untypical of their class in their social and political attitudes, but their influence should not be underestimated.

If, in fact, one looks more closely at the position of this court nobility in the second half of the eighteenth century its advantages both social and political do not appear to have been as overwhelming as was once thought. The researches of M. Bluche, for example, have shown that the royal regulations of 1759 limiting the right of presentation at court were not quite as restrictive in their effect as might be supposed.³ Although these regulations for the grant of *les honneurs de la cour* did specifically debar from presentation at court those whose noble status had resulted from the purchase of judicial office and all who had been ennobled by royal *lettres de noblesse*—for these too could often be bought—the first restriction did not apply to magistrates who rose to ministerial rank or who held one of the great ceremonial offices of the Crown, whilst those who had been ennobled by the king for distinguished service to the state were similarly not excluded from this privilege. The sovereign himself, moreover, was not bound by the regulations and could, at his discretion, exclude those who had the required genealogical proof of nobility dating back to the

¹ Bluche, *op. cit.* p. 314.

² *Mémoires* (2nd edn., Paris, 1825), p. 140.

³ *Les Honneurs de la Cour* (Paris, 1957).

year 1400 and admit others who lacked these qualifications. It is true that these loopholes in the regulations did not greatly increase the numbers of nobles who could claim admission to the charmed circle of royal patronage, but they do indicate that it could be penetrated exceptionally by men whose social position did not correspond to the spirit and letter of the new genealogical requirements.¹ It was not so much the new restrictions, however rigidly enforced by the paragon of royal genealogists—the elder Chérin—as the expensive way of life at Versailles which made it difficult for these advantages to be shared by the provincial nobility.

Though the court nobility's grip on high ecclesiastical office was never relaxed at this period, its share of ministerial appointments throughout the eighteenth century was only modest and shrank even further in the reign of Louis XVI.² Similarly, the comte de Guibert's military reforms on the eve of the revolution reduced the court nobility's hitherto excessive allocation of the high military commands³ and the sums spent on its pensions and places, although more generous than in other countries, were not as crippling to the national finances as has sometimes been suggested. Nevertheless the court nobles—*les grands* and *les gens en place* as they were called by the radical pamphleteers—were

¹ M. Bluche has noted that the codification of 1759 had the paradoxical result of increasing rather than diminishing the number of postulants for these privileges. This was not entirely out of snobbery but mainly because presentation of their wives at court opened up the prospect of rich marriages for their daughters and close contact with the sovereign facilitated promotion in the services (*Les Honneurs de la Cour, passim*).

² Of the sixty-five ministers who held office between 1718 and 1789 only 15 per cent were nobles of ancient extraction. More than 30 per cent were descended from ancestors whose nobility had resulted from the purchase of judicial office and 22 per cent had ancestors who had become noble through the purchase of office as king's secretaries. Slightly more than 22 per cent were descended from forebears ennobled by the grant of royal *lettres de noblesse* (F. Bluche, "L'Origine Sociale du personnel ministériel Français au XVIII^e siècle", *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Moderne* (1957), pp. 9-13). Of Louis XVI's thirty-six ministers only three were of the old feudal families (*The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. Goodwin (London, 1953), p. 28).

³ For Guibert's military reforms in 1788 see J. Egret, *La Pré-Révolution Française, 1787-1788*, pp. 80-94. Even so, in 1789 there were five dukes and one prince among the twelve marshals of France!

equally unpopular with the provincial nobility and few of them were elected by their order as delegates to the Estates General of 1789.

Lastly, in reactionary insistence on aristocratic privileges and conservative support for the traditional values of the *noblesse d'épée*, the French provincial nobles often appeared more retrograde in their attitudes than either the judicial or court nobility. It was for their especial benefit—to relieve the distressed serving or retired noble officers of the costs of educating their sons—that the Royal Military School at Paris had been established in 1751 and that, in 1776, twelve provincial academies had been converted into military colleges.¹ It was pressure from the representatives of this same class—the provincial *noblesse d'épée*—that led to the drafting of the royal declaration of May 1781 which restricted direct commissioned entry to the army to those who could prove four generations of noble descent in the male line—the identical requirement exacted for admission to the *École Royale Militaire* in 1751. These concessions granted to the provincial nobility were regarded as compensation to the class whose economic decline had been accelerated by service to the state during the long wars of Louis XIV and as balancing the special favours accorded to the court nobility. It may be asked how had the provincial nobility become so dependent on this sort of royal largesse and protection? Some have suggested that it was because of its short-sighted and prejudiced refusal to engage in wholesale or maritime trade when encouraged to do so, without loss of status or privilege, by a succession of royal ministers from the time of Richelieu onwards.²

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries one of the most

¹ For this subject see R. Lulan, "Pourquoi et comment on entrain à l'École Militaire de Paris", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, iv (1957), 141-50. Article XIII of the edict of 22 January 1751 made it clear that the *École Militaire* was designed to help "la noblesse de notre royaume qui est hors d'état de procurer une éducation convenable à ses enfants". The twelve provincial military colleges of 1776 were Sorèze, Tiron, Rebais, Beaumont, Pont-le-Voy, Vendôme, Effiat, Pont-à-Mousson, Tournon, Auxerre, Dôle and Brienne (where Napoleon was a schoolboy) (E. G. Léonard, *L'armée et ses problèmes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1958), p. 246).

