Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France

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Nobles and Politics

The dauphinois liberal Barnave explained the 1789 Revolution as a struggle between, on the one hand, coastal, cosmopolitan, and trading cities and, on the other hand, interior, reactionary, and landed centers: a commercial class dominated the former, while the latter were in the hands of nobles. After Sieyès's 1789 pamphlets and Revolutionary anti-noble legislation, it was all too usual to deduce political sympathies from class origins. The sweeping socioeconomic explanation of the Revolution first stated in the 1790s was continually embroidered during the nineteenth century. Soon after the 1830 Revolution the Globe newspaper observed, on 17 September 1830, that France's aristocratic rulers under the reign of Charles x had been replaced by "new patricians," numbered with curious precision as 22,000 bourgeois. During the discussion of the 1844 patente law a deputy used similar language when he said that a new aristocracy of finance and industry had arisen in France with businessmen for barons: they asked not for titles but glowed in the amounts of the business tax they paid. Albert Maurin's Histoire de la chute des Bourbons portrayed contemporary history as a losing battle fought by nobles in disarray before an all-conquering army of the middle class. Conservative political sympathies of nobles opposed to innovation were assumed long before Jaurès provided his majestic summation in the Histoire socialiste of the death struggle between the aristocratic and landed principles in France and those of capital and bourgeois egalitarianism.

Informed of these alarming notions by radical newspapers, books, and speeches, nobles were understandably in no hurry to quit the stage of history. They followed closely the enactment and implementation of laws affecting nobles after 1791: impediments on the use of Old Regime titles before 1814, the production of new titles when the March 1808 decrees were set in motion, and the nominations to the Chamber of
Peers by the constitutional monarchies. Nobles observed how opinion evolved during the great parliamentary debates on primogeniture (1826), in the comments on the compensation of émigrés, on the heredity of the peers (1831), and on the restrictions and then prohibition of new majorats (1835), as well as the brief but intense discussions preceding the 1848 abolition of noble titles. Nobles generally approved the restitution of titles by Louis-Napoleon “confirmed” to his loyal supporters.

In this chapter, however, our subject is not how nobles reacted to legislation about their use of titles (along with wealth the now supremely important attribute of their place in an elite) but the part nobles played in politics between 1800 and 1870. This is at once an immense and an elusive subject. Immense because nobles served every regime in France during the seven decades, and to trace only the leading ministers, senators, tribunes, peers, and deputies as they came and went would involve commentary on the parliamentary history of the century. Elusive since the various ducs, marquis, comtes, barons, vicomtes, and chevaliers were united in their pride of rank but not in a political union deriving from it. They never shared precisely the same outlook. Moreover, no political party (not even in the limited electorate of 1814–48) could be based solely on noble interests. That certainly included the Restoration ultras, as well as the Legimists, who after 1830 were increasingly affected by the “national” policy of Genoude and others, a policy that equated the monarchy with popular interests.

Nobles continued to set the tone of how to rule. The aristocracy had been attached to the court before 1789, and indeed the remnants of the “parti Choiseul” who reappeared in the corridors of power at the start of the nineteenth century continued that tradition. Napoleon encouraged the rally to him of former court aristocrats and hoped for an amalgamation with “new” families. When the Bourbons returned to power in 1814, it appeared to one journalist that presence at court was still highly indispensable to the ambitious noble: “A gentleman who does not show himself at court does not exist.”

After 1830 it was members of the Old Regime liberal aristocracy who gave Louis-Philippe’s court what style it possessed. Napoleon III dispensed benefits to courtiers often drawn from the opportunist and shabby southern noblesse, but aristocrats were prominent among the regime’s supporters. Under successive monarchies court, politics, and rewards were conjoined. Nobles were indispensable to maintain the social forms in which French power was exercised.

By 1800 nobles were in an understandable state of confusion about their hopes to exercise any social power in post-Revolutionary France. The most widespread attitude was the least abstruse ambition: to cling
to whatever remnants of the advantages that being of the noblesse had produced in the past. For nobles this meant conserving and regaining properties and what attendant deference they still enjoyed in the countryside. For those who wished to be left to the quiet enjoyment of their possessions and place in French rural society after the promulgation of the Constitution of the Year VIII the sensible course was to accept with as good a grace as possible the big legal changes introduced by the Revolution in matters such as feudal dues, communal lands, and special privileges while seeking to regain de facto small advantages by cajoling or browbeating the peasantry. This silent majority of the noblesse schemed for authority in the modest day-to-day life of rural France, particularly in the west, southwest, Brittany, and the Midi.

Their sphere of influence and aspirations contrasted with that of those descendants of the Versailles court aristocracy who lost none of their atavistic knowledge of the exercise of power, who took the view that the pursuit of great wealth and influence necessarily involved high risks, and who did not fear the public scrutiny involved in serving at court, in the high bureaucracy, and in the army. As for titres, by definition they shared a symbiotic relationship with governments that decorated them. Despite rhetoric, members of the noblesse who wanted to escape genteel obscurity found themselves titrés as a result of participation in government, which in turn allowed them, if also rich, to enter the network of the aristocracy. This ladder of French politics which enabled French titled families to go up or down in the world remained in place throughout much of the century.

Royalism, however, like some varieties of Catholic thought, provided an arsenal, or refuge, of concepts and symbols to disguise the degree of collaboration with the new social realities. Very few nobles were openly aware of this function of their social discourse to provide an accommodation with the post-Revolutionary world. However, by the end of the Second Empire many noblesse had the same outlook as the marquis de Blosseville, a leading light on the Eure general council, or his friend, monseigneur de Bonnechose. They remained faithful to Legitimist doctrine, Blosseville's biographer observed, but they were absolutely against being lost in the political schemes propagated by the councillors of Henri V. This meant that they talked of guaranteeing the social order and of saving religion, but without having to compromise themselves as obdurate royalists. Like so many others, Blosseville had before him paternal example, for his father, an émigré dragoons officer, had returned to France in 1797 and served as mayor of his seigneurial village from 1806 to 1830. If his father could serve a Bonaparte and still retain noblesse social values, so could the son. Nobles quite rightly objected that nineteenth-century conditions were hardly ideal for a Fronde or a
crusade. In a sense the political theories most popular with the mass of the noblesse became an alibi explaining away their observable political passivity and resignation to the course of French politics. If we search for a national focus of aristocratic power in the nineteenth century, we must examine the French upper house, which existed under the constitutional monarchies and which, on the face of it, seemed a natural political focus for the nobles. The Chamber of Peers did not merely “royalize” the Napoleonic senate in 1814: it was the product of a continuing debate about the forms of parliamentary government that reached back for a quarter-century. During the discussion of provincial assemblies in 1788 the idea emerged of a second chamber in a representative system of national assemblies in France. No sooner had the National Assembly been constituted in 1789 than suspicions of the aristocratic designs of the proponents of separate assemblies were noisily voiced. That mistrust was dissipated by the invigorating experience of Revolutionary government. In 1795 the Conseil des Anciens was established, its very name a testimony to greybeards’ caution. Composed of half the number of the Conseil des Cinq-Cents (the lower house), the Conseil des Anciens, married men of forty and over, was supposed to counterbalance the dangerously impetuous lower house. Between 1795 and 1848 and again from 1852 to 1870 France had a double tier of representative assemblies intended to prevent rash innovation or arbitrariness. From its inception in 1800 (3 nivôse III) the Senate included noblesse, but only one true aristocrat, the former due de Choiseul-Praslin. A little later the due de Luynes, de Viry, d’Aboville, and Eugène de Beauharnais joined its ranks. In what was called the nineteenth year of Louis XVIII’s reign the Charter of 1814 replaced the Senate with a chamber of hereditary peers. In his self-important way Vitrolles was typical of the noblesse in his disapproval of the hereditary principle of the members of the Chamber of Peers. He described the nomination of new members to ensure a political majority sympathetic to the government as “this prostitution of the state’s preeminent dignity.” In the autumn of 1815 the young Lamartine urged the suppression of noble privileges, while calling for “an elective peerage on the British [sic] lines.” In his memoirs Salaberry called the Chamber of Peers a bedlam (pétaudière) of former revolutionaries and members of the Convention, imperial senators and ministers deported into a modern Noah’s Ark. Even in retrospect the noblesse refused to find anything good about the institution self-evidently in the best position to advance their interests. No limit was placed on the royal right to name peers, but in practice the Bourbons, and later Louis-Philippe, kept it at around three hundred men. In 1826 there were 295, in 1830, 384, and in 1840, 306. With the exception of ecle-
siastics, peers were required by an ordinance of 25 August 1817 to set up *majorats*. This was intended to ensure considerable wealth for the political peerage.

