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978-0-521-39282-2 - The Politics of Privilege: Old Regime and Revolution in Lille

Gail Bossenga

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This study analyzes the political and fiscal origins of the French Revolution by looking at the relationship between the royal government and privileged, corporate bodies at the local level. Utilizing a neo-Tocquevillian approach, it argues that the monarchy undermined its own attempts at reform by extending central authority, while at the same time it continued to rely upon corporate structures and monopolies to finance the state. The unresolvable, institutional conflicts had the effect of politicizing members of the privileged elite and eventually led many of them to embrace a rhetoric of citizenship, accountability, and civic equality that had far-reaching and unanticipated consequences. When Lille's bourgeoisie consolidated a municipal revolution in 1789, they followed a program that was politically liberal, but economically conservative.

Arranged as a series of case-studies, the book illuminates the structure of political power in the Flemish provincial estates, the growth of royal taxation, the problem of municipal credit, the role of venal officeholders, and the relationship of the revolutionary bourgeoisie to monopolies of the guilds.

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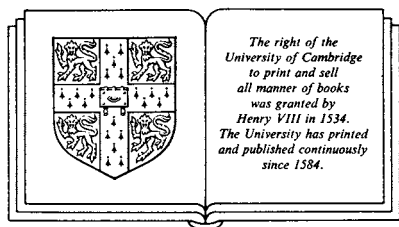
# The politics of privilege

## *Old regime and revolution in Lille*

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Gail Bossenga

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## Preface

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My interest in the relationship between the corporate bodies of the old regime and the origins of the French Revolution goes back to my days as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, specifically to a course with David Bien. The class was engrossed (or at least I was) with the problem of how notions of equality might have arisen in a society organized upon the antithetical principles of hierarchy and privilege. One solution, the most common proposed, was some variant of the “egalitarian outsider” theory of history. According to this historiographical scenario, unprivileged groups, chronically thwarted in their attempts at social mobility, rose up, armed themselves with the rhetoric of equality, and finally overthrew their privileged oppressors. As a specialist in ironical twists of history, however, Bien had an additional proposal: perhaps notions of equality were being formulated inside corporate bodies as well as in opposition to them. This I found to be such a preposterous idea that I immediately knew I had stumbled onto the subject of my doctoral research.

Since that time I have pursued various angles of the relationship of privileged corps to an egalitarian revolution, some more successfully than others. My approach has been that of the local study, and within that locality, of case studies of particular corporate institutions endowed with different ranks, powers, and rights. By restricting the study to specific corps, I found that I could investigate in a more detailed fashion the processes impinging upon these institutions, the rhetoric utilized to defend or attack their privileges, and the multiple allegiances generated through simultaneous membership in several of these bodies. My goal, ultimately, was to present a series of essays on the problem of privilege in the old regime from the perspective of local actors who witnessed the various stresses, strains, and uses to which corporate bodies were subjected. As such, the research was oriented heavily toward institutional factors, and, although I did not predict this when I began, the results led me to argue for the primacy of fiscal, political, and cultural reasons for the outbreak of revolution. Indeed, a central problem that I faced after completing my

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research was to interpret the connection, if any, between economic liberalism and the political origins of the Revolution, given that my evidence pointed so starkly away from a Marxist interpretation toward a Tocquevillian and Weberian one.

A number of individuals and institutions provided moral and material support without which this work would never have been completed. I would like to express my thanks to them all. David Bien, as noted already, provided the inspiration for this study, while Charles Tilly gave me invaluable advice on how to construct a viable agenda for my research. Both of these professors, as well as other members of my doctoral committee, Louise Tilly and Jacob Price, offered helpful comments for writing and revising the dissertation. My initial sojourn in Lille would have been less pleasant and productive without the warm hospitality of Pierre and Solange Deyon, and the friendship of Thorkil Jacobsen and Liana Vardi. I gained a number of insights from conversations with Wayne Te Brake and from discussions with Harry Liebersohn, with whom I had the pleasure of teaching a graduate course during my tenure as a Henry Luce postdoctoral fellow at the Claremont Graduate School. I received encouragement and suggestions from various members of a northern California reading group in French history, coordinated at the time by Lynn Hunt, and from my colleagues at the University of Kansas, Angel Kwolek-Folland, Ann Schofield, and, in particular, Beth Bailey. Jack Goldstone, Jim Riley, and Ran Halévi took the time to comment on portions of the manuscript. A number of reader's reports, all anonymous, recommended changes that helped me to produce a far more readable final text. The editorial support of William Davies has been appreciated.

At the doctoral level, my research was supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council, the French Fulbright, and the University of Michigan. I am also grateful for postdoctoral financial aid from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council for Learned Societies, the Henry Luce Foundation, and a summer research grant from the University of Kansas. I owe a debt, for which this book will have to serve as repayment, to them all.

My family has weathered the process of completing this book with good humor and patience. As my daughter Laurina astutely observed, "children have more fun than adults, because when you are young you can play, but when you grow up, you have to write books." Our second, who has yet to make an appearance at the time of writing this preface, has reminded me again of the fundamental importance of the role of biology in history, at least in how quickly it gets written. Most important in this ongoing project has been the selfless help of my husband, Carl Strikwerda, who has alternately served as research assistant, proofreader, bibliographer,

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and sympathetic ear. One of the more remarkable achievements in this line of work proved to be his surprising ability to listen to the rise and fall of the ancien régime in Lille at least 256 times (after which we both lost count) and never once fall asleep. This book is dedicated to him.

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## Abbreviations

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- A.D.N. = *Archives Départementales du Nord*  
A.D.N., C.B.F. = *Archives Départementales du Nord, série C, Archives du Bureau des Finances.*  
A.M.L. = *Archives Municipales de Lille*  
A.M.L., A.G. = *Archives Municipales de Lille, Affaires Générales*  
A.N. = *Archives Nationales*  
B.M.L. = *Bibliothèque Municipale de Lille*