

Introduction

The European nobilities as an historical problem

From the early Middle Ages until the threshold of our own era, a small group of people dominated European society. These were the nobilities, constituting in most countries 1 or 2 percent of population but holding much larger shares of their societies' wealth, political authority, and esteem. Such claims to privilege had many sources, but ultimately they rested on ideas about personality and identity. Nobles saw themselves as different from other people. By their birth, so they argued, they had inherited distinctive qualities, qualities that their educations had refined and strengthened. This combination of genetic and cultural inheritance, so they claimed, separated them from others and gave them special aptitudes for protecting and commanding. In turn these social roles justified wealth and honor: because they commanded others, the nobles needed esteem and deference, and they needed to be free of the material cares that dominated ordinary lives. Privilege, they argued, was both a precondition of effective rule and a suitable reward for its troubles. In most parts of Europe, these privileges acquired the force of law. An extensive body of law defined who was noble and what advantages they enjoyed. Thus nobles usually enjoyed special standing in the lawcourts, and special provisions governed their property transactions.

The book that follows sketches the history of these ruling groups during the years in which their hold on European societies was tightest: between the end of the Middle Ages, around 1400, and the beginnings of the industrial age, around 1800. The book explores the nobles' numbers and backgrounds, their wealth, something of their daily lives. It considers their place in Europe's political development. It tries to understand their contributions to European culture, and more broadly their impact on the rest of society. A final chapter explores the impact on them of political and social changes after the French Revolution of 1789.

These were tumultuous years in European history. During the four centuries that this book examines, Europeans first encountered the New

2 The European nobility, 1400–1800

World, then organized an increasingly profitable domination of it. In the long term, the encounter led to radical changes in Europeans' outlooks and values, changes that were especially powerful because they coincided with other cultural encounters: with Greek and Roman knowledge in the fifteenth century, with new religions during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, with a new science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And there were radical political and social changes. Most European states became more powerful, better organized, and more centralized in these years; most economies became more active, more productive, more reliant on monetary exchanges. By the end of the period, the beginnings of industrial revolution were visible in some parts of Europe, and a few great cities had attained a modern scale; London already had a million inhabitants, and Paris would soon reach that mark. The task of a book like this, then, is to set the history of Europe's traditional ruling group – a ruling group that justified its position by reference to the past – within a series of revolutionary changes in the world around it.

No single book, of course, could adequately summarize Europe's diverse experiences of aristocratic society in these years. Even in the simplest matters, profound differences divided the nobilities of different nations. Nobles were common in eastern Europe and in Spain, much less numerous in most of the west; they represented at least 8 percent of Polish population, about 1 percent of French. Definitions of who belonged to the order might vary widely. In England, only a few hundred families enjoyed official titles as nobles, while thousands of others formed a loosely defined gentry, whose existence rested only on ancestral wealth and assertions about good birth. Elsewhere, for the most part, all nobles enjoyed official titles, and few legal barriers separated the greatest dukes from the least significant village squires; in these countries, the nobility formed a single order, and its members – rich and poor alike – claimed a common superiority to all those who lacked noble birth. Attitudes to urban life might likewise differ from one country to another. Near the Mediterranean nobles had long lived in cities, whereas to the north they tended to live in the countryside and only hesitantly moved to the cities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Aristocratic political powers might be equally varied. During much of the early modern period, nobles in central and eastern Europe had local powers undreamed of in the west; within their estates, they ruled with little outside interference. In contrast, by the eighteenth century British nobles held unequalled control over centralized state power, but had few formal powers as landowners. Variations of this kind make generalization about European patterns a risky matter, especially since much necessary primary research remains to be done.

