

1974-04-00b: [DYNASTIC OFFICIALDOM] Social mentality of Dynastic Officialdom

In the question of the social mentality of the dynastic officialdom, the answers have been numerous in recent years, but I myself am not satisfied. It is the question upon which I have been most earnestly engaged in the past year, and for the immediate future. The importance of the subject in most of the literature lies in trying to determine whether the mentality of the new nobility, the officialdom, was in some ways still bourgeois (from their origin) so that their role is forcing the impasse with the crown into the calling of the Estates, and the revolution that ensued, is a manifestation of bourgeois mentality. No doubt the bourgeois mentality wins after the revolution, and little doubt that most of those who control society afterwards are the families of officialdom (erstwhile noble, most of them) that had controlled it before the revolution. But this question does not interest me, since it is largely teleological in nature, and makes of the French Revolution such an all-consuming episode in French history that a truly historical understanding of the social psychology of the ruling class before 1789 is foredoomed.

Among the hypotheses that I entertain currently are the following:

--The issue of noble or not noble, which dominated the families of officeholders during the generations of seeking tenure of nobility, lost its compelling power when the process was completed. This is not only due to not having gotten the thing, and being secure in it, but also due to political and social changes in French society during the 18th century, with the pace of change accelerating rapidly in the later part of the century. The arguments made that a sense of élite, in functional terms of power, overcoming the sense of noble, in the sense of status, was rapidly coming into being in the later 19th century, are very convincing.

--If officialdom participates in the so-called "aristocratic reaction of the later 18th century, it is more in the sense of the saturation of positions available than of a fear of overextending the ranks of the nobility, the problem is compounded by the fact that office was a major way to nobility, and so saturation of one limited access to the other; but to guess which was the main objective of the reaction must be approached cautiously.

--The problem of officialdom must be considered not so much on how outmoded it was becoming in the light of modern bureaucratic organization, nor in the narrow family-interest sense that some writers insist on taking as the basis for dismissing the viability of dynastic officialdom as a way of running a nation; the question must be considered in terms of the mentality of dynastic officials as a class. I do believe that here one can find as great a concern for the national interest of France, shared by tens of thousands of the actual high functionaries of the land, than the lovers of enlightenment philosophy and idealistic Revolutionary dreams are likely to admit.

--There is, still, a self-satisfaction about the group, but this is no more nor less than one finds always with the ruling elite, from feudal noble to modern technocrats. Dynastic officialdom was not dynamic and risk-seeking. Studies of their wealth show that they preferred the low risk, low yield forms such as land, rentes, and office, as opposed to the high risk, high yield forms of commerce that the "capitalist" bourgeois class went for. This sense of security is in some way a consequence of the process of family tenure of nobility which created dynastic officialdom. And in some ways, especially in the provinces, a result of devotion of interest in life in things more cultural and intellectual, for which continued growth of the family patrimony was irrelevant.