

1974-02-21: [BOURGEOISIE] Wealth vs. Nobility.

The indications in Dawson's discussion of the corporate *cahiers* of early 1789 that some provincial magistrates favored abolishing of hereditary & venal office (by wanting the treasury to buy them back), together with the evidence of shifting offices as part of social mobility, indicates that the class of the *officiers* probably held enough confidence in their own ability to occupy the offices even if they had to compete for them, to let go their proprietary control of them. This would be abetted, of course, by the fact that the return from offices did not nearly equal what could be had from investment in land or rentes. One might imagine that by the later 18th century it was not so much that the *officier* class had been filled by new nobles, as that a new class of worthy rulers had been developed, and the sons would be properly educated to carry on. The assurance of the continuity came more from wealth than from office--that has to be true after the family achieved noble status, for office no longer gave nobility (it had already done so) nor great return on investment. No robin whose property rights would be respected, and who would be compensated for his office if taken from him, really would lose anything by the Revolution; unless, of course, it was the dignity of nobility which appealed to him most. The overlapping character of rich bourgeois and noble suggests that an attitude of mutual *élite* character prevailed more than invidious distinctions of legal status.

The question seems always to be put in terms of being noble and having status, or not having nobility at all and thus losing status. But nobility is not the only definition of status. Status operates in every society, whether it has legal definition or not; and a kind of non-legal understanding of what true status was could have been arising in France in the later 18th century which made the prospect of losing legal nobility less dire than we suppose. Where the *hobereau* mentality prevailed, yes; but where wealth matched nobility, it probably overweighted it. It is much easier to think of recently ennobled surrendering that status, out of sympathy for their friends who'd not yet made it, than ever to think of them surrendering their wealth.

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