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Introduction: the gilded ghetto of royal nobility

May 1789. The Estates-General met at Versailles. The three orders processed ceremonially. The second order, the nobility, shone with all the brilliance of gold-embroidered coats and capes, white-plumed hats, and engraved ceremonial swords. Alongside the nobility the third estate was dark and sombre, a sorry sight. Yet: brilliant as it still appeared, still today at the head of the procession, the nobility could already feel the cold wind of defeat.

It had become, by imperceptible stages which had mostly escaped its notice, a marginal minority in French society, under sentence. In 1789 nobles were the kingdom's Jews.

To be sure, the nobility still exercised an irresistible attraction, and for broad areas of opinion it was the only model. Its code of honour, its ritual refined from the politeness born of court ceremonies, its style, behaviour and way of life, were still dominant. Nobility remained the supreme ambition of the unrepentantly elitist middle classes, who saw in ennoblement a way of escaping the confusions which ranked them with the most despised elements of a third estate with which fundamentally they felt so little in common. But, at the same time as it engendered social imitation, the nobility aroused envy and indeed hostility, mingled with feelings of frustration and anxiety in the face of a group ill-understood, perceived as alien, and easily enough as antagonistic. This sharp awareness of *difference*, no doubt stronger among non-nobles than nobles themselves, could and indeed soon did give rise to delusions which the 'aristocratic plots' of the Revolution would bring to the surface. Even before that, however, turning the nobility's own arguments against itself, the third estate had adopted a racist attitude towards it. Sieyès denounced this 'people apart, a counterfeit people which, unable to exist by itself for lack of useful organs, latches on to a real nation like those vegetable growths which can only live on the sap of the plants they exhaust and suck dry'. And,

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using the argument inopportunely provided by Boulainvilliers, he suggested sending the second order back to its mythic origins: 'Why does not [the third estate] send all these families who still make the crazy claim that they are descended from a race of conquerors back to the forests of Franconia?' And it was true enough that the nobility, from La Roque to Boulainvilliers via Saint-Simon, had fashioned this rod for its own back. Justifying its own privileges on grounds of race and history, it ceased to be identified with the Nation and made inevitable the rejection it was to suffer.

Efforts made in the second half of the eighteenth century to remodel its image were inefficient and came too late to make much impact. The damage was done. All it had taken was half a century, roughly the reign of Louis XIV, with its development of the phenomenon of the Court, centralisation and the uprooting of the nobility that followed it, the vanity of the ducal caste and its official theorists, for the nobility to shatter the cohesion of the kingdom and cut itself off from the rest of the Nation. After that, right down to the Constituent Assembly, nobles' attempts to escape from the gilded ghetto in which they had allowed themselves to be shut up were mostly fruitless; as Sieyès' words show, there was a determination to keep them out.

This was the paradox of the nobility, to be at one and the same time the official elite of the kingdom, and a body of rejects, seen as alien, useless and harmful. Any elite produced by a given political and social system is bound to appear a parasitic excrescence once the system which has spawned it is called into question. Today, wherever socialist models are the rule or the aspiration, elites spawned by capitalist states have fallen into disrepute and are denounced as impediments to national cohesion. The French nobility was no exception to the general rule and, despite worthy efforts in 1789 to blend itself into the Nation and identify with it, it was unable to turn back the tide that was sweeping it away.

Yet the French nobility never turned itself into a caste, or cut itself off from the nearest levels of the third estate. The absence of a general register of nobility, which was never drawn up, the ease of ennoblement, the encroachment on privileges by the office- and fief-holding middle class: all this proved how open the group remained. In France it was never entirely clear who was and who was not in the nobility.