Yet differences do not constitute the whole story. If national differences mattered greatly, so also did patterns of resemblance. Throughout Europe, nobles held to common ideologies. Everywhere they justified their privileges by a common set of images about the nature of their group and the services that they performed for the rest of society. There were also common experiences. In fact the nobilities formed one of a relatively few groups that had a genuinely European history during the early modern period. Like artists and intellectuals but in much greater numbers, they moved about Europe, in search of education, pleasure, and employment. Royal marriages typically sent large numbers of nobles to distant lands, as courtiers and advisers to newly married princesses. Warfare had the same effect, placing nobles for prolonged periods in foreign settings and (because of the leisurely pace of much early modern campaigning) allowing them significant interchange with local residents. This movement of people (mostly of men, but involving many women as well) produced in turn shared sensibilities. Ideals of dress and deportment tended to be shared by aristocratic circles throughout Europe, but so also did more fundamental ideas about human life. "The polite of every country seem to have but one character," as a mid-eighteenth-century Englishman put it. "A gentleman of Sweden differs but little, except in trifles, from one of every other country."¹ The story of the nobilities is partly one of national differences, but it is also one of shared Europe-wide patterns. A central argument of this book, in fact, is for the importance of these common patterns. Across Europe, the nobilities changed in essentially similar ways, under the impact of essentially similar forces.

What is at stake in a history of these men and women? In one sense very little. Their tiny numbers made them wildly atypical of the societies in which they lived. Nor can a study of the group be justified by its spectacular achievements. Throughout Europe, to be sure, there were individual nobles who displayed remarkable abilities and made impressive use of them. Because in most parts of Europe they monopolized high political and military offices, the nobles supplied most of the early modern period's great generals and statesmen. Many nobles participated actively in Europe's cultural life as well. Many even involved themselves in the most dynamic and innovative efforts of European capitalism, financing overseas exploration, new corporations, and technological advances. Yet such efforts remained the work of a minority among the nobles. The majority (so it seems necessary to conclude) led vacant and parasitic lives, without the justification even of service to their countries.

¹ Quoted J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985), 99.

4 The European nobility, 1400–1800

“Five hundred . . . ordinary men, chosen accidentally from among the unemployed” – so a hostile observer in 1909 described the British peerage of his day, probably the most energetic and best educated, certainly the richest, nobles in European history.² However lacking in sympathy or imagination, the judgment in one sense was fair enough. The European nobles made uneven use of enormous advantages. There is little to suggest that they were an especially distinguished or even public-spirited ruling group. Probably they took more from the societies around them than they gave back.

Yet even the historian who believes that most early modern nobles were of mediocre ability and self-indulgent character finds that they demand close study, and study that does not focus only on the minority of achievers among them. That is because the nobles' situation has become central to how historians understand processes of social change in the early modern period, and even beyond. Their centrality has resulted from one of the great discoveries of historical research in the generations since World War II. In one national history after another, historians have come to realize that the nobilities were an astoundingly resilient ruling group, repeatedly able to withstand apparently overwhelming historical forces.

The English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century has provided an especially clear example. Historians once interpreted this series of events as the result of a weakening of aristocratic power, which allowed commoners to dominate national politics and eventually to abolish the high nobility altogether. Historians no longer think in these terms. Instead, they have come to see the House of Lords dominating English politics throughout the period leading up to the Revolution, and they have seen the English nobles as maintaining their economic preeminence with the same effectiveness. If anything, so historians have come to believe, the high nobles dominated and directed English politics in its age of greatest turmoil. Even more important, they emerged successfully from the ordeal, still the richest group in society and quite ready to direct politics over the two centuries to come. For the same awareness of aristocratic resilience has characterized thought about the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The industrial revolution did little to shake aristocratic rule. The richest people in mid-nineteenth-century England, after a century of industrialization, remained aristocratic landowners. Political arrangements directly translated this economic power. The British cabinets of the late nineteenth century were among the most aristocratic in the nation's history.

England represents an extreme instance of the continuity of aristocratic

² David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, 1991), 49, quoting the British prime minister David Lloyd George.

power in European history, but there were parallels throughout Europe. In France, historians have shown that the nobles managed to capture for themselves many of the profits of absolutist government in the seventeenth century – a government that once was believed to be hostile to their interests. More startlingly, similar conclusions have emerged concerning the great French Revolution of 1789. The revolutionaries killed many individual nobles, damaged many more nobles' fortunes, and developed a ferociously anti-aristocratic rhetoric; their efforts permanently changed the rules of political practice in France. Yet for all this, they left most aristocratic families and their properties in place, ready to take up anew their leading position in nineteenth-century society; and the rules of nineteenth-century life continued to favor the well-born. In France as in England, historians have pushed the date for ending the Old Regime – the social order based on distinctions of birth and assumptions of social privilege – steadily later, to the political cataclysms of the early twentieth century and the complicated economic changes that accompanied them.

