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978-0-521-08905-0 - The French Prefectorial Corps, 1814-1830

Nicholas Richardson

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

'Que la centralisation administrative est une institution de l'ancien régime, et non pas l'œuvre de la Révolution ni de l'Empire, comme on le dit.' Tocqueville's thesis has needed substantial modification since its first appearance over one hundred years ago. Certainly the administrative system created by Napoleon in 1800 had similarities to that of the Ancien Régime.¹ The intendant may be seen as the prototype of the Napoleonic prefect; the sub-delegate, of the sub-prefect. But if they were centralizing agents, there was no overall system of centralization. The intendant's power depended to a considerable extent on his own personality, and on the support his superiors would, or could, give him. As Mégret d'Etigny found in his struggle with the Parlement of Bordeaux, such support was not always forthcoming.² More important, the intendant was surrounded by a congeries of competing authorities, the provincial Estates, Parlement, and Governor, any or all of whom might act as counterbalancing influences to centralization. The first prerequisite for fully centralized government was therefore the suppression of any rival influence in the provinces. This was achieved by the abolition of privileges, territorial and corporate as well as personal, after the night of the Fourth August, and by the subsequent division of France into departments, areas of a more or less uniform size, uniformly administered. By eliminating the administrative anomalies of the Ancien Régime the Assembly made a centralized system of government possible. It was left to Napoleon to make it a reality. The decree of 28 Pluviôse An VIII (25 March 1800) removed the last obstacle to centralization, the elected councils which had previously administered the departments. These councils did not disappear entirely, but they

¹ Local government from 1789 to 1800 is well covered in J. Godechot, *Les institutions de la France sous la Révolution et l'Empire* (1951). There is a brief summary, in English, of local government since 1800 in B. Chapman, *The Prefects and Provincial France* (1955).

² M. Bordes, 'Les intendants de Louis XV', *Revue historique*, CCXXIII (1960), 60-1.

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were now co-opted, not elected, and their role was reduced to that of deliberation, not administration. As a spokesman for the new régime put it, ‘... administrer doit être le fait d’un seul homme; et juger le fait de plusieurs’.¹ The new system was streamlined and rigidly hierarchic. A sub-prefect administered each *arrondissement* (the new administrative sub-unit), a prefect each department, the latter being directly subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. It was a system wonderfully pleasing to the rationalist eye: ‘le préfet, essentiellement occupé de l’exécution, transmet les ordres au sous-préfet; celui-ci aux maires des villes, bourgs, et villages; de manière que la chaîne d’exécution descend sans interruption du ministre à l’administré, et transmet la loi et les ordres du gouvernement jusqu’aux dernières ramifications de l’ordre social avec la rapidité du fluide électrique’.² Authoritarian and highly centralized, the prefectoral corps was a typically Napoleonic innovation: indeed, if government was to mean not only Paris but the provinces, it was *the* essential innovation. Understandably, therefore, it appealed little to the royalists in the early years of the Restoration. There was talk of doing away with the Corps, of bringing back the intendants. It remained talk. The Bourbons might temporarily revive the cumbrous councils of the Ancien Régime in place of the imperial Council of State, the prefectoral system remained unscathed. But though the Bourbons left the machine intact, they greatly modified its working. As the mechanics of parliamentary government evolved in the years after 1815, so the prefects came to play a crucial political role. They and their subordinates, as readers of *Lucien Leuwen* will remember, were indispensable electoral agents. This in turn affected the career. It was only to be expected that a change of régime would mean a change of administrative personnel; but since no ministry could risk hostile administrators, change became endemic. It became customary for a new ministry to dismiss or transfer those members of the Corps it distrusted, in the ‘massacres’ and

¹ Roederer to the C[orps] L[égislatif] 18 Pluviôse An VIII (7 Feb. 1800)(AP, 2nd ser., 1, 169).

² Chaptal to the CL, 28 Pluviôse An VIII (17 Feb. 1800)(AP, 2nd ser., 1, 230).

