

9/8/73

The problem of the new nobility / old nobility in 17th-18th c France might be expressed thusly:

The old nobility, headed by the monarch, was strong in so far as the need for a single head of state, untroubled by problems of succession, was still undeniable, and the glory of monarchical tradition lived strongly in the minds of everyone. Indeed, the common mind would see all gain in terms of adherence to tradition (& H. 4 & "Salic law" succession in the 1590's proved this by resolving the religious/civil wars), and be utterly oblivious to any subversion of the old ~~paradigm~~ by the actual events & institutional developments of the times.

The old nobility would be weak in that it did not recognize the shifting paradigm, which was moving the effective organs of government away from the monarchy into the hands of ^{provincial} local aristocracies and a hereditary-venal class of national officials. That the monarch still stood technically at the head of the new dynastic officialdom was acceptable but not necessary - i.e., increasingly less necessary as the solidarity of consciousness of ~~putting~~ power to rule grew among the dynastic officialdom. So, the monarch was not dysfunctional - it was not even that in the early stages of the revolution - but it was increasingly un-functional.

The strength of the new nobility lies fundamentally in their private control of public offices, which created a legal form of public power, ~~not~~ ~~was~~ one "constitutional" basis, not less effective / ~~no matter how oddly to be compared~~ than that exercised by the feudal nobility of the middle ages. In the latter system,

The virtually caste character of the society made the feudal group separate from ~~the~~ all others by birth, and their function to rule was accepted as natural to the hierarchical character of society. The degeneration of feudalism of the 17th, 18th centuries did not have a caste basis, for nobility in early modern times was truly an "order" and not a caste. It's position was not separate from others in an organic-metaphorical sense, but ^{defined} ~~was~~ ^{in a} functionalist ~~and~~ ~~clearly~~ ~~defined~~ sense. The clearly legal and ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~based~~ ~~on~~ non-blood ways of arriving at noble status, even in a single lifetime (by buying a *seigniorie* position, 3. 6.), and of making ~~the~~ noble status "casual noblesse" in a couple of generations, undermined any sense of age-old or "immemorial" nobility. (However that notion itself is a precious thought of the surviving old nobility, without much meaning, I would guess, and utterly irrelevant to the functional position of early modern nobles [save perhaps the king himself]). In short, the power had moved to a new group and the laws of the time gave them status and family perpetuity of it.

The weakness of the new nobility lay in the gap between ~~the~~ consensus of their ~~as~~ "order" power they managed to achieve [the main point to prove], and by which they ruled the country, and a truly constitutional justification of their position. That is to say, as a corporation of private individuals holding public power on a hereditary basis they could function well in governing, but the public constitutional justification for their power was lacking except in so far as everyone considered them were in monarchy's agents.

But this is exactly what fails to convince, if what ~~the~~ he said about the old nobility (incl. the monarchy) is true: it was formalized in the main, and not functioning, but it was the justification legally in the existence of a truly functioning (new) nobility that had no investment ⁱⁿ in the rationale in the reason ~~of~~ of the old nobility.

The dysfunction of the French system, therefore, is in some fashion a constitutional one: The operative ruling group had no constitutional justification except in the belief that persisted in the validity of the old feudal group paradigm. Over time, the new nobility's power had to become more & more naked, as one saw that its recruitment and "blood" status was a fictionalized version of the old nobility's status. The anomaly in the constitution had to be resolved by re-defining the right to power of the "new nobility" in terms which were not patently false. This is not to say that the new nobility itself would lead the way to this re-definition, for ~~that~~ that order would be as consent to hold power under any one paradigm as another. Indeed, the new nobility's urge to accommodate itself to the standards of the old nobility, and to hold the old & new Parlements in (87c Paris, 34.) is perfectly understandable, since any move to redefine the paradigm & power might endanger their own actual exercise of power. Still, this group could chafe a bit at the status inferiority which the various court, army & other old noble elements would point out from time to time. And, too, the new nobility could unconsciously believe themselves capable of surmounting any paradigmatic change which did not attack property

and wealth, but only the outer symbols of nobility. So the function of the new nobility is not to change, but not to live in dread of change. The old nobility, being non-functional, would lose all if the paradigm changed; The new nobility, ~~would~~ being functional, would function still ~~later~~ after the paradigm change.

The issue, then, is to establish a counter-paradigm of functionalism in the ~~new nobility~~ mentality of the new nobility which co-existed with their urge to assimilate with the old non-functional nobility. The dilemmas of the new nobility would ~~be~~ allow thus allow one to accept simultaneously an "aristocratic" reaction (They went along with the old nobility's status drives) and yet a daring to oppose the monarchy itself and thus jeopardize the working basis of their own power. If one does not establish the counter paradigm of functionalism — it must be thought of as basically sublimated — then one has no recourse but to believe that the new nobility actually went over to the old nobility's paradigm without reservations, and that they were an ford need supplicants for the admission to the old order. The external proofs on the literary side prove this, in a way, but the force of logic will not easily allow that the dynamic, functioning nobility of the late ancien régime was purely sycophantic. It had to harbour its own justifying paradigm of power — or at least, after several generations of having got that power via royal largesse and been subservient to the source, to have developed a sense of independent right to exercise that power which had little to do with the ~~new~~ justifying paradigm of the royal source.

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