Such emphasis on the “persistence of the Old Regime”³ in western Europe, the enduring vitality there of aristocratic social forms, has in turn reshaped historians' approach to the problems of central Europe. For historians of Germany and the rest of central Europe have long recognized that there aristocratic society remained vital and dominant up to World War I. Precisely this continuity, in fact, was once offered as an explanation for the peculiarities of German history – for bellicosity in 1914 and totalitarianism a generation later. Germany (so interpretation used to run) failed to challenge aristocratic rule and to establish in its place the dominance of the bourgeoisie. In their eagerness to protect the economic interests and military institutions on which their order rested, German nobles were ready to encourage destabilizing adventures both abroad and at home, and they were determined to destroy forces that might have produced a stable, democratic polity. But discovery of aristocratic continuities in England and France has made the German case seem less unusual. Aristocratic social and political structures survived everywhere in nineteenth-century Europe; their survival cannot be made an explanation for Germany's peculiar history.⁴

Historians' growing realization of the continuing vitality of aristocratic social forms everywhere in early modern Europe thus sets some of the agenda for a study like this one, and makes clear the significance of the

³ For the phrase and strong arguments justifying its use, Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).

⁴ See the discussion in David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984), 39–61, 144–55, *passim*.

6 The European nobility, 1400–1800

subject. The nobles matter to us as we try to understand early modern societies because they dominated them with such persistence, and because their domination survived into the modern age, indeed into the twentieth century. We need to ask how the nobles did it, how they managed to adapt to so many historical changes. This means in particular examining the nobles' confrontations with two of the dominant forces of the early modern period, the bureaucratic state and market capitalism. Both forces developed rapidly in Europe from the sixteenth century on. Both modernized European society by changing the rules of social action: that is, changing the methods for accumulating and keeping wealth and power. Together, economic and political developments over the early modern period repeatedly challenged the methods by which nobles in earlier generations had established their rule. Yet the nobles were as firmly in command of their societies at the end of these years as at the beginning, in fact probably more firmly. How had this astounding fact come about? This is part of what a history of the nobilities can tell us. It is one reason that such a history leads directly into fundamental facts about European society before 1900.

But there is another side to the history of aristocratic adaptation, the history of its failures. As a group the nobles by and large succeeded in keeping and even increasing their powers. But they did not succeed equally in all domains, and not all groups of nobles shared equally in the success. The bare fact of success, so forcefully established in recent scholarship, thus conceals as much as it reveals. The process of adaptation favored some groups within the nobility over others; it required certain forms of dealing with the surrounding societies, and penalized others; it encouraged certain tendencies in the social environment and stifled others. The continuity of aristocratic power and wealth, in other words, accompanied important changes in society and in the aristocracy itself. Alongside the theme of adaptation and success, then, this book will treat the themes of failure and change. It will try to identify the qualitative changes that nobles' successes may mask from view.

Such questions demand a history that is in some degree social, that is, a history that attempts to understand daily realities of substantial groups of people. Ideas and ideologies are an important part of this history, but its core remains the effort to establish typical patterns of behavior, against which the unusual, whether successful or failed, can be charted. The claim to social history may ring strangely in a history devoted to ruling groups. And in fact much thought in the development of social history since World War II stressed the need to turn attention away from such groups as the nobles, who, it was argued, had enjoyed historians' attention long enough. It was time, so these historians argued, that more

attention be given to peasants and workers, and less to social elites like nobles. Yet the methods of social history can as profitably be employed on the privileged as on the weak. An important achievement of social historians has been to show the power that working people could exercise in the aristocratic societies of early modern Europe (as indeed in other societies). They have given less attention to understanding the forces that limited what the rich could do, to seeing the rich like the poor as caught in the societies of which they are a part and as impelled by social forces that they could not control.