Many members of the Old Regime aristocracy, such as Raigecourt and Saulx-Tavanes, rejoined relatives who earlier had sat in the Napoleonic Senate. Presided over by a chancellor appointed for life, the peers deliberated secretly about laws brought before the Chamber of Deputies by the ministers and subsequently referred to them for an opinion. They also had to approve the budget, and they served as a court for high treason trials, as in the case of the duc de Berry’s assassination in February 1820 by the stableman Louvel, or for crimes of their peers, like the celebrated murder by Choiseul-Praslin of his wife, *née* Sebastiani, in August 1847. The king’s ministers sat either in the Chamber of Deputies or in the Chamber of Peers. The major offices of the Chamber of Peers were those of the grand referendary, the marquis de Semonville, who served from 1814 to 1834 and whose apartment was actually within the Luxembourg Palace, where the peers assembled, and those of the bureau—the president, vice-president, and four secretaries—which was charged with taking the views of the peers to the king.

Even during the Restoration the peers were never completely sycophantic in their dealings with the ministers. In the course of the struggle between Charles x and the liberals in the Chamber of Deputies many peers, especially those of the liberal court aristocracy under the Old Regime, showed themselves moderate. Decazes appointed eighty odd peers in 1819, and Villèle appointed a further seventy in 1827, many of whom were former commoners. These promotions sufficed to win certain votes but not to ensure continuing obedience of the membership to governmental policies. In 1830 the peers reaffirmed loyalty to the Charter and survived the July Revolution, despite Lafayette’s call for abolition of the upper house. The most important change in its practice was that debates were now public, and so speeches could be published. The *fournées* (appointments made to pack the Chamber with supporters to outvote the liberals) of Charles x were unseated. Article 15 of the Charter of 1830 stated that laws could be proposed not only by the king and the Chamber of Deputies but also by the Chamber of Peers. The king retained his right to name unlimited number of peers. In December 1831, however, after long debates the heredity of the peerage was abolished. Peers played a major role in the July Monarchy’s political life. Great Old Regime names still figured there in the 1830s: Brissac, Noailles, Montmorency, and Crillon among others, together with Greffulhe, Albufera, Roy, and other families first titled after 1800. The reputation of the peers was much soiled in the 1840s by the conduct of some of its members, and there was no public regret for the disap-
pearance of the upper house. Napoleon III would return to a Senate, but one staffed with new men.

The year 1848 brought the Second Republic and ended the parliamentary system of the constitutional monarchies. The constitution hurriedly drawn up in the early days of 1852 named Prince Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte as emperor and returned to Napoleonic precedents. He appointed eighty supporters to life tenure in the Senate. They served without salary, although Bonaparte bestowed on them handsome dotations of 30,000F each. While the organization underwent various changes during the Second Empire, it remained essentially Napoleon III’s creature. Vincent, whose grandfather had been ennobled in 1778, whose father was made a baron of the Empire in 1809, and who himself became a hereditary baron-sur-majorat in 1827 and a senator in 1859 symbolized the type of support the regime hoped for.

Senators rarely exceeded 150 in number, including noblesse and titrés.\(^{11}\) According to Bachelin-Deflorenne, in 1866 the Senate was composed of 169 senators presided over by Troplong, Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor and first president of the Cour de cassation. There were five vice-presidents, a grand referendary, an unnamed secretary, and three princes of the imperial family who sat as members. If we count as noble those with a title or with a particle in the family name (Caignart de Saulcy, for instance), we have 98 individuals, or 58 percent of the total. In contrast, 71, or 42 percent, had neither title, particle, nor even military rank. Some names, such as Goulhot de Saint Germain, carried little prestige, but the lineage of an Elie de Beaumont could not be faulted. That there were few names of Restoration or Orleanist peers (Maupas, Ségur, d’Agusseau) in no way detracts from—indeed it emphasizes—the display by the senators of titles and noble-type names.\(^{12}\)

Nobles rallied increasingly to the Second Empire. General d’Aurelle de Paladines, of a family of petty noblesse, boasted to Louis-Napoleon that he was the first to have acclaimed the Empire: “France awaits its salvation from the Empire: I take responsibility for Order!” The marquis de Chasseloup-Laubat, a conseiller d’état in 1828, deputy under Louis-Philippe, and at the Assemblée Législative of 1849, became minister of the Navy in 1851, an official deputy in 1852 and again from 1861 to 1867, president of the Council of State, senator, and again minister just before the Empire’s defeat in 1870. Although somewhat unusual, he shows continuing noble participation in French political life from the Restoration crowned with assiduous efforts under the Second Empire and, indeed, afterwards: in 1871 he was elected deputy of the Charente-Inférieure.\(^{13}\) A more notorious royalist showed equal flexibility: the marquis de la Rochejacquelin was republican in 1848 and died an imperial senator in 1867.\(^{14}\) Great names from the Old Regime court at
Versailles, as well as resounding patronyms from the lesser noblesse, were to be found among the titrés.

Nobles also sat in the lower house throughout the period 1800–1870. Recent studies document their fluctuating presence in the successive assemblies but nothing to show any coherent political strategy. Noble deputies, of course, were never elected on a specifically noble program. In Haute-Garonne, one of the departments that most consistently elected right-wing deputies in the 1820s, nobles were found among ultra, ministerial, and liberal voters. In the Corrèze, a department with a clear penchant for electing deputies well in with the government of the day, all the deputies were noble. Even so, Pierre-Joseph Bedoch, Chevalier of the Empire, Fouché, with an imperial title of duc, seven members of the noblesse, and Froment de Champ Lagarde, who passed for noble as the son of a former bailiff in Versailles, lacked a unified political outlook. Statistical studies of the social background of French legislators in the nineteenth century make clear that nobles were heavily overrepresented given their percentage in the population.

