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## Introduction

The spring of 1675 was a time of turmoil in western France, with public discontent rising rapidly against the battery of new taxes enacted to pay for the war with the United Provinces. In early April the rumor spread to Brittany that rioters in Bordeaux had conducted an *auto-da-fé*, using his wares to incinerate the chief *traitant* of the new stamped paper tax. The forces of order everywhere stood on edge. The First President of the Parlement, Florent d'Argouges, wrote to the mayor and aldermen of Nantes that "authority must always be preserved." Mindful of the constant conflicts between the municipality and the seneschal of Nantes, he reminded them that "service is better carried out when the main officers are united."

D'Argouges presents us with the primary policy goal of the early modern French state, the preservation of order, and with its necessary enabling condition, unity among the ruling elites. In this new world, the focus of divine benediction shifted from the hierarchical social order itself to a combination of the sovereign state and the newly moral individual. The king himself was the first such individual, giving law binding on all his subjects, although not on himself. How hard it must have been to maintain the necessary unity when the order around which elites had to rally lacked clear definition. The old social, economic, and political hierarchy, which was still an organic reality in France, was that of the society of estates. The new hierarchies were economic (the society of classes) and political (the sovereign state). The structure of inquiry about such a society must examine both hierarchies to show how they formed a new order based, above all, on the defense of property.

The king provided confused leadership in the search for the new order. On the one hand, he defended the social status quo by supporting its two defining institutions, the family and the society of orders hierarchy. On the other hand, he attacked the political status quo by seeking to move French governance outside the framework of contract and into that of law, that is, into the area in which the king had unlimited authority. Order thus had contradictory meanings. The network of orders codified inequality into a divine social cosmos, yet the king wanted to treat everyone as an equal before him, to make all subject to his laws. The framework of orders preserved the hierarchical structure contemporaries believed society needed to function, yet the government demanded

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freedom of action outside that structure in order to preserve the social peace and protect that most important of all social elements, property. In a society both unstable and stable, the government had to be a combination of absolute authority, to preserve order (that is, enjoyment of property) and limited power, so as not to threaten property. The government could not threaten the property of elites and simultaneously maintain its legitimacy in their eyes. Contemporaries made no bones about the connection between property and order: as the bishop of Saint-Malo wrote to Colbert (1675), “the bourgeois and principal inhabitants are well intentioned as much for the service of the king as for the preservation of their goods.” The good bishop did not fail to remind them that the two went hand in hand.

How best to analyze this disorderly society obsessed with order? This book has three sections: on classes and their relationship to the Breton economy; on the society of estates, as seen through its institutions, above all the Estates of Brittany; and on the problem of order itself. Before turning to the Breton case, however, we must first establish the broader French context within which Breton developments took place. Let us start with classes and estates and then turn to an examination of the problem of order and the nature of “absolutism.”

CLASSES AND ESTATES

The two “scholasticisms,” the society of orders and the society of classes, have defined the historiographical parameters of inquiry about early modern France for more than a generation. As Pierre Goubert has suggested, each model has its utility, yet neither can satisfactorily explain the complexity of early modern French society. To be restricted to either is “the negation of the greatest and dearest of all liberties, that of the mind, and the negation of historical research itself.”<sup>1</sup> To understand early modern France, we must consider classes (classifying people by the nature of their economic activity and by their level of wealth), estates (or orders) (classifying people by culturally determined legal categories), and order. We need also to relate these categories to gender and age because of the destabilization created by rapidly changing gender relations and attitudes toward the social peace.<sup>2</sup> The Breton network of classes and estates reflected the province’s particularism in certain ways, yet the Breton pattern broadly resembled the larger French one.

<sup>1</sup> P. Goubert and D. Roche, *Les Français et l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1984) I, 31.

<sup>2</sup> S. Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (New York, 1988); S. Hanley, “Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France,” *French Historical Studies*, 16, (1) (Spring 1989): 4–27. Hanley cites the relevant edicts in note 9. See also her “Toward a Reassessment of Political Culture through Gender Concerns in Early Modern France,” a paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, 1991. My thanks to Professor Hanley for permission to cite a work in progress.