The “persistence of the Old Regime” has been a surprising fact for historians, and it is worth asking why this should be so. One reason, clearly, lies in the fact that much European historiography since the French Revolution has focussed on the rise of the middle classes and the consequent decline of the nobilities. Nobles themselves contributed to this interest, because from very early times they repeatedly bewailed their loss of power and wealth, and complained that these had passed to other groups. Around the nobilities, in other words, there gathered images of crisis and decay, usually allied to nostalgia for times when the nobles’ situation was more solid and less subject to questioning and complaint. In fact, the great French social theorist and observer (and nobleman) Alexis de Tocqueville in the mid-nineteenth century offered the nobility’s decline as the central thread of European history. “If, beginning at the eleventh century, one takes stock of what was happening in France at fifty-year intervals, one finds each time that a double revolution has taken place in the state of society. The noble has gone down in the social scale, and the commoner has gone up; as the one falls, the other rises. Each half century brings them closer, and soon they will touch. And that is not something peculiar to France. Wherever one looks one finds the same revolution taking place throughout the Christian world.”⁵ What Tocqueville saw as a broad and inexorable process of social change, other writers claimed to observe in the details of the world around them. “If I had time,” lamented William Cobbett as he wandered the southern English countryside in 1823, “I would make an actual survey of one whole county, and find out *how many of the old gentry have lost their estates*, and have been supplanted by the Jews, since PITT began his reign. I am sure I should prove that, in number, they are one-half extinguished . . . The little ones are, indeed, gone.”⁶

Complaints like these, coming from observers as acute as Tocqueville

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York, 1969), 11.

⁶ William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, ed. George Woodstock (London, 1967), 119 (emphases in original).

and Cobbett, pose problems that are partly logical and partly empirical. Even if there were evidence for the nobles' decline relative to the middle classes, for instance, we have trouble understanding how Tocqueville could have imagined a social class in steady decline during eight consecutive centuries. Surely, we think, there must have been some bright moments to interrupt this centuries-long decline; and in any case after such steady decay, what could have remained of the class in his own time? In fact, though one would not know it from reading Tocqueville, nobles remained rich, powerful, and socially visible in nineteenth-century France, where the Tocqueville family itself enjoyed a distinguished position; they were even richer elsewhere in Europe. Tocqueville's own experience ought to have made him skeptical about the historical picture that he drew.

Another fact ought to have made him even more skeptical. Complaints such as his enjoyed a long history, which can be traced back through the sixteenth century and into the Middle Ages. At even the most glorious moments in their history, the nobilities complained of poverty and neglect, often in the hope of obtaining government assistance. "Such as were gentlemen's houses . . . are since dwindled into cottages & such as were then cottages are now advanced to gentlemen's houses, some of whom (though they are not many) would pass for palaces in former days; and yet neither they nor their owners were known to the parish . . . sixty years ago," as another English observer worried in the 1720s.⁷ "The princes of the blood and the other great nobles are so poor and so lacking in authority . . . because all the lands and wealth of importance of the greater families of the kingdom have fallen at various times into the hands of the crown . . . They have little authority." Thus an Italian visitor in 1561, commenting on the state of the French nobility.⁸ The same observer saw problems for the lesser nobles, who faced a difficult choice between ruinous expense if they came to court and political impotence if they stayed home. "The nobles, who are usually not very rich, are ruined when they come to court, where everything is dear . . . On the contrary, when they stay in their chateaux and lead a private and simple life, they have all they need without livery, sumptuous garments, expensive horses, banquets, and other things necessary to a courtier."⁹ A century and a half later, La Bruyère used almost the same language, though his point was different: "A nobleman, if he lives at home in his province, lives free but

⁷ Quoted E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London, 1975), 112.