Despite inconsistencies in the definition of who was noble, particularly in the exclusion of some of those who claimed titles, one study revealed that nobles were persistently overrepresented given their proportion of the electoral body, let alone of the nation, from 1800 to 1834. In the Chamber of Deputies between 1837 and 1839, 35 percent of the representatives were nobles—or in numerical terms, there were 74 noblesse, 55 titrés from the First Empire, 19 from the Restoration and July Monarchy, and 12 with a particle. An analysis of the Chamber of Deputies elected between 6 August 1846 and the February Revolution, 1848, again showed that more than a third of the deputies were noble. This meant that under the July Monarchy the numbers of noble deputies tended to increase steadily between 1831 and 1848.

Less systematic evidence is available for the Second Empire, but the senators and members of the Corps législatif included large numbers of nobles. Paradoxically, this impressive overrepresentation never became effective political power for the simple reason that noble deputies shared no common program. Tocqueville, himself involved in politics, observed that the social unity perceived by commoners and outsiders did not constitute an ideological or practical political cohesion.

A recent study has reminded us of the growing power of the bureaucracy as it seconded the policies of successive regimes. This has awakened interest in the family backgrounds of the staffs of such powerful bodies as the Council of State, the prefectural corps, the different ministries, and the departmental administrations. Not surprisingly, men from the lower classes were conspicuous rarities in the higher levels of the bureaucracy. Peasants and artisans rarely commanded the
means to educate their sons to requisite standards, nor did they connect with the web of patronage that could place their offspring on the ladders leading to the Council of State, the diplomatic service, or even the administrative staff of the prefectures. However, nobles with wealth and education similar to that of the prosperous middle classes, who provided the majority of such officials, were not unusual in the ministries. The great aristocrats, of course, considered ill-paid posts too far removed from the exercise of power to be a dérogeance of their belief in their natural place at the pinnacle of society. For Alfred de Musset’s Bonapartist father it was respectable enough to be an official in a ministry, since the family was not well-off or prominent; however, it was unthinkable to a La Rochefoucauld, Crillon, Raigecourt, Choiseul-Praslin, or Harcourt. Thus, under the Empire the central bureaucracy at the Foreign Ministry included less than one in ten nobles or individuals with particled names, but these groups made up more than 20 percent of the consular corps, and more than half of the ambassadors were nobles. Until the July Monarchy there was practically no movement between the three groups.  

In the higher reaches of the bureaucracy the rich noblesse might make an appearance from time to time. This was especially true immediately after the Revolution, as in the case of comte Séraphin de La Tour-du-Pin, who had served in the artillery, cavalry, and infantry before 1789. Subsequent to his return to France after emigration to the United States from 1792 to 1800, under the Consulate and the Empire, he took posts as prefect of Brussels and Amiens before being named one of the French plenipotentiaries at the Congress of Vienna. He followed Louis xvIII to Ghent in 1815, and in August of that year he was named to preside over the Somme electoral college. Two days later he was named a peer. A little later his good fortune continued with his nomination as minister plenipotentiary to Holland, and in 1820 he was named ambassador to Turin. At the news of the Revolution of 1830 he gave up his post, and after 1832 he lived abroad intermittently until his death in 1837. La Tour du Pin’s service in the Napoleonic prefectural corps was vital to his transition into the political class of the Restoration over and above his earlier record as a young soldier, courtier, and then émigré with strong connections, since his wife had been one of Marie-Antoinette’s ladies-in-waiting.  

Later in the century the prefectural corps did not always serve as such a useful stepping stone. Vicomte Aldebert Pineton de Chambrun was the youngest and one of the wealthiest of the prefects appointed by Louis-Napoleon before the December coup of 1852 which established the Second Empire. Although of a distinguished lineage, he had realized the limitations of remaining confined to the Legitimist camp. Per-
haps the fact that his father-in-law was an industrialist (director general of Baccarat Crystal) was itself a clue to his iconoclastic attitudes towards public service. However, his career did not prosper once Bonaparte became Napoleon III, and he angrily resigned in 1854, turning his energies to the crystal factory. The two other men who with Chambrun made up the richest trio of appointees under the prince-president also had names with a noble ring: Paul de la Hante (in fact Delahante) and baron Dubois de Romand; like Chambrun they had left the service by 1856.25

These noble participants in the bureaucracy do not seem to have had a qualitatively different attitude towards government service from that of their commoner colleagues. Those nobles who had accepted state service in the hundreds under the stable conditions of First Consul Bonaparte were in no position to impose a new viewpoint on the administration that gave them a salary. Indeed, comte d’Herbouville, who remained in France during the Revolution and was named prefect at Antwerp in 1800 and at Lyon in 1806, seemed to have more concern with changing the outlook of his social equals. In 1814–15 he was urging on the royalists the need for a uniform training in administration, in which nobles were to shine. Herbouville felt that only if nobles were properly trained could they staff a modern state, and this involved jettisoning the idea bequeathed by history that only a military career was a suitable ambition. One might add that Herbouville here was describing his own career: he had risen to the rank of maréchal de camp before 1789, but after lying low during the Revolution he had begun a new career in state service which was to continue under the Restoration, when he was made a peer and director of the postal service from 1815 to 1816. He was thus in a position to know a lot about the views heard at the mess as well as at the ministries.26 The force of tradition molded bureaucrats regardless of their personal antecedents.

The way in which the bureaucracy and state service could ingest nobles was exemplified by the six brothers of the well-established Caffarelli family of petty noblesse. Of two ecclesiastics one took the oath to the Civil Constitution, while the other emigrated to Spain, and of four military men one died fighting in the Napoleonic assault on Acre, another was an émigré shot at Quiberon, a third a Napoleonic state councillor and maritime prefect of Brest, and the fourth a general. After the Concordat the émigré ecclesiastic was made bishop of Saint-Brieuc, while his constitutionnel brother became prefect of the Ardèche, then of the Calvados, and finally of the Aube, which he left in 1814 at the time of the allied invasion to retire to the village of his birth, Falga, in the Lauraguais. There he resumed wearing his habit, was named an honorary canon of Albi cathedral, and became a member of the departmental
general council until his death in 1826. His nephew was an assistant at the Council of State in the 1830s, prefect of the Ille-et-Vilaire in 1849, and deputy for the same department from 1852 to 1869. If nothing else, the Caffarellis show emphatically noble adaptability to the course of events.27

Paid noble officials were not, of course, easily compared with those who accepted positions such as that of mayor without salary. The satisfactions they derived were entirely different from the psychological ones of deference to a man assumed to have credit with the prefect and ultimately with Paris. There may also have been the calculation that local standing would prove useful later. One Nivernais family, the Bourgoings, might be cited among hundreds to show that development. Under the Directory, Adolphe de Bourgoing was a member of the jury d'instruction, a justice of the peace, a member of the Nevers town council, inspector of the droits réunis (taxes levied on items of general consumption) in 1799, a dragoons captain in 1805, as well as receveur principal des droits réunis at Auxerre and president of the agricultural society. In 1853 Adolphe-Pierre became a prefect. This was a not uncommon mixture of paid and unpaid positions. One historian suggested that nobles accepted state service in order to amass the cash necessary to set up a majorat; however, my own investigation of the origins and wealth of the men who set up majorats sur demande does not support this.28 Certain bureaucratic positions were always held to be particularly suited to nobles. The Protestant commoner Guizot believed that only aristocrats made proper ambassadors for major posts. However, noble demography set limits on the number of candidates for such positions.