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Brittany, like France as a whole, had three distinct elites: the titled nobility, the legal and judicial elite, and the merchants.<sup>3</sup> Individuals rarely moved from the mercantile elite directly to that of the titled nobility; the middle group, primarily the officers of the royal judiciary, served as a mechanism for upward social mobility. The nobles possessed all the marks of social and political esteem: they had unquestioned social precedence; they were the military; they rendered (or had rendered in their name) local justice. The legal class, like the nobility, owned land, but save for some *Parlementaires*, most Breton legists held a *sieurie* rather than a *seigneurie*. They had to cede social and political precedence to the nobles, although they shared political power by means of their offices. The nobles often judged (or rather had others, lower ranking lawyers, judge for them) in the first instance but the sentence went to a royal court on appeal. These two noble worlds intersected at the Parlement of Brittany.

The second elite, the judicial officers, came from legal families: almost all Breton judges were the sons of judges, lawyers, or petty officials. Among the lesser judiciary, the grandfathers had often been merchants but among the higher ranking judges grandfathers, too, were usually (lower ranking) judges. Once one had chosen the legal path, one cut off ties to the world of commerce and finance. In Nantes, as elsewhere, the royal judicial officers and the lawyers lived in one section of the city, while the merchants and financiers lived in another. They followed highly endogamous patterns of social interaction, for instance in marriage and godparenting. The Parlement provided one noteworthy Breton particularity: some of the highest echelons of the royal judiciary came from old “sword” noble families, from families already noble in the fourteenth or early fifteenth century. These noble *Parlementaires*, however, tended to be the descendants of nobles who had moved to a city and taken up a legal career in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.

The third elite, the merchants, shared urban power with the royal officers in the sixteenth century; in the seventeenth century the judicial officers tended to obtain a monopoly on mayoralties and to dominate the town councils. Even though thirty or more Breton towns sent deputies to each session of the Estates in the seventeenth century, those deputies came overwhelmingly from the legal class, either royal officials or lawyers. The merchants therefore had very little political representation. Their chief political allies came from among the royal financial officers, a much smaller group in Brittany than elsewhere. Breton merchants and financiers had less political power than their compeers in many other areas, even though Brittany had a thriving commerce. Unlike the legal group and the nobles, the merchants rarely owned land, except in the areas around the richest commercial towns such as Morlaix, Saint-Malo, or Nantes.

The monarchy rested on the cooperation of these three elites, whose interests

<sup>3</sup> On the legal group, see the provocative essay by G. Huppert, *Les bourgeois gentilshommes* (Chicago, 1977).

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tended to be more consonant than conflicting. Simplistic class-based analyses of the French monarchy tend to emphasize the conflicts more than the consonance, so that the king becomes the ally of the bourgeoisie against the nobility or the ally of the nobility against the bourgeoisie – the “absolutist” state as the last stage of the feudal monarchy. Perry Anderson, in *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, gives the classic formulation: “Absolutism was essentially just this: a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination.” In his view, this absolutist monarchy was primarily (although not exclusively) a mechanism for the protection of “aristocratic property and privileges.”<sup>4</sup>

Robert Brenner, in his wide-ranging articles comparing England and France, takes essentially the same line, seeing the absolutist state as a replacement for the old structures of “surplus extraction” but operating for the benefit of the same class.<sup>5</sup> William Beik, in his outstanding book on *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France*, comes to a similar, albeit more nuanced, conclusion about Languedoc: “Absolutism was the political manifestation of a system of domination protecting the interests of a privileged class of officers and landed lords.” Beik even goes so far as to suggest that the “‘society of orders’ did not exist as a system, but only as one aspect of a distinctly early modern form of a society of classes.” For Beik, the society of orders is based on “the social esteem accorded to the mystical or real function which each group performs and which has no necessary connection to the group’s economic role.”<sup>6</sup> In one sense, Brittany bears out Beik’s observations about Languedoc because the two hierarchies – classes and orders – overlapped so much; however, in another sense, the social (and political) esteem of the dominant groups had a very real connection to their economic role as landlord.