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'waltzes' which characterized the nineteenth-century administration. Decazes established the precedent in 1819, with what an opponent called a Saint Bartholomew's Day of prefects and sub-prefects.¹ The practice reached a climax in the early years of the Third Republic, before and immediately after the Sixteenth May (as Paul Cambon's prefectoral career shows), but the last massacre was that carried out by the Cartel des Gauches as recently as 1924 'toutes les places et tout de suite'.

The prefectoral system was inevitably a target for criticism. It lay at the heart of the perennial French discussion of the evils of excessive centralization, the target in particular for counter-revolutionary theorists: in Bonald's world of the enlarged commune, or Maurras' of the semi-autonomous province, the Corps could play no part. It was nevertheless too valuable an instrument for any government to destroy it. This had become obvious as early as the Restoration, when critics of the system like Villèle or La Bourdonnaye forgot their distrust once they controlled the mechanism. As Vaublanc naïvely put it, the prefectoral administration was one of the most monarchical institutions ever conceived.² The only attempt to suppress the Corps was made by Ledru-Rollin in February 1848, when he replaced the prefects by *commissaires*. The experiment was short-lived. The prefects returned: and the twenty-three-year-old Emile Ollivier, briefly *commissaire* at Marseilles, found himself translated to the modest prefecture of the Haute-Marne.³ The administration emerged from the nineteenth century almost unchanged in organization, if perhaps more limited in its powers. It was to remain unchanged until the 1920s, arguably until Vichy's Regional Prefects or M. Jules Moch's creation of the *Igames* in 1948.

The study of the social background of the Corps has a wider relevance. The ruling class of the Restoration remains something of an enigma, a premissed amalgam of *noblesse de race* and *gens*

¹ Crignon d'Ouzouer's printed but unspoken speech, addenda to debate of 23 March 1819 (AP, 2nd ser., xxiii, 362).

² Comte Viennot de Vaublanc, *Mémoires sur la Révolution de France...* (4 vols., 1833), III, 85.

³ P. Saint-Marc, *Emile Ollivier, 1825-1913* (Paris, 1950), pp. 15-53.

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nantis which had not yet hardened into a self-conscious corps of *notables*. Contemporaries themselves seem to have been unclear, disputing the desirability, composition and even existence of an aristocracy. One reason for confusion lay in the word aristocracy. It had an uncomfortable historical resonance, and during the Restoration the Left used it with something of the same pejorative purpose it had possessed during the early years of the Revolution. ‘What is this aristocracy?’, a deputy interrupted during one of General Foy’s speeches. The reply was impressively brutal. ‘Je vais vous dire: l’aristocratie au XIX^e siècle, c’est la ligue, c’est la coalition de ceux qui veulent consommer sans produire, vivre sans travailler, tout savoir sans rien avoir appris, envahir tous les honneurs sans les avoir mérités, occuper tous les emplois sans être en état de les remplir; voilà l’aristocratie...’¹ The Left might grudgingly recognize a political aristocracy, the Chamber of Peers. They admitted no legitimate aristocracy outside the Peers. Their view had a pleasing simplicity. On the one side were those who wanted equality, and not merely paper guarantees, on the other a faction fighting to recover its lost privileges, the legions of the counter-revolution. The antinomy between the old and the new doctrines stemmed from the antipathy between the men of the Ancien Régime and those who owed their rise to the Revolution and Empire, whose rights were enshrined in the Charter. With political divisions the product of social differences, politics were omnipresent: Saint-Chamans found that the division in his regiment between so-called *gentilshommes* and *vilains* persisted even in Church, the *gentilshommes* sitting on the right, the *vilains* on the left.² It was a view that Balzac and Stendhal dramatized, and that Tocqueville was to endorse: ‘Notre histoire, de 1789 à 1830, vue de loin et dans son ensemble, ne doit apparaître que comme le tableau d’une lutte acharnée entre l’ancien régime, ses traditions, ses souvenirs, ses espérances et ses hommes représentés par l’aristocratie, et la France nouvelle conduite par la classe moyenne.’³

¹ Sitting of 20 March 1821 (AP, 2nd ser., xxx, 407).

² *Mémoires du général comte de Saint-Chamans...* (Paris, 1896), pp. 354–5.