In the judicial system parlementaire nobles no longer had the primacy enjoyed by proud families of robins under the Old Regime. The higher ranks of the judiciary had been largely hereditary and were in the hands of nobles by 1789; the impetus behind the legal reforms of 1789–94 came from the lower levels of the system. With the collapse of the old judicial structure early in the Revolution, notaries, avocats, and procureurs were suddenly presented with the opportunity to find new jobs. This time they did not make the error of supporting their noble superiors, as they had at the time of the Maupeou reforms. Once seated, the new judiciary felt comfortable in its new eminence. There was no question after 1800 of recalling former magistrates by right. Instead, they had to find a place in a functioning judiciary staffed by men with many grudges against the parlementaire haughtiness of the past. Parlementaires and their sons put their hopes in support by the emperor, who wanted them back to give a little more tone to the administration of justice.29 One hundred and fifty former parlementaires were reseated
following the reorganization introduced by the law of 20 April 1811. This was 10–20 percent of the higher judiciary but no more than 10 percent of those who had been judges in 1789. If the legal system is seen as a support of the status quo and a source of power, nobles had suffered a grievous reverse.

Alan Spitzer has said that only under the First Empire and the Restoration was the nineteenth-century French political class not dominated by lawyers. If the Chamber of Deputies of 1824 was the elected French parliamentary assembly with the highest proportion of nobles during the century, in the three years to 1827 men of law came to wield increasing power in national politics. Nevertheless, after 1830, because of their assumed Legitimist sympathies, noble candidates for appointment to the bench were discriminated against and declined as a proportion of the judges. Under the Second Empire that trend was reversed—that is, an increasing number of the post-Revolutionary titrés now sat on the bench. Nobles who entered the legal system usually remained for their entire career despite changes in government. One example among many is baron Tholet from Montpellier, an émigré during the Revolution who returned to France to study law and took a post in 1809 as president of the tribunal of the small town of Lodève, in the Massif. By 1811 he was an assistant to the regional appeal court prosecutor, and in 1812 he himself became prosecutor at Carcassonne. In 1816 he was made a judge of the Pau Appeal Court, and in 1822 he was appointed first president of the appeal court in the larger town of Limoges. At this stage in his steady ascent through the professional hierarchy of the judiciary, Louis xvm bestowed upon him another baronal title. He ran as a moderate candidate at Tulle in the Corrèze but returned in 1837 to the judiciary, advancing to the place of councillor at the Paris Cour de cassation by 1849. Under Napoleon iii he returned to the city where he had first seen the light of day, Montpellier, and sat there as the chief presiding judge in the appeal court. He died in 1856.30 Baron Tholet was particularly successful under different regimes, but significant numbers of nobles with robe family traditions flourished in the career.

In Pau at mid-century four out of twenty judges descended from parlementaire families, but they were individuals of great local prestige: Dombidau de Crouseilles, nephew of the bishop of Quimper; Bedouch, who was mayor of his commune; Courrèges d’Agnos; and the son of the last first president of the Parliament of Pau, Charitte. The staffs of appeal courts such as those in Nancy, Dijon, Rennes, and Rouen still included the names of local noble dynasties that had found their roots in the former parlements in those cities.31 At least one noble completely departed from a sword family tradition: the impoverished Saint-Gresse from the Gers, who also spurned the intense Legitimist sympathies of
his father when he studied law and became a known republican, although he managed to exercise as a barrister throughout the Second Empire and received his reward under the Third Republic when he became the first president at the Toulouse court.32

Law was certainly good training and sometimes an acceptable career for nobles to follow if they were obliged to earn their bread. Did noble judges administer the law differently than their commoner colleagues? One might guess at a discretionary sympathy for an aggrieved noble physically threatened by a dishonest métayer, or extra severe treatment for a drunkard who bellowed anti-noble slogans; however, there seem to be no grounds for supposing that this went beyond the individual variations revealed by the sentencing patterns of judges at all times. Nobles were too conscious of the eyes of the public upon them to have encouraged the suspicion that they judged in a way flagrantly partial to their minority.

Present in the national assemblies, bureaucracy, and judiciary, in the nineteenth century nobles were never able to count on the predominance or even connivance of their fellows. The area of French life where they might hope to make their influence most felt was in the countryside.33 Napoleon sought to harness the advisory councils in each department—the general council and those of the arrondissements—to the prosperous local worthies and nobles who enjoyed social prestige. Their views could be voiced in the departmental general councils by the grandest of noble landlords and in the arrondissement councils by the slightly less well-off. Suggestions and laments over the state of the roads, taxes, the price of imported grain, education, beggars, and other topics that attracted local interest were passed on to the prefect.

The main purpose of this system was to serve as a safety valve and a listening post, but it also provided a mini-stage for many ambitions.34 To be on the general council was a sign of considération, like taking part in a secular ritual to reassure and comfort the inhabitants of one’s department, even though in fact it had scant connection to national decision making. Prestige explained the draw for nobles to serve on these councils, where from 1800 to 1870 they were always massively overrepresented in terms of their number in the population at large although not in terms of their presence among the great landowners. They often served from one regime to the next.

In the case of the Choiseul-Praslin, Raigecourt, and Villèle families, we find that all sat during the century. In 1842 no member of the Legitimist Villèle family sat besides baron de Malaret and the 10 percent of the Haute-Garonne councillors who were nobles. In Seine-et-Marne, however, the duc de Choiseul-Praslin, comte Greffulhe, and comte de Ségur were among the 20 percent of the titled council members, while
in nearby Nièvre marquis de Raigecourt and baron Dupin were among the 16 percent with titles. In 1862 there were even more titles on the Seine-et-Marne general council (24 percent) but no Choiseul-Praslin; in Nièvre there were again more titles (32 percent) but no Raigecourt; and in Haute-Garonne, no Villèle but a constant 10 percent of nobles. 35

Among those who served on the general councils are numerous examples of nobles who adjusted to changing times. Paul de Chazot as a young man was an officer of the royal guard of Charles x, resigning his commission in 1830. Subsequently he became mayor of Eperrais (Orne) before joining the departmental general council in 1852. He was elected to the Corps législatif in 1858 and again in 1863, but the chronicler of the departmental council lauded him for his local efforts: “He will be remembered as a member of the general council, as president of the agricultural committee and the society for [horse] races at Mortagne, and the secretary of the advisory committee for agriculture.” 36 Small wonder that similar nobles were vociferous in the debate about decentralization. 37 Too much should not be made of this, however. Just as the speeches made to the agricultural societies often expressed wishful thinking for a seigneurial past, so these tirades praising localism, far from a genuine exercise of power, were an indirect discourse on family distinction.

Noble power was closest to the lives of at least some Frenchmen on the bottom rung of civic life: in the communes, the basic administrative unit, which had replaced the parish after 1789. Even before 1789, however, nobles never fully controlled local affairs in their parishes, whether rural or urban. One study of Rheims at the end of the Old Regime showed a sizable group of nobles on the municipal council, but they were politically polarized, with commoner officials against the clergy and its privileges. In Troyes, by contrast, there were few nobles. In both cases nobles were part of a plurality of local powers, without any clear control of distinct policies. They shared a community of economic interests with wealthy commoners. 38 Elsewhere similarities of the sort showed that there was no specific “noble” approach to municipal politics. In rural parishes the former seigneur, however, probably enjoyed the closest thing to a vestige of the Old Regime in the deference he was accorded.

