Harsanyi on MacKnight, "Nobility and Patrimony in Modern France"

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Paraphrasing Montesquieu’s question in his 1721 *Persian Letters* (How can one be Persian?), Elizabeth C. Macknight seems to ask: How can one be noble? More precisely, how could one still identify oneself as a member of nobility, a category systematically and implacably dismantled by the 1789 Revolution? And what did it mean to be noble in postrevolutionary France? To answer these questions, Macknight focuses on issues of property and patrimony from 1789 to the 2000s. Drawing on concepts of distinction and cultural capital elaborated by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint-Martin, Macknight advances the case of “the distinctiveness of nobles’ lived experiences” in interactions with the state from the Directory (1795–99) onward (p. 4). Choosing to revisit the notion of noble difference tests a considerable body of established scholarship that has identified long-term processes of gradual social and cultural blending between ancient landowning nobles, robe nobles, empire nobles, notables, and grand bourgeois; these studies concluded that by the early nineteenth century, France’s heterogenous elite hailed from different quarters but displayed “a single social psychology” in André Tudesq’s formula.

The numerous personal and official documents Macknight has unearthed through extensive research in private archives (the list of family archives consulted covers eight pages) point to the cracks in the neat façade of harmony at the top. Even when outwardly open to mixing with outsiders, nobles remained keenly aware of their exceptionality and deployed considerable means to maintain a separate identity. This is not necessarily a fresh insight: strategies of distinction before and after the Revolution have been the subject of several landmark works on noble identity (acknowledged throughout the book). Beaumarchais’s famous line notwithstanding, it was never enough to “go through the trouble of being born”: much time, energy, and expense went into learning and practicing how to live nobly, that is, differently from the common sort. Post-1789, with privileges and other markers of status consigned to irrelevance, cultivating the manners, lifestyle, education choices, and cultural references meant to tell apart noble men and women from everyone else took on a sense of historical urgency—the urgency of resisting the erasure of memory and the passing of time. Yet the intangible *je ne sais quoi* that makes nobles noble needed, Antaeus like, to draw sustenance from concrete possessions, most and foremost from land ownership. Holding on to property implied getting a handle on accounting while navigating ever-changing legal codes in more or less hostile political climates—not a genteel occupation, nonetheless a solemn duty transmitted.
from one generation to the next. In the words of the Duchess of Sabran-Pontevès: “All patrimony is a material and moral responsibility” (p. 51). How the material sustained the moral is the central theme of this book.

Nobles started petitioning the state from the first days of Thermidor, soon after the execution of Robespierre and his associates in July 1794. The part of wronged victims of injustice hardly suited people who represented the very social status the Revolution sought to abolish, often émigrés or relatives of émigrés, and for the most part less than enthusiastic spectators to the events that turned their world upside down. Yet the Thermidorian language of redress and retribution, the interpretation of the Terror as a cruel aberration, worked in the nobles’ favor. That the sanctity of private property, never seriously challenged during the Revolution, was enshrined in all postrevolutionary legal systems helped as well.[1] Nobles filed restitution of property claims and sought compensation for acts of injustice as common citizens, their inconvenient belonging to the ci-devant second estate concealed behind the new civil identity. Even though some may have gained appreciation for the principle of equality before the law, they approached the process in markedly different ways. When ordinary citizens similarly wronged during the harshest times of the Revolution reacquired a house or a piece of land, Macknight argues, nobles regained patrimony: the buildings, land, and any object of value lost and recovered by noble families were invested with a special meaning that transgressed the confines of family lore. Castles and gardens anchored entire regions and served as repository of cultural memory for all the inhabitants, whether or not they ever set foot in the place themselves. The link with the past turned family homes into markers of collective identity and imbued mundane activities like renovating private residences or deciding inheritance partitions with a sense of historical solemnity.

The book is organized chronologically. Each chapter introduces individuals and families who struggle to keep their patrimony and their identity intact from one generation to the next in a world that grows more democratic, open, and egalitarian with every passing year—more commercial and industrial too, with shrinking possibilities for supporting costly buildings and domains without generating sufficient funds by non-aristocratic means. Working for wages was one solution; making morally dubious marriages with wealthy commoners smitten by old-world glamour was another, especially toward the turn of the twentieth century when American heiresses seemed to sail to Europe for the sole purpose of salvaging the crumbling fortunes of the high-born. Much of the correspondence quoted here betrays a sense of melancholy for what is or will be irretrievably lost mixed with the determination of saving what can be saved—the French expression “sauver les meubles” fitting perfectly the dilemmas of nobility in modern times and the core argument of this book.

Finally, one question, never asked in so many words, runs through this book, like through much of the writing on nobility: why should any part of noble heritage, the intangible as well as the tangible, be rescued? That individuals wish to maintain strong links with their own past is understandable, but why should this be of concern for the society at large? As David Higgs has pointed out, the “desire to appear noble” is a vital element in the construction of noble identity in modern France.[2] Equally vital remains the corresponding desire of the public to want to see nobles, that is, accept the inherent assumption that core noble values are woven into fabric of the national identity. The last two chapters discuss the many ways chunks of noble patrimony began to be absorbed into the national patrimony, thus transforming ancestral homes into tourist sites and cultural destinations managed by
the state. It is maybe the most noticeable proof that the nobles' self-representation as custodians of
the nation’s emotional ties with the past has seeped into public consciousness.[3]

The book is a valuable addition to existing literature and shines a light on a lesser-studied segment of
noble life. Wonderfully selected case studies, presented in a lively narrative, make the reader
empathize with the general mood of swimming against the tide. The distinctiveness of the nobles' lived experience in interactions with the state seems, however, more asserted than persuasively demonstrated. Post-Revolution, administrative and legal institutions did not differentiate between noble and non-noble property. Men and women of noble descent felt that their dealings with the state was different mostly because they thought of themselves as different from their fellow citizens. The distinction would endure, the author suggests, for as long as the public will continue to be fascinated with noble cultural legacies enough to validate this self-image.

Notes


[3]. The gradual conversion of the feudal noble ethos into modern patriotism is part of the same process of keeping the nobility relevant long after its political demise. See Jay M. Smith, Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).


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