

1974-11-04: [PROPRES] Propres & Social Inequality

[4 November 74] What remains always, of course, is the disparity between families that is perpetuated over time by the function of family heritage. If the laws of succession restricted each generation's chances of great leaps forward by keeping fortunes' tied to stable holdings that were not to be alienated, at the same time over several generations there would be likely to be an accretion of wealth from new acquisitions. And as always is the case, the more one has, the more one can get, so that there was an accelerating rate of growth as one's family heritage grew greater. Thus the disparity between rich and poor grew greater and greater, even in periods of prosperity. I would suggest, therefore, that the shape of society in 18th-century France was very much determined by how the laws of inheritance had worked over the centuries.

[30 November 74] The vast majority of society, at least 90 percent, entered life without significant heritage, lived without true social security, and had little chance to leave their children better off; past and future in the temporal sense had not much meaning for them. Of the 10 percent of the dominant group, most were not noble, or were newly ennobled. They had no great sense of ancestral heritage, but were secure in their own lives and could hope for even greater status for their descendants. At the very top, the nobility of the blood took for granted its own status and that of their descendants, and made a specialty of ancestral exaltation, the one characteristic that the other classes in society could not share with them. By the end of the 18th century, however, the ancestral heritage of many of the robe had achieved great meaning--some in office longer than the Bourbons--and so the nobility of the blood's Special status lost meaning more and more.