² For Richelieu's initiatives see H. Hauser, *La pensée et l'action économiques du Cardinal de Richelieu* (Paris, 1944), chaps. v and vi.

interesting aspects of royal policy towards the nobility had in fact been the repeated invitations addressed to its more impoverished members to imitate the example of their British, Dutch and Italian counterparts by becoming a *noblesse commerçante*.¹ Their failure to respond has often been ascribed to their misguided adherence to the customary restrictions placed on the economic activities of the nobility by the outworn principle of *dérogeance* and to their selfish fears of the loss of their status and fiscal privileges.² Royal policy in this respect seemed not only reasonable but also in keeping with the traditional outlook of the nobility, for it was designed to stimulate only those more respectable branches of commercial enterprise—colonial and overseas trade and wholesale internal commerce—which were regarded as compatible with the dignity of the nobility and which, in the intensified trade warfare of the period, seemed to offer a challenge to the traditional military virtues of the *noblesse d'épée*.³ These were precisely the branches of commerce which the monarchy had, since the end of the fifteenth century, been prepared to exempt from the penalties associated with the principle of *dérogeance* and which, in the eighteenth century, had assumed the character of a vital national interest. They also seemed to offer the most direct and effective means by which the declining economic fortunes of the provincial nobility might have been redressed. It was considered that these encouragements might appeal particularly to the younger sons of the *noblesse d'épée*, who were often reluctant to enter the church and who were sometimes even debarred from military careers by the expense involved in the purchase of commissions. Younger sons who suffered from the

¹ See E. Depitre, "Le système et la querelle de la noblesse commerçante, 1756-1759", *Revue d'Histoire Economique et Sociale*, vi (1913), 137-76; H. Levy-Bruhl, "La noblesse de France et le commerce à la fin de l'Ancien Régime", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne*, viii (1933), 209-35; H. de Halgouët "Gentilshommes commerçants et commerçants nobles au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles", *Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne*, xvi (1936), 147-88.

² The best study of the social and political implications of *dérogeance* is G. Zeller, "Une notion de caractère historico-sociale: La dérogeance", *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, xxii (1957), 40-74. Cf. also F. Redlich, "European aristocracy and Economic Development", in *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, vi, No. 2 (1953-4), 83-84.

³ G. F. Coyer, *La Noblesse Commerçante* (London and Paris, 1756), p. 103.

effects of primogeniture might well have found, so it was thought, an outlet for their unemployed energies in commerce.

As is well known, however, none of the decrees of Colbert and his successors, specifically exempting the nobility from the consequences of *dérogeance* in the field of wholesale and maritime trade and making provision for the ennoblement of enterprising and successful large-scale merchants on condition that they remained in commerce, had an appreciable effect.¹ The explanation of this failure ought not, however, to be sought solely in the caste spirit or reactionary outlook of those whom these opportunities and incentives had been intended to benefit. There were, it would appear, intelligible and in some respects valid reasons for the refusal of the *noblesse d'épée* to be convinced by the arguments of royal ministers or those of pamphleteers such as the abbé Coyer. Except in Brittany and in such privileged financial or commercial centres as Lyons, Bordeaux and Marseilles, there were in France at this period few local circumstances to favour the growth of a commercial or urban patriciate of the Dutch or Italian variety.² Nor did the provincial nobility in France, which was mainly a landed aristocracy, possess either the capital resources or business experience required for the pursuit of maritime or wholesale trade.³ The nobles were well aware of the vigorous opposition which their infiltration into commercial activity without the sacrifice of their fiscal immunities would encounter from the trade guilds and mercantile associations.⁴ Bitter experience also indicated that royal guarantees would not invariably protect the nobility who did engage in commerce from

¹ For accounts of this legislation and its effects see G. Richard, "Un aspect particulier de la politique économique et sociale de la monarchie au XVII^e siècle", *Le XVII^e Siècle* (1960), pp. 16-27 and *Revue d'Histoire Moderne*, viii (1933), 213-19.

² G. Richard, "A propos de la noblesse commerçante de Lyon au XVIII^e siècle", *L'Information Historique*, vol. xxi (1959).

³ Business experience might have been acquired in retail trade, but the monarchy never suggested that this should be exempted from the consequences of *dérogeance*, despite the Abbé Coyer's arguments in favour of such a dispensation, cf. *La Noblesse Commerçante* (1756), p. 178.