³ *Souvenirs*, ed. L. Monnier (Paris, 1942), p. 26.

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The Right disagreed in detail as in principle. Constitutional theorists might revel in recondite analyses of checks and balances, might discover in the Chamber of Peers an admirable constitutional artifice on the analogy of the English House of Lords.¹ Reality lay elsewhere. Even social reality—‘il n’y a de bourgeois ici que quelques pairs’. The Peers were economically emasculated and politically powerless. There was no stable aristocracy which could form a barrier between the throne and the people, only a series of disputed and ephemeral groups. Some spokesmen preached the virtues of an aristocracy which would be the equivalent of the English gentry, Molé, less vaguely, the claims of the 90,000 citizens who had the vote, a group whom he saw, prophetically, as a ‘corps de notables’. They alone could form an aristocracy, he argued, since in the political and social situation of post-revolutionary France property was the sole possible criterion.² But this was merely to push the question a stage further, for the social background of the 90,000 electors was itself disputed. This supplementary controversy turned on the role of the nobility: that is (and it is in this sense alone that the terms noble and nobility have been used throughout this book), members of families already noble in 1789.

The Right saw the nobility as scattered and powerless, the débris of a few families whose power had been waning even in 1789, whose only possessions were their memories: ‘s’effrayer de cette aristocratie, c’est avoir peur des morts: les résurrections sont des miracles trop rares pour que les plus craintifs s’inquiètent de celui-là’.³ With a wealth of corroborative detail, the Right displayed the decline of a nobility whose economic and political position had been threatened before the Revolution, and whose ruin had been consummated by emigration, confiscations, and the abolition of the *droit d’aînesse*. The Left remained sceptical. The nobility played a major part in political life, they alleged; far from being a minority in the electoral colleges, they and their auxiliaries were the most powerful elements, for aristocratic

¹ An analogy which shrewd outsiders like Charles Greville thought to be false.

² Molé to Chamber of Peers, 25 Jan. 1817 (AP, 2nd ser., xviii, 286).

³ Duc de Doudeauville to Chamber of Peers, 24 June 1820 (AP, 2nd ser., xxviii, 693).

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wealth had not been destroyed by the Revolution, but merely dispersed. In so far as the Revolution had adversely affected the nobility, it had led them to look for state employment:

encombrant les hôtels

Des ministres, — rampante, avide et dégradée. . .

And here the Restoration had fully indemnified them, employing a mass of untrained and incompetent nobles in posts to which they had no right.

The prefectorial personnel provide some means of checking the truth of these allegations. The task of establishing the social background of this personnel meets certain difficulties: the complexity of the regulations governing ennoblement under the Ancien Régime, the application of these criteria to genealogies not always remarkable for their rigour. But this is nothing compared to the subsequent step, that of estimating the political, social and economic position of the noble families concerned. No evaluation of an aristocracy goes unchallenged. There is a pervasive feeling that interest in an aristocracy is merely the exterior manifestation of a desire to belong to it (a prejudice presumably absent in the case of those describing *classes laborieuses et dangereuses*). Should the interest survive, then there is the allegation that no outsider can ever really pierce the arcana that surround aristocracy. Balzac's beloved Faubourg, his 'tolerably befingered pack of cards', hardly survives Madame de Villeparisis' scrutiny: 'D'abord il n'y était pas allé, on ne le recevait pas, qu'est-ce-qu'il pouvait en savoir?' And Proust's own picture is alternately seen as the product of a naïvely snobbish admiration, or as vitiated by a corroding and unhistorical irony. A foreign historian is in a position of added delicacy. Alice in an aristocratic Wonderland, he may contrive to avoid the grosser solecisms, at the risk of trampling over nuances of social difference, of producing an unlovely blend of the dogmatic and jejune. Yet, in an age when private initiative in nomenclature found its sanction in official complaisance, when plain Le Roy could burgeon forth as Le Roy de Saint-Arnaud, or Delattre be distended into de Lattre de Tassigny, some criterion of

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nobility more rigorous than that of the possession of a euphonic name or a particule is imperative; and with it, an evaluation of a family's social standing based on more satisfactory grounds than its alleged antiquity.¹