First and foremost it was a national nobility. To be sure, it took in foreign nobles, but only immediately to naturalise them. In Alsace, it

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More information

overlapped with the Imperial nobility; it recognised that of newly acquired provinces like Corsica and Lorraine and assimilated foreign elements, whether Swedish, German, Polish or Swiss, and above all the imposing mass of Jacobite refugees. Even so the percentage of assimilations must have remained less than 2%. But what in fact were the numbers of the French nobility? 80,000 persons or 400,000? Since the old regime figures have varied between these two extremes. It is difficult to work out, but not impossible. Nor is this a purely academic issue. First of all the satisfaction or failure to satisfy the needs of the nobility depended on its numbers. Opportunities for service were not unlimited, especially since the nobility seldom had a monopoly of any career, even in the army. And without figures, how can we estimate the renewal rate of the order? As the linchpin of social morality, the nobility's capacity to absorb newcomers or to allow progress from one end of the noble hierarchy to the other was important both for the renewal of the second order, and for the satisfaction of the third estate's desire for promotion. For complex reasons, the chances of rising for the petty nobility of the provinces and the countryside were almost non-existent. The way was beset with filters so fine that practically nobody could get through.

For the third estate to get into the second order was a very different matter. The middle classes had opportunities as various as they were most often costly, for attaining the privilege of nobility. They could even gain an instant promotion which lifted them at one leap to the highest level. The Bourgeois de Boynes family, ennobled by the office of King's Secretary in 1719, received the honours of the court[1] with dispensation from proofs of ancestry, less than 50 years later. The Peyrenc de Moras, or the Laurent de Villedeuil families, and many others had the same meteoric rise. This penetration into the nobility, and above all into its higher reaches, by the cream of the third estate, had consequences of great importance for the perpetuation of the order, and indeed determined its evolution. The order was maintained at an adequate demographic level for its existence, even though it was plainly on the wane from the mid seventeenth century. In addition, the nobility drew on the wealth and the abilities of the third estate. Even more important were the transformations affecting noble psychology and the order's view of itself. Its invasion since the sixteenth century by new elements, at a time when the identity of the middle class was emerging, led to the warping of noble ideology and a conversion of the second order to values foreign to its traditional ethic.

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More information

Sometimes not without reluctance or regret; noble racism was deeply ingrained. But it was not all-embracing, and both acknowledgement of middle-class ideology and the ideas of Boulainvilliers could be found together in the same person. Boulainvilliers, however, perhaps for lack of opportunity, made little appearance in that last will and testament of the nobility, its *cahiers* of 1789. Birth is never mentioned in them, but references to individual merit appear with the regularity of a *leitmotiv*. The collective value of the group had been abandoned. Traditionally, a noble was defined by his lineage. His merit was inseparable from that of his ancestry, and the worth of his forebears underlay his own virtue. In one extreme sense he had no individual existence, no separate self. He was merely a link in an ancestral chain. This was the tradition that the nobility, or at least a large segment of the order, abandoned in 1789. Just like commoners, nobles demanded recognition of their personal merit, put off the protective veil of ancestry and, not without pride, offered themselves to the judgment and the competition of the third estate. Uncertainly, and running up sometimes against insuperable obstacles, little by little the middle class model supplanted the noble one. Transformations in behaviour followed. The nobility joined in the development of productive forces, absorbed capitalism into its outlook, and took on the ways of the middle class.

The nobility was not sealed off by impenetrable social barriers, or by some ideological frontier. It was not forbidden territory. Various nobilities could be defined by profession within the order; but only secondarily. For profession itself was determined by a decisive factor, a far more fundamental reason for profound gradations than length of lineage: money. Money mingled ranks and spread confusion, for it opened the way to the acquisition of land, including noble land – fiefs – which had not conferred nobility since the sixteenth century but were available to anybody at a time when to be well endowed was becoming more important than, or at least confused with, being well born. But at the same time it deepened differences and shattered noble unity. The hierarchy of wealth, which can be established from fiscal documents and personal accounts, shows precisely not only the limitations from lack of means which paralysed part of the nobility, and the particular outlook which this often bitterly resented situation gave rise to; but also the discrepancy between the model of society longed for by these frustrated nobles and the model favoured by a noble elite less professionally specialised, less exclusive in its inclinations and ambitions, and more easily contaminated by the intellectual currents it encountered.

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More information

Throughout the eighteenth century the petty military nobility, kept from Court through principle, from office through penury, from distinctions through obscurity, looked to professionalism for a definition and an identity.