⁸ James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, eds., *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, rev. edn (Middlesex–New York, 1968), 316.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

without substance; if he lives at court, he is taken care of, but enslaved.”¹⁰ Soon after, the duc de Saint-Simon complained that French government was in the hands of the “vile bourgeoisie,” leaving the nobility powerless and neglected.¹¹

Just as these complaints had been repeated, generation after generation, for centuries before Tocqueville wrote, so also they have ritually been repeated since. Late in the nineteenth century, at the moment of the British aristocracy’s greatest wealth and power, administrators had so taken these ideas to heart that they greeted with surprise surveys proving aristocratic prosperity.¹² Even today the rhetoric of aristocratic decline retains its force. “The picture, says [photographer Richard] Avedon, is a Proustian look at the death of aristocratic Europe, taken at the last great ball on the Continent.” Thus the caption in *Newsweek* magazine of a photograph taken in 1991 – a photograph of wealthy and handsome people, lavishly bedecked, and apparently enjoying themselves in an exclusive, elegant setting.¹³

The language of complaint is often the work of acute and careful observers, and (we shall see) it often described significant realities. Yet, repeated so regularly generation after generation, this language cannot only reflect factual observation. After all, while complaints of aristocratic decay recurred from one generation to the next, aristocrats themselves continued their social dominance and their wealth. The disjuncture between reality and anxious contemporary comment suggests that the language of decline formed something more than observation of reality. It was also, perhaps primarily, a set of expectations *through which* reality was understood, or even given shape. Around the nobility, it appears, there has clung a permanent rhetoric of nostalgia; what was once solid and assured, so observer after observer tells us, has reached the verge of collapse.

If this rhetoric of nostalgia cannot be explained as a direct reflection of reality, why did it emerge, and why did it retain such power in the European imagination? To some extent, as a simple misreading of realities. At any time, as we shall see in detail, individual nobles and their families might be in difficulties. The spectacle was often moving, as indeed financial collapse remains today: cherished homes and possessions having to be sold, daughters unable to find suitable marriage partners, unpolished newcomers taking positions in high society. Such scenes were

¹⁰ Quoted Franklin Ford, *Robe and Sword* (repr. New York, 1965), vii.

¹¹ Quoted René Pomméau and Jean Ehrard, *Littérature française, 5: de Fénelon à Voltaire* (Paris, 1984), 252.

¹² Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall*, 22, 54–55.

¹³ *Newsweek*, 13 September 1993, 51.

real, and not surprisingly they attracted the attention of social observers in all periods. Yet individual misfortunes did not mean the decline of the social group as a whole. Observers have too easily leapt from individual cases to assertions about the condition of the group. The leap has been especially easy when personal interests have been involved: for nobles who found themselves in difficulties and needed to interpret these in larger than personal terms; or for conservatives of all kinds, frightened by signs of imminent social change.

Yet nostalgia has also deeper sources, in the qualities that western culture has tended to assign to aristocracies and in the ways it has used those qualities to think indirectly about other issues. Nobility has represented, first, biological stability. European nobles have always defined themselves in terms of descent from admired ancestors. Usually they have tried to preserve the purity of that descent by marrying with others whose blood is pure; even today, according to opinion polls, most French nobles say that they would be most comfortable marrying another noble. Through his/her presumed racial purity, the noble seemed to embody connectedness to a distant historical past. “It is a reverend thing to see an ancient castle or building not in decay, or to see a fair timber-tree sound and perfect: how much more to behold an ancient noble family which hath stood against the waves and weathers of time.” Thus the English jurist and scientific propagandist Francis Bacon, early in the seventeenth century.¹⁴ A still more powerful belief that noble descent could somehow preserve contact with ancient virtues flourished in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus the heroine of Benjamin Disraeli’s novel *Sybil*, who offers pure Anglo-Saxon nobility somehow surviving uncontaminated in a mid-nineteenth-century present, displays the purity of faith, constancy, and courage of her ancestors – ancestors of whom she knows nothing, and whose influence on her is purely genetic. Disraeli’s novel expressed the conviction that noble birth preserved specific qualities, qualities that others possessed to a much lesser degree: generosity, courage, indifference to calculation. Those who disliked the calculations and moral cowardice of capitalist society could view the nobles as living monuments to a better, morally heroic past.

The significance thus attached to biological contact with the past helps to account for the anxieties nobles expressed about presumed threats to the purity of their blood. It is not accidental that William Cobbett, in his worries at the replacement of the old English gentry by new men, described the threat as coming from “Jews.” He meant to speak of the threatening new wealth that government finance had generated – but his

¹⁴ Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (London, 1985), 99.