

1974-03-10a [DYNASTICAL OFFICIALDOM] Financial Officials and Noble Status

The point made by Boshier that the financial officials protected themselves from fines and expropriation by Chambres de JUSTICE, after 1716, by the device of becoming noble--and so immunizing themselves from certain kinds of prosecution--bears some thought and analysis.

One wonders, first of all, whether it was the status of the noble socially which disallowed such investigations, or whether it was the fortune of nobles fell into a different legal category than the fortune of roturiers. The laws of succession of nobles requires that the estate be kept intact in favor of the eldest, in large measure. For a noble to have a large fortune was a positive good in society, which the establishment would never deny. Cahiers talk about the reestablishment of diminished noble fortunes. The king regularly intervened to help nobles in dire financial straits. If, therefore, it was a noble who made great fortunes through the exercise of his financial offices, by dint of having public money at his disposal for private ends, then the public good is not injured. It would be, if the crown relied not upon those French noble financial officials for short-term credit but upon foreign banquiers. That is to say, the money the noble financial accountants made at royal expense was not money lost to France, but used to buttress the fortune of the class that everyone recognized should be wealthy. It was different, of course, if they were not noble, since non-nobles were not supposed to be very wealthy--if they became wealthy, they should become nobles. The circular argument is, it seems to me, perfectly in tune with the social premises of the ancien regime. The kind of imprecations against the mixture of public and private resources, and thus public and private interests, which Boshier makes, are irrelevant--unless one take a providential point of view and say that everyone was foolish to believe that it was not unnatural to allow this to take place because doom was bound to sound for them.

It is true, on the other hand, that the financial officials had a greater personal fortune investment in their offices than the judicial officers. If we take Dawson's statistics of the baillis' fortune to be indicative, and conclude that judicial officials' wealth consisted only 15 percent in offices, it might be somewhat the same with the financiers in terms of the saleable value of their offices, but that is not the main value of the royal office. For the financial officer, it was the use of vast public sums for the short periods of time when he held them between collection and distribution, and the short-term credit notes that he issued to the government, against his expected revenues, and the public credit that he had which allowed him to wheel-deal in a financial way, that was the true advantage to him of the office. It is not, from my point of view, the fact of public-private mixture of interest that is worth worrying about as Boshier does, but the amount of the total fortune or creditworthiness of the individual which he derived from the office. The Parlements were not hesitant to let reform of the financial officialdom pass through their chambers, for the situation there was different from their own in a basic way despite the fact that they were all venal, noble officeholders and so part of Dynastic Officialdom at large.