The Napoleonic use of lists of those with sufficient wealth, respectability, and political docility to be candidates for official positions provides us with some insights into the relative prestige of such individuals. The complicated electoral procedures presented to the Corps législatif by Roederer on 10 February 1801 made provision for the election of municipal, arrondissement, and departmental notables but were not easy to put into practice. Complaints arose on all sides, such as from those
people at Bordeaux whose names began with the letter L, who had been completely left off the list by oversight. Those lists have bequeathed French archives a remarkable documentation from which it is possible to examine the national elite in its largest sense. Even to figure on the lists of notables was in a sense power, or the first step towards it, since from the lists were chosen the officials. Chaptal described the lists on 23 ventôse XIII as an amalgam drawn from all who might serve the Empire: “The motherland at this time interrogates all men of good will: the government asks of them magistrates worthy of associating themselves to its efforts.” Another circular, of 18 July 1809, called the lists “the moral catalog of the nation, the history of every individual, a fright to the wicked and a hope for the meritorious . . . a rich source of information for the government.”

The numbers of nobles present on the lists is not entirely clear, since there was an injunction on imperial officials to use only those titles granted by the emperor after 1808. To an extent this was rectified under the column dealing with the status of the individual before 1789, but a number of noblesse were listed only by family name and without particles. What quantitative studies have been done of the survival of the nobility in the “political class” of the Empire are thus certainly minimal statements. Napoleon’s implementation of the suggestion by Sieyès to replace the Revolutionary principle of election by the technocratic one of co-option of the competent—those who enjoyed “consideration,” as the texts endlessly put it—marked a revival of a quasi-seigneurial and paternalistic view of local government. From the lists of national nobility came the names of candidates for posts such as those of mayor, municipal councillor, juryman, and so on. Mayors were chosen by Paris, although councillors were elected during most of the period 1800–1870. From the lists we can trace the chain of family appearances in local office, not necessarily continuous but repeated, which was typical of many of the 37,000 communes that existed under the Second Empire. Particularly in the first decades of the century, officials often referred to family relationships when addressing the public and liked to cast the mayor of a commune in loco parentis. The Bagnères subprefect (Hautes-Pyrénées) addressed local mayors on the subject in May 1813: “Nearest to those administered, a mayor is the public official who can most effectively cause authority to be loved and respected: he is a father in the middle of his family.” Regardless of whether Napoleon thought of notables as civilian corporals, or perhaps as adults by contrast with a childish people, this system gave nobles a commodious niche in the new institutions.

There are relatively few studies of nineteenth-century French local elites, although the works of Agulhon, Chaline, Tudesq, and Vigier have
provided a variety of methodological insights. Nobles were present in the local elites of French regions in varying degrees, as would be only natural in view of the uneven distribution of them throughout France. Perhaps the most promising material is to be found in municipal histories, particularly those of the major provincial capitals, which provided a sufficiently complex universe of roles and aspirations for the tensions between rival components of the elite to become manifested in elections, membership of different societies, religious rituals or the lack of them, and so forth. One study wisely remarked that “it is necessary to place oneself on a relative plane in order to understand the characteristics and the level of the group that passes locally for an elite.”

Noble participation in municipal government during the changing conditions of the nineteenth century was not constant. However, it always far exceeded the place of the nobles in the national population at large, even during the purges carried out by the July Monarchy and the Second Republic. The posts often came to them when they were quite young. Leclerc de Fleurigny at age twenty-four with a revenue of six thousand francs lived in his château and was made mayor of the commune of his name in 1809, and he held the post for decades. Joseph de Villèle was made mayor of the commune in which he lived under Napoleon. The mayoralty was the first rung towards other responsibilities: member of the local consultative councils, deputy, and even peer or senator for the most successful.

Figure 4 reveals the fluctuations of the participation of nobles in two rather different departments, the Aude and the Sarthe. Both witnessed a steep drop from 1830 to 1834, but then the rising trend returned. The Aude had fewer resident nobles than the Sarthe, although they were still disproportionately represented among the mayors, particularly in the years before 1830. One of them was marquis d'Hautpoul, who returned unexpectedly to his château at Saint-Papoul in the winter of 1829 and was promptly named mayor; in his memoirs he spoke of services rendered to his fellow citizens in restoring order to the communal budget. The Sarthe generally had wealthier nobles than did the Aude. Between 1810 and 1872 the proportion of nobles among the department's mayors never dipped below 20 percent, and it sometimes surpassed 50 percent and more.

The Restoration rapidly increased the numbers of mayors of the largest cities who were from the noblesse. The number of prominent individuals ready to take these posts probably increased. In 1816 the royal almanac listed marquis de Montgrand as mayor of Marseille, Joseph de Villèle in Toulouse, vicomte de Fourges in Bordeaux, marquis d'Ax-Daxat in Montpellier, marquis de Valogne in Nîmes, and vicomte de la Peyrade in Sète, to sample only the major southern cities. In the
same period nobles sat more frequently on municipal councils: sixteen out of twenty-seven in Toulouse in 1824. However, the more onerous jobs in the municipalities—those of deputy, secretary general, section chief, and so forth—were less frequently held by nobles.

The noble perception of the value of office depended on how far the office could influence higher-level administrative choices and decisions. Particularly during the Restoration, mayors filtered the traditional patronage system involved in local appointments. On the Mediterranean littoral and in the Midi this was especially evident. A typical viewpoint was expressed by the elder Villèle in a note to his son, the mayor of Toulouse, on 12 October 1815: “It is a good thing to be mayor of Toulouse. Certainly one gets from it a great considération, which usually is useful. On the other hand, you know the responsibilities—I participate a little in both. I receive ten compliments that otherwise would not have been offered to me, and ten hats are raised that would not have been raised. Also I have many requests.”

Prestige could be expressed in a more tangible way in civic ceremonial, as at the funeral of a former émigré who had returned in 1797 to Monistrol (Haute-Loire), where his family château was located, to serve for many years as the mayor. His funeral procession in 1824 was described in the municipal registers with great precision: “All the corporations, colleges, communities, the gendarmerie brigade, the municipal

council, the hospital board, that of Charity, the secular clergy, the National Guard, with flag unfurled and decorated with crepe, four cavaliers of the Royal Order of the Legion of Honor carrying the corners of the mortuary shroud, and an immense crowd of the common people [peuple] accompanied by four drums." The family name remained well-known when his son, a former army officer, member of the general council, and a representative of the people in 1848, was killed during the June fighting on the rue Saint Antoine in Paris. His funeral, also at Monistrol and also celebrated with great pomp, was followed by the renaming of the principal square as la place Charbonnel.

For much of the period 1800–1870 the bureaucracy actively sought out nobles to take positions of prominence in the countryside. The administrators' attitude towards such posts in the hands of noblemen was put clearly by the prefect of the Hautes-Pyrénées when he wrote that

the misfortune of the times has placed, in some communes, nonresident mayors or mayors who are not landowners there. In this way communes were condemned to the humiliation of not having a single distinguished [honnête] person in its bosom. The mayor who arrived yesterday, without contact to the old families of the region [pays], will find only cold hearts, ill-disposed and soon excessively soured by the presumption or certainty that the magistrate imposed on them more as an overseer than as the father of all maintains himself in the graces of the higher authorities by ties that are favorable to nobody.48

This desire for a mayor with political "weight" and clientèle ties was fundamental in a nation organized around the concept of notability. Despite the use by historians of political labels—Legitimist, liberal, Orleanist, conservative, Bonapartist, and so forth—in the operations of the mayoralties ideology was inconsequential. What was evident was that service in municipal government provided prestige and social authority.