Viel, a labourer's son, became a sub-prefect during the Restoration. Locard, whose father was a haberdasher, André d'Arbelle, whose father had been a baker at Montluel before the Revolution, became prefects.² They were exceptions. The Restoration Corps included few men of humble origin. The majority of its members came from families of well-established bourgeoisie, the Hardy from Laval or Sèze from Bordeaux, the Bovis from Provence or Rendu from the Bresse.³ At the top of the scale were members of families who had been in the process of acquiring nobility in 1789, whether by legal means, like the Clock or Le Noir de Cantelou, or by the scarcely less reputable procedure of usurping it, like the Balahu de Noiron.⁴ A second group owed their rise to the Revolution and Empire. These are the families who have found their historian—or judge—in M. Beau de Loménie, the bourgeois dynasties who rode every nineteenth-century change of régime. The Cornudet, for example, were a family of notaries and *procureurs* from the Marche. Etienne-Emile, the Restoration sub-prefect, was the grandson of a notary, the son of a deputy to the Legislative Assembly and the Five Hundred, who rallied to Napoleon, became a senator and count of the Empire, rallied to the Bourbons in 1814 and was made a peer, rallied to Napoleon in March 1815 and was made a Hundred Days peer. A progress Monsieur Dambreuse would have appreciated. Etienne-Emile was deputy for the Creuse from 1831 to 1846, when he in turn

¹ Saint-Arnaud: P. Chalmin, *L'officier français de 1815 à 1870* (Paris, 1957), p. 93. Delattre: Ph. Du Puy de Clinchamps, *La noblesse* (Collection Que sais-je?), p. 109.

² AN doss. Viel, 176(11). Locard, 166(34). André d'Arbelle, 155(6); Révérend, *Restauration*, 1, 37.

³ Hardy: Angot, *Dictionnaire... de la Mayenne* (4 vols., 1900), II, 403–4. Sèze: *ADLN* (1894), pp. 512–14. Bovis: Chaix, VI, 300–2. Rendu: Révérend, *Restauration*, VI, 61–2.

⁴ Clock: Chaix, XI, 112–13. Le Noir de Cantelou: Révérend, *Restauration*, IV, 305. Balahu de Noiron: R. de Lurion, *Nobiliaire de Franche-Comté* (1890), p. 47.

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became a peer; his son was deputy for the same department during the Second Empire; one grandson sat for the Seine-et-Oise, another for the Creuse.¹

Thus far the social composition of the Restoration Corps hardly differs from that of its imperial predecessor. Where it did differ was in the number of nobles given posts. At the end of the Empire 21 per cent of the personnel in office in France were of noble extraction, in July 1830 nearly 45 per cent.² The allegation that the nobility flocked into state service had, therefore, some justification. But the rise in the proportion of nobles serving in the Corps does not necessarily indicate that nobility was either a relevant criterion for office, or a major advantage. Indeed, the juridical concept of nobility may seem altogether irrelevant in an age when its possession no longer entailed special privileges. Differences in social status may seem less important than the very marked division between the two levels of the administration, in terms of official standing, salary, and above all private income. If some one-fifth of the prefects the Bourbons appointed could be regarded as very rich in their own right, the same was true of only some one-hundredth of the subordinate personnel.³ In this sense, to adapt Robert de Jouvenel, a prefect who was a noble may have had less in common with another noble who was a sub-prefect than with a prefect of bourgeois background. The ruling class might therefore be defined, in M. Reinhard's phrase, as an *élite de fonction*, the criterion for membership of the ruling class being the post occupied rather than the juridical status enjoyed.⁴ Such a definition is misleading. It was true, in contrast to the Ancien Régime, that birth was no longer an indispensable qualification for the majority of important posts, that the *noblesse de race* no longer occupied such posts as of right. But it was also true, in so far as the prefectoral corps is representative, that for this *de jure*

¹ AN doss. Cornudet, 157(32); Révérend, *Restauration*, II, 201-2; Raoul de Warren, *Les pairs de France...*, I (no page numbers).