They tried to establish the model of a nobility entirely dedicated to the profession of arms, finding justification in an ascetic ideal. The disappointed hopes of the petty nobility thus led them to dream of a class of heroes and an antidote to a society devoted to luxury and the rising power of money. It was the equivalent, on a chivalric level, of the religious mysticism of the Jansenistic middle class of the previous century. The frustration of this petty nobility, kept out of senior posts and sometimes the army itself by venality and the privilege of courtiers, bred a mystique of heroism and selflessness. The chevalier d'Arc, who gave his book the characteristic title of the *French Patriot*, gave vigorous expression to this yearning for sacrifice, and his frenzied debate with the abbé Coyer elevated this ideal of austerity, purity and service to the fatherland to paradoxical heights.

None of this was calculated to fire the gilded nobility with much enthusiasm. They had evolved differently. They did not escape their own crisis of identity. The transformation of the noble outlook had not been spontaneous. The monarchy had pushed it along, and public opinion had forced it to consider its position. First, with respect to itself, what it was and what it ought to become. Then with respect to the Nation, a Nation which, breaking into self-awareness, threatened to condemn the nobility to exclusion. Of course, attempts to define the nobility were nothing new. Jurists had long identified nobility with virtue, usually in order to provide a better justification for a hereditary nobility. Moralists had warned against accepting this too readily. The thought of the Enlightenment had thrown doubt on its certainty. And the nobility joined in the game of self-examination; a fashionable game perhaps, but a disturbing one. Bossuet was their defender, but it was Bossuet himself who opened the crisis with the charge that 'Nobility is often but empty, ignorant, coarse and idle poverty, vain in despising what it lacks; are these grounds for such swollen pride?'[2] It was a terrible condemnation left for the eighteenth century to ponder. If nobility was supposed to be virtue above all, why was virtue not a principle of the nobility? Nobles supposed to be falling so short were bound to be concerned! Was there no escape from such worries? Some refuge from agonising, perhaps, in well-worn certainties? Many petty gentlemen thought so, threatened and alarmed by

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More information

equality, clinging haughtily to the fickle illusion of superiority. Comte de Ségur, thrust onto the side of change more by fashion than conviction, was a clear-eyed observer while in the army of this hardening attitude among petty nobles under threat:

> The great lords and courtiers were less to blame than the poor and unenlightened nobility of the provinces; and this should come as no surprise, for all these people had were their titles, which they endlessly invoked against the real superiority of the middle class by whose wealth and education they were crossed and humiliated.[3]

Well-born and something of a rebel, he could overlook such things. Yet there were limits to the Enlightenment's appeal to high society. For many it was little more than a game. One could throw oneself energetically and elegantly into English fashions, liberal ideas, republicanism and equality. But how many of these triflers merely feigned Enlightenment? Many a frivolous dabbler was playing the innocent sorcerer's apprentice who would wake up the next day horrified by the forces he had so rashly let loose.

Ségur, one himself, clearly picked out the inconsistency of these socialites, foppishly playing the aristocratic rebel, unaware of the importance of the stakes, spoilt children who thought that turning on their nurses was revolutionary:

> We deeply respected the remnants of an ancient order whose habits, ignorance and prejudices we gaily defied . . . We lent enthusiastic support to the philosophic doctrines professed by bold and witty scribblers. Voltaire won us over, Rousseau touched our hearts, and we felt a secret pleasure when we saw them attack an old structure that appeared to us gothic and ridiculous. So whatever our rank, our privileges, the remains of our former power eaten away beneath our feet, we enjoyed this little war. Untouched by it, we were mere onlookers. These battles were mere pen- or word-play which did not seem to us likely to affect the worldly superiority we enjoyed and which centuries-old possession made us believe indestructible . . . Liberty, whatever its tones, appealed to us through its courage, and equality through its convenience. It can be pleasurable to sink so long as one believes one can rise again at will, and, heedless of the future, we tasted in one draught patrician advantages and the delights of plebeian philosophy.