This return to an essentially local, quasi-seigneurial view of power had borne its first fruits with the submission of France during the Empire and continued to do so until the end of the constitutional monarchies. A primarily peasant society remained passively obedient to the national government in the villages and small towns. The Revolution—particularly the anti-noble legislation and the holocaust of executions, both emphasized in constantly repeated martyrologies—convinced many noble families that the fundamental defense of their interests was to be found in rural complicity. They were known best in the countryside; in the urban anonymity, despite the immediate obligations of
servants and purveyors, nobles were less sure of their ground. Was it not true that nonresident families who lost intimate local contacts, such as the aristocratic Saulx-Tavanes, so rarely seen in Burgundy, were those who suffered most from the Revolution? Too distant an estrangement from rural obligations in the pursuit of more profitable but riskier court advantages made any noble vulnerable. Indeed, one can loosely equate the despoiled nobles with those most distanced from their home communities. After the Revolution nobles personally well known in local society kept their preeminence in it.

The nature of such attachments, however, depended on many things. Apart from individual characteristics, such as a particularly blatant extortionism in leases or exceptional arrogance, there were regional considerations and differences in rank. A prefect reporting from the Haute-Garonne in December 1815 contrasted the noble outlook of southwestern France with that of western France: “In this department the royalists and especially the nobles show none of those pretensions capable of affrighting the common people [peuple] as [I encountered] in the Charente department, which I have administered, or others adjacent.”

If country attitudes changed slowly from 1800 to 1870, they were certainly not immobile. While many nobles expected deference by right from the peasantry, the latter came to realize that control over land and other resources was one measure of power, and influence in political and bureaucratic decisions quite another. While peasants were not averse to obsequiousness at this time, they naturally wanted to know its rewards. In the changing political circumstances of nineteenth-century France this was the calculation not easily made. When after the Hundred Days the duc de Vicence retired from a political and military career that had begun in 1788 and had raised him to the position of Napoleon’s grand écuier, he was clearly out of the restored Bourbons’ good books. In the spring of 1816 the former intimate of Napoleon was under surveillance at the family’s Caulaincourt château. The First Military Division commander noted his local popularity and considered him dangerous because of the influence his great wealth gave him over the peasantry. This was the kind of situation where a peasant weighed immediate advantages from a good relationship with a wealthy landowner, in this case of lands that had been a marquisat in the Caulaincourt family since August 1715, against more distant benefits that might be forthcoming from government or bureaucracy. Of course, immediate advantage was generally preferred to the distant and abstract. Peasants at the bottom levels of rural society almost never enjoyed direct contact with the estate owner in person any more than with members of the departmental bureaucracy. The distinction between
noble and bureaucrat was often blurred when nobles served as mayors, subprefects, or local councillors. Such office holding kept alive a nostalgia for Old Regime feudal and seigneurial responsibilities towards tenants, particularly on the lips of the noblesse. What they liked to think of as noblesse oblige was now a variant of nineteenth-century patronage systems, too partial and manipulative for one section of society to control in all its ramifications even in the remoter countryside.

An isolated southwestern department like the Hautes-Pyrénées illustrated what was involved in the local manipulation of power during the Restoration. Bertrand Barère de Vieuxac, a former member of the committee of public safety, was simply one of an extensive patronage clan that included a Napoleonic titrè and sought honorific and local posts over a span of more than sixty years. A later generation saw a similar network emanating from the Goulard family, who also claimed to be nobles. In the Cher, closer and more responsive to the political and economic rhythms of Paris, a similar network sprang from the Vogué family. As contemporaries observed, the Cher was spared the Reign of Terror’s worst rigors thanks to a moderation often ascribed to the “innately” placid Berrichon temperament. It was equally comprehensible as the result of local nobles’ refusal to become involved in counterrevolutionary politics. Their property was thus not confiscated, nor was their social place undermined. By the 1840s the most powerful noble family network was that of the marquis de Vogüé, a well-known farmer, often elected to comices agricoles during the Second Empire and holding substantial investments in the wood-fired ironworks of the area. Noting Vogüé’s free-trade sympathies, his moderation in opposition, and his local prestige, the prefect made some shrewd remarks about the marquis’s election by acclamation as president of the Bourges agricultural society:

Mr. de Vogüé is a practiced agriculturalist, prizewinner of all regional competitions, member of the Central Agricultural Society in such a fashion that I am certain, to the exclusion of political preoccupations, it was the very special position of Mr. de Vogüé that inspired the choice made of his person in the circumstances... as a private individual and agriculturalist. [Public] opinion of Mr. de Vogüé is so placed that the administration remains powerless in any efforts that it would undertake to hamper the expression of public sympathy in his favor. I shall add that it would be dangerous and clumsy to carry out such a defiance of opinion.

Like so many other contemporaries, the Cher prefect sensed that proclaimed “orthodox” Legitimist attitudes were symbolic statements of social identity, to be divorced from their apparent political meaning.
Legitimism had always been charged with ritual meanings. This was increasingly true after 1830. Subscriptions to Legitimist newspapers like the *Journal des Modes*, the *Gazette de France*, and other provincial emulators; contributions to fund raising for monuments or for gifts to the exiled Bourbon family; and participation in local banquets and religious services to mark the pretender’s birthday or the anniversary of Louis XVI’s execution were gestures of complicity and an occasion for sociability without true hardship or real risk. Comte d’Adhémar correctly saw that “Legitimist opinions are a conviction—better than that, a religion.” Royalist newspapers spoke of the “pilgrimage” in December 1843 of nine hundred faithful supporters to Henri V’s Belgrave Square home in London. Not everybody could sustain the reverential tone. The young duchesse d’Uzès, Legitimist both by birth and by marriage, described a visit to the pretender at Frohsdorf in 1867 with refreshing candor: “Monseigneur, of medium height, dissimulating badly his limp but with a royal majesty, Madame, big, ugly to the point of making one believe that ugliness had been invented for her, but trying to be amiable. . . . She was deaf and heard none of my words. The comte de Chambord took up the interview and helped her to reply. The conversation was banal, and I have retained no memory of it.” The point of such visits was, of course, to carry out a social ritual proper to the nobility.

The more legitimism took on ritual forms associated with Catholic piety, however, the easier it became to obey the injunction to “render unto Caesar.” Those occasions were often pleasurable. Let the press report from the Camargue of a picnic to celebrate the 1846 wedding of the pretender suffice as an example. Local nobles figured prominently: marquise de Ponterès, née Castellane, MM. de Barthélemy, de Surian, de Sabran, de Roux, de Trets, and de Campou, baron de Flotte, vicomte de Sairas, as well as a chorus of “good people,” including those standbys of provençal traditionalism, the *patrons pêcheurs*. Symbolic legitimism could thus be international, Parisian, or strictly local and provided opportunities to reaffirm social distances in secular and religious settings. These activities did not preclude nobles’ sharing the advantages enjoyed by wealthy commoners, but they gave those satisfactions a special noble stamp.

