

1974-03-10d: [ROYAL ADMINISTRATION] Non-noble hereditary class of officers possible?

This question seems answerable in the affirmative if one considers the baillis, who had dynastic aspects in terms of family transmission, but most of them never became noble. They had to make a move to some higher-ranking robe slot which gave nobility. On the other hand, the effort of this group to get noble status attached to their positions, over some generations, shows that they were not content.

But let us imagine that the noble status was not given to any (save perhaps the presidents of Parlement); would it have been possible to develop an administrative class, with hereditary office privilege but no nobility? (Of course, too, one must consider the lesser financial offices that were non-noble but venal.) The answer in the negative, from a sociological point of view, is that the governing class must be ennobled eventually, since it is just not possible to have the rulers be socially inferior to any of the ruled. If the old nobility was to be subject to any justice outside their own court of peers, the presiding official in that tribunal must be of noble rank in a legal sense. Another more practical historical reason is that the change from personal ministers and servants who were ennobled, as secretaries of the king, to a widely based national professional ruling group made it difficult not to continue the practice of ennobling. Otherwise, it would have been necessary for the monarchy to have made some great conscious decisions, at a given moment, that the country was moving from one paradigm to another, and that while it had been valid to ennoble those who served the king in civil governance under the old system, that this would be a bad thing in the new system which would be far more impersonal, much much in scope. In other words, the giving of noble status to the newly formed offices of the 16th and 17th centuries was an almost inevitable development from the later medieval practice of ennobling high civil servants. There was no way for the monarchy to see that the new administrative class would grow and grow and grow, and that it would develop an esprit de corps separate from the king. (Think sometime of how the Dynastic Officialdom in France was a royal creation that came back to haunt the monarchy the way that Parliament was in England.)

Another possibility would have been (at least in theory) to have office ennoble the holder and make his progeny noble-worthy in the sense that if they could perform the office according to hard qualifications they could be noble. How one would have worked new blood into the system is not easy to see. In this system, however, the offices would not have become proprietary, and so the succession to them in civil law would not have forced the kind of lopsided inheritance that it did. It would have meant, for one thing, that all the sons of the officeholder would have had an equal chance to succeed to some ennobling office, based upon their competitive talent. This would have obviated the criticism of unqualified children getting the office over more qualified ones simply on the basis of their order of birth. The great trouble with this system, however, is that every high officeholder had to have a very large fortune outside of his office, in order to be able to afford to spend his time exercising that office and yet live in a manner worthy of his office; for office itself was not profitable.

Then, too, I am thinking here only of the offices that required real professional training, i.e., the robe types. On the level of the very very rich, they had to be made noble so that there would be no extremely powerful group in the country (on the basis of wealth) which was socially inferior to the nobility. In this group, however, there is no question of trying to find out which of the children was the most talented to succeed to the office, since the office didn't really call for much professional training and talent. It was more related to private family preference of children than to any state qualifications.

It seems, therefore, that there is no inherent objection to the great officers of the new

administrative class being all noble, nor, to view it the other way around, for only nobility to qualify for those high offices. The quirk of the system was the one-to-one relationship between family and specific office. For the new system of governance clearly called for precise professional training, rather than (as in the older noble ruling class days) just being born and raised in a family that ruled and thus trained generally to be one of the ruling class later on. Rulership via office in the ancien regime was professional; earlier it had been personal.

Another logical possibility would have been to place the office within a certain family on a kind of mortmain basis. That is to say, disallow sale to anyone, and allow transference only to male descendants or else the office escheat to the crown. This, of course, would have exacerbated the problem of having incompetents get offices (so, one assumes, if it is true that some families did by-pass their male descendants and choose collateral heirs or sell the office). But it would have meant regular escheat of offices--every office, sooner or later considering the inability of families to maintain unbroken lines of Salic law descent--and so the reality of ultimate royal control would have been much more clear. It is, then, the venal aspect, not the hereditary aspect, which allowed the system to escape royal control to the degree that it did.

The whole problem of separating the official function from the ennobling status needs to be explored. The official function was the same for every generation within a family that exercised an office for several hundreds of year; but the social status of the early incumbent was vastly different from that of the later incumbent. For one thing, there was a total change on the day, whenever it happened, that a certain office holder had his semen charged with noble potential by arriving at the situation where his progeny were noble by birth no matter their function in life later on. There were even some nobles, *baillis*, who exercised offices that did not ennoble--i.e., they were noble from other sources. But no one could be common and exercise an office that carried noble privileges; he might get those privileges only for as long as he exercised that office, or only for his lifetime, but an ennobling office had to ennoble. (Or was there the possibility to deny noble status and yet exercise a noble office?)

The main problem, though, is one of time, of the change that ennoblement made socially even though the exercise of office that brought the ennoblement did not change at all over the generations. Or did it? Did it happen perhaps that by the end of the ancien regime that there was a hardening of the noble class, because most of its members were of several generational nobility, as contrasted to the late 16th- and 17th-century situation where the ennobled officialdom was largely just in midstream of the three generation process, etc.? In that situation, the newly rising class of nobility would have seemed more like *routuriers* in their habits than would their descendants of the 18th century. That would mean that there was a growing stress on the distinctiveness of noble status. Yet that, of course, would be contradicted by the way that noble status was not necessary to be part of the elite in the later 18th century (although few could remain elite very long without getting noble status.) Also, within the noble class in legal terms, there were undoubtedly those who disdained the high court style and led a more moderate intellectual and cultural life by choice. All these motifs could be operating at once, and it is a question of whether noble or not noble, high noble and low noble did not become so ambiguous that the whole distinctiveness of the class was undermined. In that case, its special legal privileges would not really function in harmony with their functional or even their own social status conceptions. The legal line might remain clean, but all the other social, political, and economic factors that that legal line should serve to substantiate, were in disarray.