

Ch. 9: "Claims of the Peerage"

The Robe became in the 18th C. the pivotal group to defend nobles' privileges, to oppose King's power, to stop reforms of Maupeou, Turgot, Necker from suppressing their power.

The highest noblesse de race was Peers and Ducs et pairs. Ford portrays them as continually involved in Court intrigues, extravagance, defending feudal rights, Medieval traditions. They sat as councillors in Parlement of Paris by birth, held honorific claims, sought to control Parlement and royal administration, opposed Louis XIV's illegitimate sons being eligible to throne, debated with magistrates for top honors and procedural questions (where Peers could sit, whether hats on or off while speaking, who exits first, etc.). Peers sought to humble Parlement (1715-18), then to dominate it (1720s+). They dislike Parlement's restrictions on their rights to duel, to hoard commodities; they had a House of Lords image of Parlement with their decision needed to pass all laws. They argued that they were a separate corps, the sole judges of successions to throne, source of Parlement's power, that they should monopolize Crown offices, be called "Monseigneurs," not have to shake hands with lesser nobles.

Peers thought they saw allies in lower sword nobles & higher Robe magistrates; but Peers' battles for precedence made lower sword nobles ally with robe primacy.

Ch. 10: "Defense of Privilege"

High Robe nobility was the wealthiest, most secure, most powerful force within French aristocracy. They avoided the poverty of lesser Sword and the sycophancy of Court nobles & Peers. High Robe characterized by best education (Jesuit or Jansenist colleges), power in sovereign courts, opposition to Estates-General (king, Sword & Robe agreed on this!), opposition to reforms (of Aguesseau in 1730s, Maupeou in 1771, Turgot in 1774-76) of Parlement, opposition to new taxation (1725 cinquantième, capitation, etc.), frequent use of remonstrances (not cahiers) to air their grievances down to 1789.

By 1715 the Robe was in the ascendancy, and by 1740s the Peers became reconciled to Robe leadership, even uniting with Robe in opposition to Crown and defense of joint privileges which all nobility shared.

Ch. 11: "Social Aspects of Fusion"

All categories of non-Robe nobles increasingly depended on Parlement and courts to defend noble privileges against King & reformers after 1740s. Sword and Robe became fused by mid-18th C. due to inter-marriage, similarities of interests & privileges, similar education at academies & colleges, social mixing at salons and theatres, etc.

18th C. saw rising popularity of fiction based upon nobles' lives (as memoirs and "adventures" of dukes & countesses). 17th C. attitude of ridicule of nobility changed in early 18th C. to respect, even envy, of their honors, wealth, power. Ridicule still heaped upon hoberaux & fraudulent nobles. Lives of Robe portrayed as living in luxury, comfort, with many love affairs and much time spent on appearances (dress, hair, etc.).

Robe and Sword still distinguished at Versailles where Sword and nobles of race honored with seating, ceremony, dignities above Robe; as a rule, Robe also had better education, access to secret councils, more scholarly output than Sword. Robe read philosophes, not Sword so much! Education required of Robe administrators included four years college studying Classics and two years law study.

Ch. 12: "Restatement of Thèse Nobiliaire"

1740s saw a restatement of idea that Parlements were an intermediate "check" on royal absolutism. Sources of this idea include influence of British Constitution; Montesquieu's L'Esprit de lois(1748); 16th C. Claude de Seyssel's arguments(1516); 17th C. Flavin's arguments in his 13 Books of parlements of France(1617), where he emphasized that Parlements were a "corps intermédiaire" between king and people; Locke's ideas; Hotman's Francogallia(1574) which exalted nobility & Estates-General; Fénelon's Tables de Chaulnes(1711) & idea of "contractual kingship"; Saint-Simon's Mémoires; Boulainvilliers' restatement of thèse nobiliaire in 1720s-30s emphasized Frankish roots of nobility, Frank parlement had been battling vs. Capetian usurpation, & "Germanic theory"(as opposed to Romanic theory) of institutions in France. Thèse Nobiliaire consequently stresses constitutional monarchy with king's powers exercised thru institutional intermediary powers such as parlements or estates.

An opposite theory was the thèse royale supported by Argenson(1718) who said king is above laws & he alone is source of reforms (not Parlement); also Abbé Dubos in his Histoire critique(1734) emphasized that Franks were only Roman allies, Clovis an officer of Rome, French kings as heirs of caesars, and Champs de Mars merely a spring rally of troops (without legislative powers). Thèse royale stressed institutional continuity from Romans to Gauls to Franks & on thru French dynasties of kings, centralized government control by Crown, parlements and estates exist to serve king (not curb his power), & proponents called "Romanists".

1715-1750 witnessed increased interest in Medieval historic roots of 18th C. institutions; clubs & salons discuss two theses. Provincial academies and literary societies "booming" with close parliamentary support and supervision in provinces. Academies develop aristocratic thought for high Robe. Montesquieu was product of academies: He emphasized venality, condemns despotism, exalts senates & parlements as "depositories of laws", nobility as "intermediaries" & "checks" on Crown's power & "protectors" of people. Montesquieu also product of salons, courts, & intellectual heritage of Hotman and Flavin.

"Conclusion"

The 18th C. witnessed a "feudal reaction" on the part of Robe against Crown; a fusion of Sword and Robe; the rise to power positions of Robe during Regency of Duke d'Orleans, their growing opposition to new taxes, to Jesuits & Ultramontanism; they strongly defend their privileges, wealth, leadership roles with propoganda. As a group, Robe showed leadership ability, education, unity as magistrates with similar interests--and in the end(prior to 1789), they "won" out against reform attempts by Maupeou, Turgot, and Necker from 1770-1788.