All this is to say that sorting nobles into neat political sets overlooks symbolic politics, as well as the divisions within families. Individuals were sometimes at loggerheads on specific matters of public policy while sharing a common pride in rank. Thus liberal nobles felt a bemused affection for the ostentatiously orthodox Legitimists, who, while avoiding high-risk politics, exemplified in its purest state the belief in noble separateness and superiority. As an old lady the comtesse d’Armaillé recalled with pride that her husband had rejected an indirect
approach to discover whether he was interested in a post of chamberlain or écuyer to Napoleon III without consulting her, so unthinkable was such activity within the family notion of honor. Her own family (Ségur) had been on good terms with successive governments, but she saw nothing inconsistent in this:

Our politics were close to religion. In getting close to the new regime we would have believed that we were disobeying our dearest and most respected traditions. Comte de Chambord was our king, our prince. His portrait (before which at eighty-one years of age I now write these lines) was suspended in M. d’Armaillé’s room like a pious picture. We did not reason about it, we felt ourselves honored to love him and to remain faithful to him. In this feeling there was no bitterness, no hatred against those who did not share it. I love to recognize it and to consider this kind of elevation as the effect of a sincere and true faith. No exaltation mixed with it. We found in it, on the contrary, a calm and a profound independence.55

Behind the internal squabbles, snubs, recriminations, and slander between “old” and “new” families over their merits and genealogy there was always a tacit recognition that all of them cared for the same things. All titrés at one level rejoiced in the existence of the most rigidly orthodox noblesse, who affected to despise them, since the noblesse preserved the rejection of democracy, egalitarianism, and individualism by a raw affirmation of racial and moral superiority over commoners.

The semipolitical activity in which this became explicit was participation in local charity, especially in the countryside. This could be seen as a neofeudal concern for retainers, in the event rural beggars. Of course, nobles had been prominent in eighteenth-century philanthropic efforts: the great aristocrat François-Alexandre-Frédéric de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt had presided over the Assemblée Législative’s Comité de mendicité and after his return to Napoleonic France from emigration he had continued to search for work for paupers and abandoned children in the Oise. Under the Restoration his politics still had been those of a liberal.56 More representative of conservatives was his cousin and fellow peer of France, duc Michel de la Rochefoucauld Doudeauville, celebrated for his defense of noble and clerical privileges as much as for his generosity to the Montmirail hospital and for service on the boards of directors of Paris hospitals during the Restoration.57

Noble charity typically began at the country home, which is to say at the château, which provided the main source of relief to the poor peasants and beggars. The Gouville château (Eure) was said to succor an average of 200 needy weekly and as many as 1,600 in a week during a famine in 1817.58 Joseph de Villèle’s father wanted to go into the very
homes of the poor to ensure that help went to those who were truly in need and so that wholesome pressure could be exerted to make the able-bodied work in the fields: “every capable beggar put to work in the fields is a conquest for the countryside where he uses his arms.” The Leveneur family felt responsibility for the poor of Carrouges canton (Orne), where their smithy was located. During the penurious summer of 1812 the château was used for rice distribution and coordination of food and money collections; in the winter of 1847, another time of acute rural distress, comte Leveneur permitted needy parishioners to gather fuel for their fires from his woods.

A more wholehearted commitment is illustrated by Adolphe de Bourgoing, liberal before 1830 but Legitimist afterwards, who threw his energies into the management of his 170-hectare estate at Mouron-sur-Yonne (Nièvre). He bombarded the ministry with petitions and memoranda on the need to honor agriculture, to stimulate positive rivalry between farmers, and to encourage economic innovation. He bore witness for noble solicitude for the dire conditions of the rural as well as the urban poor. Parisian and provincial emulators of the charitable Armand de Melun, as members of charitable associations, contributors to journals like the *Annales de charité*, speakers on poor relief at the Chamber of Deputies and local councils, and writers of books and pamphlets, revealed the hopes for noble involvement. An 1840 memoir of Bourgoing captured those hopes for an interdependency of noble and peasant: “How many wounds would have closed and healed, how many illnesses assuaged, how many miseries diminished for the poor inhabitants of the countryside, if those who possessed the big properties had stayed put in them for a few months only?”

Under Napoleon III, Bourgoing joined the prefectural corps that included another noble reformer, Le Rat de Magnitot, who struggled with some success against the ravages of poverty in Bourgoing’s native department of the Nièvre from 1853 to 1863. In his 1863 pamphlet Robert Tancrède de Hauteville insisted on the need for nobles to exercise charity so as to demonstrate to the rural masses a genuine concern for their well-being: “The great difficulty is to vanquish this disdain and this ingratitude and not to become weary of going before the common people [peuple] who come with such difficulty to you, who only welcome your kindnesses most of the time with a doubting gratitude and a suspicious coldness.” He insisted that charity be given directly, “without passing through strange hands, so that he who receives may be thankful to he who gives.” At the same time, this quotation implies less subservience from the peasantry than was earlier the case.

These charitable campaigns by nobles can be seen as having other ends than the self-evident one. One noble pamphleteer in the 1860s
thought that charity could help one enter into contact with a better type of person:

Associate yourself with all the charitable works *[bonnes œuvres]*, you will get to know all the great names from whom charity flows as from a spring. . . . Keep a good table in Paris and in your fine country château, you shall receive all those whom your charitable works shall have introduced you to. . . . Be the providence of your village, of your canton and your arrondissement; let it be that you are found always disposed to help with your purse for a bridge, a road, church repairs, agricultural associations.64

While this advice can be taken as somewhat ironic, its message was not. The indefatigable Armand de Melun encountered in the salons of charitable Catholic noblewomen a network of acquaintances to whose attention he commended the needy of Paris. That gave him an eminent place in the *bonne compagnie*.65 Gobineau satirized such modish inspiration of volunteer work, to which he certainly donated neither time nor funds, in his novel *Les Pléiades*. Although the Lady Bountiful motif became part and parcel of the noble identity, it encouraged highly deserving efforts to alleviate human misery at a time when the state had not taken up its responsibilities in that regard. If the eighteenth century was the time of philanthropists discussing the extinction of beggary, the nineteenth was the heyday of voluntary efforts by the Catholic nobles to help the poverty-stricken.

Throughout this chapter I have stressed that nobles at large, and particularly aristocrats, ultimately rallied to every regime. During the Restoration the fewest doubts were encountered, since only Napoleonic titrês could have any reason to boycott a regime that could present itself as the Old Regime in new clothes. For their part the Bourbons were more solicitous of the Napoleonic nobility than the popular stereotype recognizes. Moreover, under each successive regime in France from 1800 to 1870, with the possible exception of the Second Republic, nobles were overrepresented, given their proportion in the French population, in all political assemblies and many bureaucratic and official posts. Similarly, nobles profited by neoseigneurial and patronage politics in the countryside. This potential strength relative to their numbers forced upon the more reflective noblesse a realization that this place in the sun resulted not from the nation’s homage to their intrinsic excellence but from their landed wealth, political allies, adaptability, and continuing monopoly of the forms of social distinction.