² See below, Appendix III.

³ See below, pp. 175-6.

⁴ See M. Reinhard, 'Elite et noblesse dans la deuxième moitié du XVIII^e siècle', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, III (1956), 5-37.

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possession the nobility, during the Restoration, substituted one *de facto*. Forty per cent of the subordinate personnel named by the Bourbons were noble: 70 per cent of the prefects. The Restoration ruling class may have rested on a different theoretical justification to that of the Ancien Régime, but its composition hardly reflected the extent of the change.

The preponderant part played by the nobility is one characteristic of the Restoration Corps. There are two further senses in which it might seem to have been a reflexion of the 'old' France, rather than the new. The first is simply a matter of its members' age.¹ In April 1814, just over a quarter of those serving in France had been over fifty years old and their average age was forty-three and a half. In July 1830 the average age was fifty, and just under half of the Corps were older. Two in every five functionaries had been under forty in 1814: the figure for 1830 was two in every twenty-nine. Since forty was thought to be the threshold of old age in early nineteenth-century France—in 1826 only one-third of the population was aged forty or more—the contrast between the country and its rulers, the *pays réel* and the *pays légal*, already strongly enough marked in terms of numbers and wealth, was sufficiently dramatic in terms of age as well. Fazy's denunciation of the gerontocracy has its echo in Falloux's disabused comment on Villèle's ministry, that it too much resembled an old husband married to a young wife.² The younger generation found a world in which the great issues had disappeared, and with them the great opportunities. Here had lain the real attraction of Revolution and Empire, less their political aspect than the possibility they had promised of rapid advancement, 'des représentants du peuple et des généraux de vingt ans'. That possibility barely existed after 1814. In place of Michel Ney, son of an artisan, volunteer in 1787 and Marshal of France in 1804 at the age of thirty-six, the Restoration could offer only

¹ See below, Appendix iv. The question of generations is treated briefly by G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration* (1st ed., 1955), pp. 319–23, and at greater length by L. Mazoyer, 'Catégories d'âge et groupes sociaux. Les jeunes générations françaises de 1830', *Annales...*, x (Sept. 1938), 385–423.

² J. Fazy, *De la gérontocratie...* (Paris, 1828); Comte de Falloux, *Mémoires d'un royaliste* (2 vols., Paris, 1888), 1, 27.

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the prince de Hohenlohe, Marshal in 1827 at the age of sixty-two, whose lineage was impeccable but whose military service was exiguous and, worse, irrelevant, since it had been gained during the emigration as general-major in Austrian service.¹ There were administrators enough who might have echoed Alfred de Vigny's complaint

J'ai servi seize ans la Restauration
Moi, dont elle a laissé vieillir l'ambition
Dans les honneurs obscurs de quelque légion.

From *Le Rouge et le Noir* to *Les Déracinés*, the dichotomy between generations was one of the major themes of French literature, crystallizing in the person of the *arriviste* hero, the young man with no defined place in a society which, while paying lip-service to the doctrine of equality of opportunity, contrived to block most means of entry to the governing class. An education for which the kindest term would be non-vocational produced the *fonctionomanie* contemporaries already deplored during the Restoration: an overcrowding in certain professions was doubled by a physical overcrowding in the capital, the result of the Parisian vortex, which in turn further reduced a young man's chances of employment. The result was the formation of a *prolétariat de bacheliers*, young men denied the opportunities equivalent to their aspirations. Julien Sorel had wondered what would happen to people like himself, with a good education but insufficient funds to stake a career, now that Napoleon had gone. Vautrin gave one answer, when he outlined for Rastignac's benefit the probable course of the latter's legal career: Rubempré or Racadot's career gave another.

Allowance should be made for literary exaggeration, the tragic-comedy of lost illusions inherent in the theme of a young provincial arriving in Paris, the conscious exploitation of a myth of the capital dating back to Restif de la Bretonne and forward to Fantomas. But the tension between generations, exemplified in the frustration of a younger generation of superfluous men whose way to the top was blocked by their elders, had solid roots in

¹ Warren, *Les pairs de France*, II.