How many, indeed, of these laughable young democrats saw equality as more than an appealing game, and resisting the absolutist State as a more than a pastime? They turned tail at the first warning. But not all were so empty. Many appreciated how important these changes were, accepted them with thoughtful enthusiasm, and kept to their course

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More information

with the generous conviction of disinterested believers. A young aristocrat like de Pont, the correspondent of Burke, remained faithful to his ideals even after his 'mentor' became the 'defender of despotism' in denouncing the Revolution. He was no dilettante: for him liberty, equality, a constitution were not simply fashionable trimmings, but necessary innovations replacing (at the cost of some excesses, as he frankly but unsentimentally admitted) all that he deplored in the name of national dignity and honour.[4]

Official historiography has often interpreted the crisis of the old order as the embryo of a class struggle, a conflict between the nobility and a middle class destined by century-long evolution to challenge them in a life or death struggle for power. There was indeed such a conflict; but it antedated Louis XVI's reign, and indeed the eighteenth century itself, and those involved were not quite the parties they are thought to be. It began when absolutism began, and it was a quarrel between different nobles. It was not middle class against noble, but noble against noble. It took place within the nobility, a civil war that lasted as long as the old order, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, and was only resolved in the crisis of absolutism, after 1787, when the opposed nobilities came together on the defeat of the monarchy. Only after this reconciliation did the ground shift, and third estate begin to oppose nobility and attack privilege under the banner of equality.

But we need to go even further back. Absolutism was established on the ruins of feudalism when it overthrew the liege nobility, an aristocracy enjoying sovereign powers. To secure its authority and meet its growing fiscal needs, the monarchy surrounded itself with a class of retainers owing direct allegiance to its authority, closely supervised but granted noble privileges in return for services rendered, and completely subservient. In this way it brought about a transfer of power from the feudal nobility to a royal nobility, to which it delegated, under its immediate control, segments of public authority in the form of offices and commissions. Thus was created a new nobility which gradually replaced feudal remnants as they shrank to a purely decorative role. The representatives of this former feudal power, real or presumed, and helpless victims of this revolution which was the final ruin of their power, regarded it as a collapse. 'I confess I can scarce restrain myself when I think on the cruel state to which the late government reduced the order from whence I take my life and honour.' Saint-Simon, the outraged witness of noble debasement, saw clearly

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More information

how this transfer of power worked. The second order – meaning the old nobility – fell into dependence on the 'Third', lawyers, clerks and bankers, all servants of the absolutist state which distributed power among them. He depicted this third estate, this middle class ennobled by crown and office, and holding the reality of power under Louis XIV, as a new nobility. Provincial government, once in the hands of governors who were true nobles, was now exercised by commissioners, royal nobles. The latter held the second order (for in Saint-Simon's eyes they were not part of it) in complete economic and political dependence. They were rich, and had cornered all the powers that the warrior nobility had lost. Nobody was more sensitive than Saint-Simon to whatever demeaned old stock, and he deplored:

> The way rich men command poor, regardless of their birth, by means of places in authority attained through venal offices whose price far outstrips their yield. These ways of matching the nobility will not be easily given up, especially when they lead to yet greater things through the continual want that nobles have, from the most renowned to the least, of the goods and protection, to speak plainly, of rich office holders of the third order, which is almost entirely made up of them . . . As to offices, notwithstanding that the number of judicial, clerical and financial ones is wellnigh infinite, there is not one among them without direct or indirect authority or power, whose measure is in no way comparable with that of any military office whatsoever . . .[5]

With wealth and power engrossed by the royal nobility and the feudal nobility obliged to accept its protection and authority, the latter order sank to being 'the most oppressed of all, with least resources, although the only one to have existed in most distant times'.[6]

The ground of this conflict between two nobilities shifted in the eighteenth century. The cause of the royal nobility was won once absolutism triumphed. But now battle was rejoined over another issue, no longer political power, but the army. Here the clash between money and privilege was resolved at the point of absurdity in the Ségur law under Louis XVI, that last episode of the war between the two nobilities which, in giving official recognition to two classes within the royal nobility, shattered the painfully constructed compromise made by absolutism between the rival segments of the order.[7] Ultimately absolutism paid the price for this political mistake. The two nobilities, their cohesion under threat, came together in opposition and even sought, in alliance with the third estate, to bring the monarchy down. And this alliance lasted. Revolutionary rhetoric might subsequently denounce nobility, as later it would denounce the Girondins and their

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More information

supporters, but these episodes did not prevent the middle classes and the nobility from triumphing in a post-revolutionary society conforming in general to the wishes expressed by both in 1789.

