

1974-04-29: [BOURGEOISIE] Lineage Estates & Demography

The question of declining size of families noted in Geneva by Henry, then confirmed for upper & middle classes in France during the 18th century, might well be explained in terms of voluntary restriction of family by the dangers of dividing up the lineage estate. The extension of this into the lower classes would have reason only if there were to be some lineage estate involved; but even here there is always the morsel of land held in successive family right, which should not be divided.

What seems to have been the custom in the limitation of families is to have two or three children quickly and then stop. If the greatest mortality was during the first five years (see the chart in *HÉSF*, II,71), and the interval between children was two years, then the third child would be just a year old as the first passed the critical point (7/10 chances to survive beyond 5); the process would then be suspended to see if other survived, and the chances 2-1 in favor of one of three surviving beyond 10. With the rapid decline of plague, and subsistence crises, the extra-familial danger greatly reduced. So, in general, the family got greater control of its size, and had more reason to limit it than before because of the future good of all being so linked to the perpetuity and if possible enlargement of the lineage estate.

Another question perhaps to be investigated is the adoption of children by one line of family, childless, from another line which was fecund; or, what might amount to the same thing, of an early selection of a nephew as the heir designate in the childless family, in such a way, the co-proprietary ownership of some parental *propres* could be resolved, and *amorcellement* prevented. Just as useful, too, would be pacts between brothers who had several co-proprietorships, to swap them off and invest in dowries of their daughters. One would have to know just how much of this co-proprietary settlement there was, which remained unresolved at the time by death by any *licitation* or the like. It is very clear that if it were a case of coproprietary *rentes*, the *arrérages* could be split, and the ultimate resolution in favor of one or the other co-heir left until such time as he had reason to divest himself of his share by *donation* or marriage contract of a daughter.

The problem here, philosophically, is to understand whether equal heritage did tend to subdivide the lineage estate, or whether the laws of *propres* did work to hold such lineage estates together. To argue for maintaining on at least the level of the eldest son is facilitated by the *préciput*. To argue it for all presumes that a great expansion of wealth was necessary for any given head of a family if he had many children, or else a ruthless *exheredation* of them to the religious or military. But another way would be to see the group of children as not forming entirely separate *riseaux* going away from the genealogy, but frequently the balancing off of difference between agnate lines by donations and the like.

The reduction in size of family of the upper classes is controlled by another consideration, though. Especially if they are noble, the estate size necessary to maintain the noble life is 1,000,000 livres, if there are several children who are born noble, not all--indeed, not one--will have the means to live nobly if the inheritance is divided in any way, except by the device of getting a very rich bourgeois daughter-in-law to make up the deficit for one son, or both, and hoping there'd not be many daughters for whom society required great dowries. All these factors would lead the middle-rich to keep the family down. The same psychology would work generally among the bourgeois, of course, except that none of the children had to have the "magic million" because none were born noble. If only daughters, then the solution was simply to let the family become noble by marrying them to impecunious noblemen, although the name would then be lost.

But the same reason to limit family would be there among the rich bourgeois, especially if they were on the route to becoming noble; an extremely large family, with relatively equal division of the inheritance, would set that family back a step or two in its march to nobility. And the question becomes even more acute with the robin families that are in the first and second stages of the three-generation march to nobility. It is evident that the office-holder, noble during term, must have the means to live nobly, and somehow other children may have to suffer much lower standards; for they are not, nor will be (except on their own) noble. Arriving at the third generation, when all the children of the ennobling office holder are born noble, the problem is different: all these must be maintained in some way as nobles, or else some would be hobereaux, so to speak, from the time of their adulthood and separation from the family; they would have had noble life while in the family home, where their father was a noble office-holder maintaining a noble life, but only the eldest marked to continue the office would be sure of adult noble lifestyle. (One wonders here, however, whether the lesser ennobling offices did not allow a more modest than "magic million" estate for the born-noble incumbents; or, as always, that a good marriage would make up the deficit.)

Enfin, the reduction in the size of families could be powerfully affected by the idea of maintaining the mass of the lineage estate intact in at least one line; although at the same time the decision taken early to limit the size of the family would be affected by an awareness of the falling rate of infant mortality and the danger of the plague.