The highest aristocracy had grasped those facts of life centuries past in the ongoing wars of family cliques struggling for royal approval at court. They were, especially through their women, the first to make
overtures to the rulers of France thrown up by Revolution. Daughters could be extremely useful in this regard, as the aristocratic Léontine de Noailles demonstrated. She went to school under the instruction of one of Marie-Antoinette’s ladies-in-waiting in the company of the first consul’s sisters. At age seventeen she married her cousin Alfred (which kept her dowry within the cadet branch); shortly thereafter he fell in Russia. Meanwhile, a brother continued the family “insurance” as an émigré diplomat for the exiled Louis XVIII. This served the Noailles well during the Restoration, when he was a deputy for the Corrèze. After 1830 Léontine’s entry into court circles was maintained thanks to her relatives, the Mouchy, well-known partisans of the Orléans family. The proclamation of the Second Republic in 1848 meant that the elite connections which had been good under four reigns now needed serious attention, and once her son-in-law was elected for the Oise, Léontine came to Paris from her château in order to open an elegant salon to serve as a clearing house for political information. Her life typifies aristocratic attention to the family network of interests quite independent of symbolic Legitimist sympathies, with which she was, inevitably, credited in the privately printed eulogistic 1855 biography of her, produced with mock eighteenth-century typeface. Her burden was taken on by other members of the Noailles family who continued to flourish at Napoleon III’s court. The ability to come to the top of the nexus of wealth, power, and social prominence was the essence of an aristocrat.

Lesser nobles had to content themselves with thinner wine, since they lacked the wealth and metropolitan contacts that would permit a redressment of their family situation. In the case of an impecunious young member of the noblesse who became a career soldier, Laveaucoupet, political flexibility was necessary despite the Legitimism that he was described as having: “He was a Legitimist by family tradition: without making any show of it, he could not understand how a well-born man could be of any other persuasion.” He continued his career begun under the Bourbons as an officer of Louis-Philippe and as a general for Napoleon III. Tens of thousands of others made similar adjustments to reality while nodding approvingly as their womenfolk declaimed about the historic purity of their devotion to the elder line.

It becomes apparent to the student of nineteenth-century noble politics that although Parisian and provincial families, aristocrats, noblesse, and titrés, followed different trajectories in their careers, all traveled in the direction of the goals set by their family membership. No family better exemplified stylish opportunism than the remarkable Choiseuls, fortified by an ancestry traceable to 1060. At any given time the bold strokes of the Choiseul political maneuvers might repel, at least in causal gossip, some more fastidious contemporaries in the faubourg
Saint-Germain, but with their lineage, their contacts, their style and
great wealth, the Choiseul-Praslsins retained an unquestioned place at
the pinnacle of good society.\textsuperscript{68}

The aristocracy tolerated the full range of loyalties within their own
ranks, and individual animosities were never permitted to rend the
social fabric. Only family ruin definitely expelled them from the glitter­
ing circle of those who, in Paris and the country, mediated the blend of
distinction and power. The observant Austrian fop comte Apponyi com­
mented on the realignments and continuities of Parisian high society
after 1830, as it became apparent that Louis-Philippe had truly come to
power. Writing of the opportunism of the Montmorency, he noted that
they “do not disapprove of the behavior of the Bauffremont [who af­
fected Carlist disdain for the Orleanist court], finding it prudent that the
family members should be represented in all of the day’s opinions, in
order to have somebody, whatever happened, who might protect them
and facilitate their return into the good graces of power once
consolidated.”\textsuperscript{69}

In many provincial centers the \textit{noblesse} and local \textit{titrés} came to the
same conclusion. The \textit{noblesse} had entered the general councils of the
departments on a massive scale under Napoleon I when he told them to
do so, and in time increasing numbers made their appearance in the
prefects’ salons, especially if the prefects were of their own background.
They served as mayors or on committees for the encouragement of
agriculture and poor relief. Gradually they became used to meeting the
\textit{titrés} as equals. The Legitimist rhetoric that sprang to many lips served
as decoration to the job of tradition carriers and was gracefully acknowl­
dered, if not acted upon, by all who claimed to be nobles.

At this point, after the discussion of land and wealth in earlier chap­
ters, it is germane to ask how economics and politics impinged on the
existence of nineteenth-century nobles. In an article published in 1971,
I suggested that noble influence declined not as a result of the Revolu­
tion but because of a failure to adjust to new economic forms while
keeping capital in land.\textsuperscript{70} Ralph Gibson demurred by observing that
nobles in fact played a disproportionately large part in big business—he
might have added that nobles were almost always investors and not
entrepreneurs or managers.\textsuperscript{71}

Even more cogently, Gibson denied that economic innovation—or
stagnation for that matter—had much to do with the exercise of political
power, since the outlook of backward and rural France was typical of
Republicans and the notables who supported Napoleon III as much as of
royalists of Legitimist or Orleanist stripe. Instead, Gibson argued, there
was a political evolution in which nobles were again designated as
national enemies—as they had been during the Revolution—in a di¬attri be fed particularly by republicans, who were increasingly able to turn popular animosity against nobles, especially during the Third Repub¬lic. This is a striking argument which goes against the common assumption that it was the French Revolution that set the high-water mark of dislike of noble pretensions in a France where all were equal before the law. Instead, an obsessive and widespread hostility to nobles was manufactured at the same time that they dwindled in number.

The author of *Jacquou le Croquant*, Eugène Le Roy (1836–1907), the son of an estate manager for the comte de Damas, described in his novel published in 1899 the depredations of the odious, and recently en¬nobled, seigneurial Nansac family. The setting was his native Dordogne under the Restoration, which allowed for precise and detailed descrip¬tions of rural life combined with a time, more than eighty years earlier, sufficiently remote for purposes of historical distortion. 72 (Many other, less well written pieces of literature can be advanced to show how nobles provided an object for loathing to large sectors of the French public under the Third Republic, like Jews from the 1880s to 1945 or North African and other immigrant workers after the Second World War).

Gibson suggested that the hatred of nobles was manipulated by usu¬rers, who were not nobles but “men who started off humbly.” These individuals had every interest in elaborating a rhetoric that blinded the peasantry, who borrowed money (that is, those peasants who were in a position to do so), from their worst enemy, the usurer. They ranted about noble hopes to restore the tithe, corvée, and a host of other feudal obligations, not to overlook that favorite of the lubricious imagination of indignant republicans, the droit de jambage, the alleged feudal right to deflower the virgin wife of the newly wed tenant. Gibson concluded his discussion, which he limited to descendants of the noblesse, by observ¬ing that “there is no economic necessity about it; the nobles simply lost the battle for the hearts and minds of Frenchmen.” 73

This is a stimulating thesis, although one is hard-put to imagine nineteenth-century nobles battling for anybody’s hearts and minds save those of their own families. The argument founders on the implication that nobles were ever capable of collective political action. Nobles would have to admit that their shared identity was itself bound up with re¬criminations and dissension, and this necessarily precluded any rally¬ing against the enemy. Moreover, as argued throughout this study, it is highly artificial to insist on some absolute difference between nobles with titles before 1791 and those who gained or added to theirs later. Indeed, when the Association d’Entr’aide de la Noblesse Française was set up in the 1930s, it included, as had Article 71 of the Charter, the
post-Revolutionary creations. What needs to be understood is not only nobles' economic behavior or their politics seen in isolation but how they kept themselves apart from the mass of the nation, took in new recruits, rejected egalitarianism, and maintained considerable social authority. To do so we must turn our attention to their religious outlook.