The consonance of identity between the dominant economic class, large-scale landlords, and the dominant order, the titled nobility, meant that their political, social, and economic interests combined to make a formidable and coherent ruling class. The richest Breton landlords of the mid 1660s, those with a landed income of 30,000 livres a year or more, were all titled nobles: princes

<sup>4</sup> P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974, 1979), 18. Anderson’s argument resembles that of B. Porchnev, *Les soulèvements populaires en France avant la Fronde, 1623–1648* (Paris, 1963), 572, which claims that the state had to become stronger (achieve absolutism) to maintain feudalism. I would emphasize here that I am not disputing Anderson’s contention that the “aristocracy” remained the dominant political and economic class, although the adjective “feudal” is, in my view, somewhat misleading. These people certainly were “feudal” lords but their main independent source of income was ground rent, not feudal dues.

<sup>5</sup> R. Brenner, “Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism,” *Past and Present*, 97 (1982): 80. Brenner’s original (1976) article on this subject, together with the revised version and a variety of related articles are available in *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge, 1985, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> W. Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France. State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985), 335 and 7.

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(Rohans), dukes (Brissac, Cambout-Coislin, Retz, la Trémoille, Vendôme), marquises (Coëtquen, Goulaine, Rieux, Rosmadec), and counts (Assérac-Rieux, Avaugour, Boiséon). All of these families had superior seigneurial jurisdictions: the Rohans – the principalities of Léon and Guémené, the county of Porhoët, and the baronies of Coat-Méal and La Roche Mochan – and the la Trémoilles – Quintin, Goëlle, Paimpol, Châteaulaudren, and the great barony of Laval – held the most important ones.<sup>7</sup>

These titled families dominated the military hierarchy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a member of one of these great families usually held the office of lieutenant general for the three major military divisions of the province (Upper Brittany, Lower Brittany, and Nantes). The two most powerful families, la Trémoille and Rohan, produced national military leaders. The great families provided the military governors of the major cities: Rieux at Brest, Boiséon at Morlaix, Coëtquen at Saint-Malo, Goulaine or Rosmadec at Nantes. They dominated the Estates: Rohan and la Trémoille above all. In the first quarter of the seventeenth century a Rohan invariably served as the president of the Second Estate; in the second quarter of the century the function shifted to the la Trémoille family. The other major families often assisted at the Estates; some, such as Cambout, served as royal commissioners to the Estates or deputies to Court for the Estates, or even both (in 1636–7).<sup>8</sup>

A given prominence on one scale *required* equal prominence on the others. The richest landlords had to have titles that matched their landed prominence; thus, the richest parvenus, such as Gilles Ruellan in Brittany, obtained elevated noble titles – in his case that of marquis. The king had to make Ruellan a marquis because he owned so much land and because his daughters married into the apex of Breton society – Brissac, Goulaine, Guémadeuc, Coëtlogon, and Barrin de la Galissonnière – that is, to a duke and four marquises.<sup>9</sup> A royal army commander of a certain rank virtually had to have an equivalent social rank; a lieutenant general had to be a duke or a marquis, lest one of his military subordinates be his social superior. A duke or a marquis had to have a certain landed revenue to maintain himself, a landed revenue that placed him at the apex of the economic hierarchy as well. The military commander, after all, had to maintain a certain standing, a certain state of living; the king officially recognized this necessity by granting all officers of a given rank an *état* to help

<sup>7</sup> Incomes are taken from the estimate of Charles Colbert de Croissy, investigating commissioner of 1665, whose report has been published: *La Bretagne en 1665 d'après le rapport de Colbert de Croissy*, ed. J. Kerhervé, F. Roudaut, and J. Tanguy (Brest, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> See below, ch. 5, on Cambout at the Estates of 1636–7. Although he was a relative-client of Richelieu, Cambout's position in Brittany, as baron of Pontchâteau, created local prominence in its own right.

<sup>9</sup> On Gilles Ruellan, see the entry on his son in F. Saulnier, *Le Parlement de Bretagne de 1554 à 1790* (Rennes, 1909), 3 vols., and the story about him in G. Tallement de Réaux, *Historiettes* (Paris, 1960), I, 154–6.

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them maintain the standing required of their position.<sup>10</sup> At a royal court, the First President had to set the social tone. At the Parlement of Paris, a First President (Potier de Novion) even resigned (1724) because he could not maintain the social schedule expected of him.<sup>11</sup> At the Estates the leaders of the nobility *had* to offer evening banquets to the lesser nobility (banquets at which they lobbied effectively for support).