Scarcely a century separated the peak of absolutism from its end. During that century it passed through a sort of blessed state, a state of grace following from the governmental momentum built up by Louis XIV. Early successes allowed the crown to impose its authority benignly, without recourse to force. It seemed to have reached that perfect position where obedience came automatically and there was no need to threaten violence or coercion. But was this an illusion? When the Constituent Assembly met it found a kingdom that the government no longer governed or even administered. Ruled by women, the monarchy put up no resistance. For all its sporadic revivals, it had given up.

This was the logical result of a long slide, from the time of absolutism at its height down to the meeting of the Constituent Assembly, which had reduced the crown to a marginal sham. But the illusion of authority was so complete that when it was revealed for what it was, the Nation could not at first believe its eyes.

This running out of power, this long downward drift into oblivion, happened in two phases. The first occurred under Louis XIV, when government became self-absorbed and set up for its subjects a cult of its own omnipresence, worshipped at the altar of the hero-sovereign, hiding behind the protective screen of ritual and man-made institutions which performed a double function designed at one and the same time to hide both strengths and weaknesses and to neutralise all threats, all criticism and all opposition. This protective layer was the Court. Court was the catalyst of all ambitions, the sole focus of all thinking beings, a world cut off from natural life where compromises were secretly elaborated. It was a frontier sealing off the crown from all contact with diversity, sheltering it from contamination, yet at the same time operating in a vacuum. It made the birth and development of opposition outside its own ambit ridiculous if not impossible. Opposition could only become effective at Court, and there everything was smothered, controlled, smoothed over. The Court of Louis XIV was a political edifice designed to neutralise any attempt to organise external criticism or opposition. It operated by centralising threats. Nothing must overflow. It was a system for neutralising dangerous forces which turned opposition into intrigue, a formula which turned bombs into squibs, political conflict into courtiers' games or harem

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More information

conspiracies. The Court channelled, naturalised and neutralised opposition. The Crown watched over it, and was all the stronger in consequence.

In the course of the eighteenth century this mechanism changed, became debased and fell apart. The first cracks appeared under the Regency and in the early years of Louis XV's reign. Authority was on the slide, and the threat of being by-passed took shape, once resistance or even political reflexion escaped from the closed world in which Louis XIV had shut them. Fleury understood this, and that was why he closed down the Entresol club, a centre of political discussion that could have posed a real danger. But the breach had been made. After the death of Louis XIV and the liberalisation or 'de-Stalinisation' of the Regency, the function and the effectiveness of the Court were under threat. It was no longer the sealed world of power, veiling it from unwelcome scrutiny. This was so well appreciated that government shrank away into Versailles' 'little apartments' whose private and secret architecture made ever more obvious the fact that the whole structure had become top-heavy for a government that had ceased to believe in itself. After me, the deluge, said a king who could see the defences raised for his protection crumbling all around him. The Court ceased to function properly at the very moment when it was codifying its practices. Its political function, to draw a circle of fire around the crown, was becoming blurred. The clouds which hid it from the masses were blowing away. Salons, academies, dining-clubs, all the circles of the Palais Royal and soon enough secret or semi-secret societies too seized upon it; it became a subject for talk, argument, and envy. Suddenly shorn of its secrecy, and thus of its magic too, and now an everyday subject thrown open for the Nation's discussion, it shrivelled, paled and half-consciously abandoned itself while everybody, led by the nobility, transferred their interest elsewhere. But to what? Perhaps this essay will explain.