⁴ See the valuable article by G. Richard, "Les corporations et la noblesse commerçante en France au XVIII^e siècle", *L'Information Historique* (1957), pp. 185-8.

the prejudices and hostility displayed by the provincial *Parlements*. Thousands of Breton nobles who had engaged in maritime enterprise, relying on the custom of Brittany and on the royal decree of 1669 to protect their noble status and privileges, had found to their cost that they had, after all, to face the consequences of *dérogation*, the principles of which were rigorously enforced by the ultra-aristocratic *Parlement* of Rennes at the time of the successive inquests into the usurpation of nobility in the latter part of the seventeenth century.¹ Nor did the French nobility as a whole easily forget the scandals and humiliations in which it had been involved by its temporary capitulation to the speculative and commercial mania of the Regency period.² Natural suspicions of the probable consequences of deserting their traditional role in national affairs continued to preoccupy the provincial nobility and were not easily dislodged by the Neo-Mercantilist arguments put forward in support of royal policy by the abbé Coyer in 1756. By that time progressive economic thought in France was veering in favour of the Physiocratic concept of the primacy of agriculture in national development and the whole idea of a *noblesse commerçante* had already been condemned by Montesquieu as a hybrid monstrosity.³ In the outburst of public controversy which followed the supporters of the rival system of a *noblesse militaire*, such as the Chevalier d'Arc, were more effective with their Cassandra-like warnings against the surrender of the traditional values of the nobility than the abbé Coyer with his barbed satire against aristocratic conservatism and his thinly veiled egalitarian bias.⁴

For these reasons the monarchy's appeal to the cadets of the French provincial nobility to transform themselves into a

¹ B. de la Rogerie, "Étude sur la Réformation de la noblesse en Bretagne", *Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne*, iii (1922).

² *Réflexions de M. le Marquis de Lassé* (*Mercure de France*, December 1754, vol. 2), p. 8.

³ *Esprit des Lois* (1748), Book II, chap. xx.

⁴ *Recueil des pamphlets concernant la noblesse*, 3 vols., Bibliothèque Nationale L1³ 29. For the corresponding failure to enhance the prestige of wholesale and maritime trade by the ennoblement of outstanding large-scale merchants (*négoçiants*) see M. Reinhard, "Élite et Noblesse dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, iii (1956), 13-19.

noblesse commerçante fell, for the most part, on deaf ears. Modern research has revealed the existence in Nantes, Bordeaux and Lyons at this period of small groups of nobles engaged in commercial pursuits, but these appear to have consisted mainly of *anoblis* who had preferred, unlike most of their kind, to continue in commerce instead of withdrawing from it in order to "live nobly".¹ The resident *noblesse d'épée* in the West Indies not only intermarried with the white planter families, but also entered commerce at this period. These, however, were exceptions to the rule.

It was in this way that the provincial nobility was thrown back upon its own resources and it is hardly strange that it should, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, have elected instead to resort to improved methods of estate management and to defend its prospects of professional advancement in the army against the invading power of bourgeois wealth. This, it seems to me, is the real explanation of certain aspects of the so-called "feudal reaction" and of the kind of royal discrimination in favour of the traditional *noblesse d'épée* as was exhibited in the declaration of May 1781. But even this classic instance of the aristocratic reaction should not be misinterpreted. The requirement once more of proof of four generations of nobility from all who wished to enter the army as commissioned officers did not in fact debar either the recently ennobled or members of the Third Estate from the eventual attainment of officer status. The regulations did not apply either to the technical branches of the army or to the foreign regiments and their purpose was only to ensure that in future those who could not fulfil the requirements would need to serve in the ranks before promotion to officer status. The intention of the new dispensation was, therefore, not to exclude the middle classes from the prospect of commissioned rank in the army but to prevent them using their wealth to secure more rapid promotion in the military hierarchy than was possible, under the system of purchase, for the poorer provincial nobility. It was, in fact, designed to redress a situation in which the poorer

¹ G. Richard, "La noblesse commerçante à Bordeaux et à Nantes au XVIIIe siècle", *L'Information Historique*, xx (1958), 185-90 and 201, and "A propos de la noblesse commerçante de Lyon au XVIIIe siècle", *ibid.* xxi (1959).

sections of the *noblesse d'épée* had found themselves at a relative disadvantage in the service with which they had been traditionally identified.¹

¹ See G. Six, "Fallait-il quatre quartiers de noblesse pour être officier à la fin de l'Ancien Régime?", *Revue d'Histoire Moderne*, iv (1929), 47-56; E. G. Léonard, *L'armée et ses problèmes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1958), p. 286; and L. Tuetey, *Les officiers sous l'Ancien Régime. Nobles et roturiers* (Paris, 1908), p. 192.