The nobility dominated society by means of the three related attributes of title, seigneurial land, and military office. Most nobles (many Breton ones) did not serve in the military, so that their personal relationship to that function was indeed mystical, but most military officers (and cavalymen in the *compagnies d'ordonnance*) were nobles. Military service might have been a “mystical” function for a specific individual noble, but it was a very real function for the nobility as a group.<sup>12</sup> Although a specific noble might have held a very small amount of land (most did), the largest seigneuries, and the largest share of the land, belonged to nobles. In Brittany, very few non-nobles obtained seigneurial rights although a considerable group of them, especially near large towns such as Rennes or Nantes, bought the land of the fiefs to which the rights were attached.<sup>13</sup>

The nobility dominated the Breton economy as landlords (that is, as part of a class) and as seigneurs, a function that set them apart from other landlords. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries royal officers and lawyers bought substantial amounts of land. These people had family roots in the mercantile elites of the towns, but it would be a mistake to connect them *as a class* with the merchants, and to call the combined group the bourgeoisie (in the modern sense of a specific economic class; in the vocabulary of the Ancien Régime, urban dwellers living from their rents were “bourgeois”). They were, virtually without exception, *sieurs*: owners of rural estates without seigneurial rights.<sup>14</sup> Those who reached the highest judicial offices, such as judge in the Parlement or president

<sup>10</sup> The king gave an *état* to an officer to enable him to maintain a level of living appropriate to his rank. He expected military officers to use this money on expenses such as dinners for their subordinates. A marshal of France, for example, received an *état* of 10,000 livres a year. An *état* was not the same as a pension; it was a fixed amount determined by the *qualité* of the position one held. <sup>11</sup> J. H. Shennan, *The Parlement of Paris* (Ithaca, 1968), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Goubert and Roche, *Les Français*, 120 and ch. 4 in general. P. Contamine, *Guerre, état et société à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1972) and A. Corvisier, “La noblesse militaire: Aspects militaires de la noblesse française du XVe au XVIIIe siècles: état des questions,” *Histoire Sociale – Social History* 11 (1978): 336–55. Although most nobles did not fight in the army, the fact remains that the officer corps (and parts of the cavalry, such as the *compagnies d'ordonnance*) remained noble preserves.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the *francs fiefs* list of 1539: Mss. Fr. 22,342, fols. 193v and ff. For 1566, see, ADLA, B 3023. H. Sée, *Les classes rurales en Bretagne du XVIe siècle à la Révolution* (Paris, 1905) notes that the phenomenon was particularly marked around Rennes, Nantes, and Saint-Malo.

<sup>14</sup> The term is that of J. Gallet, *La seigneurie bretonne, 1450–1680. Le cas du Vannetais* (Paris, 1983), although it can be found in the writings of contemporaries, such as Charles Loyseau (*Traité des seigneuries*, 3–4). A *sieur* did not share in public political power; a seigneur did *own* a share of such

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of the Chamber of Accounts (or of one of the four presidials), did traverse this last barrier: they eventually bought (or obtained through royal letters) seigneurial rights. Our modern difficulty in placing the judicial officers in the social and legal hierarchy of Ancien Régime France is not surprising, given that contemporaries had precisely the same problem. There was a strident disagreement about the place of the royal officers within the framework of estates: at the Estates General of 1614, after a long dispute, the deputies even assigned the Parlement of Paris to sit with the Third Estate.<sup>15</sup> The upper levels of the hierarchies of class and order blended closely together:

<i>Order</i>	<i>Class</i>
titled nobles	seigneurial landlords (superior)
untitled nobles	seigneurial landlords
royal judicial officers	non-seigneurial landlords
royal financial officers	mixed interests
<i>rentiers</i>	mixed interests
wholesale merchants	merchants
retail merchants	

The groups tended to overlap at certain interstices, such as that of non-seigneurial landlord: judicial officers and nobles alike owned *sieuries*. Some financial officers, *rentiers*, and merchants (especially around Morlaix, Saint-Malo, and Nantes) also owned *sieuries* but much of their money tended to be invested in trade or tax farming. Some judges, such as those in the Parlement of Brittany, even owned seigneuries (not only around Rennes but in the Vannetais and in western Brittany). These judges tended to come from families that held seigneuries *before* they joined the court but certain families, notably those of presidents of the court, obtained them after joining the Parlement in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries.

The capitation classifications of 1695 demonstrate the overlap between economic class and social order, if one examines them carefully. Almost all of the 500-plus categories concern royal officers, so they provide a neat hierarchy of rank within segments of the royal bureaucracy and, to a lesser extent, among those segments. The massive list of such offices, however, tends to obscure the broader social categories to which the vast majority of taxpayers belonged. The highest Bretons would have ranked in the second of the twenty-two “classes”: dukes, the provincial governor, and the prince of Rohan (all paying 1,500 livres). The next class included the lieutenants general, the First President of the Parlement of Brittany, the treasurer of the Estates, and the receivers general

power. Thus a *sieur* invariably (except in the south) had a seigneur to whom his holding subordinated him (among other obligations, he would owe *lods et ventes*). In the Vannetais, old nobles virtually monopolized the seigneuries: Gallet, *La seigneurie bretonne*, esp. 305–8.

<sup>15</sup> J. M. Hayden, *France and the Estates General of 1614*. (Cambridge, 1974).

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(these latter three would certainly not have ranked so high fifty years before). The fifth, sixth, and seventh “classes” would have included the other major political figures of the province: fifth, the First President of the Chamber of Accounts, the intendant, governors of frontier fortresses; sixth, the presidents à *mortier* of the Parlement and the governors of the major towns; seventh, marquises, counts, viscounts, and barons, and the presidents of the Chamber of Accounts.

Within the twenty-two classes the list invariably starts with the military, moves to the judiciary, and then to the financial officers. Economic categories appear only in the tenth and eleventh classes, with bankers (tenth) and wholesale merchants (eleventh). The list essentially follows the general categories laid out above. Only merchants and *rentiers* appear before class 15, when rural agents show up (those leasing lands for an annual value of 3,000 livres rent). In the towns, we see wholesale merchants, then retail merchants (sixteenth). Artisan masters (those who had journeymen) from large towns appear in class 18, small-town artisans without help in class 20. The twenty-second class lumps together cottagers, day laborers, married shepherds and servants, journeymen, apprentices, unmarried shepherds and servants, and small-town servants, listed in that order. They all pay 1 livre.

This list can be simplified as follows, for the towns:

<i>Order</i>	<i>Class</i>
master craftspeople	small occupiers
journeymen	workers
day laborers and other unorganized workers	

In the countryside, the peasantry had three major groups: ploughmen (*laboueurs*), cottagers (*manouvriers*), and day laborers (*journaliers*).<sup>16</sup> The village artisans belonged to the two lower groups. The capitation categories mention farmers of 3,000 livres of lands and 2,000 livres of mills in category 15, but these people were not peasants. The richest *laboueurs* appear in category 16 – “some farmers and ploughmen” – paying 30 livres; others appear in categories 17, 18, and 20, along with some wine growers (*vignerons*). The day laborers and servants show up in the last category. Ploughmen often owned a small plot of land and *always* had a plough team (usually leased) and a rented farm. Cottagers could own a house or, rarely, a tiny plot; they usually rented a small holding. Day laborers owned only their labor and usually rented a room or a part of a room from others (although some day laborers had their own rented houses).

The hierarchy of orders made it difficult to move from one group to the next, but some forms of movement proved easier than others. The two sharpest breaks came between the artisans and the merchants and between the judicial

<sup>16</sup> The French terms did not have a universal meaning; in some areas *laboureur* meant day laborer not ploughman. See the discussion of these terms in Goubert and Roche, *Les Français*, I, ch. 2.



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and financial officers. Many families used royal office (and other techniques) to ascend to nobility during the period between 1550 and 1625 but after 1625 the process slowed considerably. The consolidation of a new order, one in which the three elites had well-defined places they all willingly defended, greatly facilitated the increased stability.

The social and economic hierarchies had few points of dissonance. Some of the titled nobles and many of the untitled ones had relatively modest economic resources; others among them had few (or no) seigneurial rights. Consider the different capitation payments expected of these groups: dukes and princes – 1,500 livres (class 2); marquises, counts, viscounts, and barons – 250 livres (class 7); fief holders (untitled gentlemen) – 40 livres (class 15); gentlemen without fiefs – 6 livres (class 19). The overwhelming majority of nobles fell into these final two categories, indeed most of them probably came from the last one. These people had political weight only as members of a faction at the Estates; the large retinues of the great, sometimes numbering more than a hundred, gave them additional authority (and more votes) in the deliberations of the Estates. In practical terms, however, the royal officers, especially the higher judicial officers – *Parlementaires*, the leaders of the presidial courts, the seneschals – had far more political and economic power than petty country squires. In general, such officials also owned far more land; some of them also held seigneurial powers. Presidents *à mortier* ranked in class 6; regular councilors of the Parlement and masters of accounts in the Chamber fell into class 9 (150 livres), the mayors of Nantes and Rennes in class 11 (100 livres), the aldermen of those two cities and mayors of all others in class 13 (60 livres). Although the capitation categories rely on several different elements – political, institutional, economic – these differences – *Parlementaires* well above untitled nobles, even those holding fiefs, presidents in the Parlements on about the same level as titled men below dukes – represented something like the real overall social structure of the province.

The break between judicial and financial officer families provides one of the more striking elements of Breton social structure. Judicial families often achieved nobility; they also intermarried with old noble families. Judicial and financial families rarely intermarried. Financial officers, except those of very great wealth, married endogamously or with the daughters of merchants. The dividing line between rural and urban interests, between those who kept their economic holdings in land or in commerce/capital, ran between the two sets of officers, with the judiciary aligned with the nobles on the rural side and the financiers allied with the merchants on the urban one.

The next social chasm lay between merchant and artisan. Artisans produced what they sold; merchants did not. Movement from one social/economic group to the other happened as rarely in Brittany as in Dijon.<sup>17</sup> Among the artisan class

<sup>17</sup> J. Farr, *Hands of Honor. Artisans and Their World in Dijon, 1550–1650* (Cornell, 1989).

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a barrier ran between journeymen and masters, but many journeymen could reasonably aspire to becoming masters. The dividing line between journeymen and masters often involved age and marital status: masters had to be married; they also tended to be in their thirties or older. We see the same divisions in the countryside. Day laborers were generally young and unmarried; cottagers were usually married and in their late twenties or early thirties; ploughmen were always married and tended to be over 35. At these levels of society, whether rural or urban, the three factors – class origin, marital status, and age – together determined one's place in the economic and social hierarchy.

The class and estate interests of these groups usually overlapped. The landlords, noble or non-noble, seigneurs or not, favored low direct taxation; the merchants worried about high indirect taxation. In Brittany the choice between direct and indirect taxation provided the main political issue. Unlike Dauphiné, Brittany had both real and personal exemptions, so that the political dispute about taxation centered not on order-based distinctions (*taille réelle* versus *taille personnelle*) but on economic interests and the relationship of the tax system to land.<sup>18</sup> The dividing line lay not, as in Dauphiné, between the Second and Third Estates, but between landlords and merchants. The peasants sided with the landlords; the artisans, who paid the lion's share of the indirect taxes on wine, sided with the merchants.

The considerable order-based solidarity about indirect as against direct taxation should not obscure the class basis of this economic issue. One's economic relationship to the land determined one's stand on direct taxation. Many landlords were not nobles: indeed, in some regions the legal families, many still commoners, held a substantial share of the land.<sup>19</sup> In Brittany landlords sat as deputies to the Third Estate as well as the Second: the two orders had the same vested interest in protecting their tenants from direct taxation. Breton politics, after 1598, revolved around a class issue: how much direct taxation would the cultivators have to pay?

The (noble and *roturier*) landlords' common possession of land meant that they had a shared class interest. Economically, landowners dominated early modern France. Agriculture produced by far the largest share of the economic output but, beyond that, land itself held an almost mystical power over the people of the time. As with so many mystical powers, this one had important rational roots: land meant political and social power.<sup>20</sup> Those without land could not hope to aspire to prominence in either sphere.

The merchants had a complex relationship to the land-based systems of

<sup>18</sup> D. Hickey, *The Coming of French Absolutism* (Toronto, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Especially in the bishopric of Rennes, near the Parlement, but Colbert de Croissy implies a considerable concentration in the bishopric of Vannes as well: *La Bretagne en 1665*, 245–47.

<sup>20</sup> Goubert and Roche, *Les Français*, 31, stress the essentially rural nature of French society “qui s'organise en fonction de la terre.”