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The French Court in the 18th Century: Noble Power and Royal Obstinacy

Ambrogio A. Caiani: Louis XVI and the French Revolution, 1789-1792, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, XIV + 254 S., 10 s/w-Abb., 5 Tabellen, ISBN 978-1-107-02633-9

Leonhard Horowski: Die Belagerung des Thrones. Machtstrukturen und Karrieremechanismen am Hof von Frankreich 1661-1789 (= Beihefte der Francia; Bd. 74), Stuttgart: Thorbecke 2012, 793 S., 1 CD-ROM, ISBN 978-3-7995-7465-5

In the historiography of the European court Versailles has always occupied a key position, as the prime example of courtly splendour and royal power. Norbert Elias, adopting and expanding a traditional French interpretation, pictured the court as a place forcefully attracting high nobles who subsequently lost power through competition in luxury and ceremony. The Sun King could consolidate royal power and overcome his old rivals partly through manipulating these mechanisms of court life. Elias' persuasive model, however, relied on an anachronistic understanding of court offices as sinecures and of courtiers as powerless sycophants. Several studies have demonstrated that Versailles was a bastion of noble power rather than a 'goldene Käfig', a statement that holds true for many other courts. [1]

Much work on the French court has dealt primarily with the seventeenth century and Louis XIV. The eighteenth-century court has been largely neglected. Standing uncomfortably between the powerful example of Louis XIV and the dramatic finale of monarchy in 1792, it tends to be pictured in terms of decline and ossification, as a prelude to the revolution. The work of Bernard Hours restored agency and intelligence to Louis XV's attitude towards his court; several descriptive studies by William Ritchey Newton have reconstructed in detail various aspects of the eighteenth-century court. [2] Their work, however, now is surpassed in most respects by a massive new study on the court from 1661 to 1789: Leonhard Horowski's *Die Belagerung des Thrones*. Almost at the same time, Caiani's *Louis XVI and the French Revolution* appeared, tracing Louis XVI's court and royal representation from 1789 to 1792. These two works together provide a fresh basis for a reassessment of the French court from Louis XIV to its demise in 1792.

Die Belagerung des Thrones is the published and polished version of a dissertation finished in 2003. The author is currently completing a *Habilitationsschrift* on Prussian and British ministers and has published several articles on absolutism, court careers and favourites. [3] His dissertation looks at the court from the perspective of the courtiers rather than from that of the king, a method earlier adopted successfully by Andreas Pečar in his study on the Viennese court under Charles VI. [4] Horowski, however, aims to provide greater precision by unravelling the nature of office-holding and the career patterns of courtiers, in addition to the family alliances and rivalries at court. He chooses a long-term perspective and a prosopographical approach. This ambitious agenda demands a near-exhaustive knowledge of French court families and the ability to organize this knowledge in an analytical framework - a rare combination.

Horowski's study opens with an authoritative introduction into the relevant literature. Below I consider the six chapters of the book in three parts, each consisting of two chapters. In the first two chapters Horowski introduces the *ancien regime* setting of royal power and noble status, on the whole aligning himself with an Anglo-American revisionist approach towards

Louis XIV's 'absolutism' and the royal court. He is careful, however, to qualify some accepted truths, such as the gradual blurring of the categories of *robe* and *épée*. The author convincingly argues that this distinction remained of utmost importance in eighteenth-century France. Via favour and access Horowski moves to an examination of office-holding at court, explaining the complicated intermediary status of court office between hereditary and venal offices and the *commissions* which remained in the king's hand.

Chapters three and four clarify the selection of court offices included in the prosopography and explain the dynamics of office-holding. These two chapters provide the data at the basis of this book's argument: the nominations to ca. fifty court offices in the king's household, in the queen's partly female household, and in the military elite units attached to the royal *maison*. For the years between 1661 and 1789 Horowski counted 790 nominations involving a group of 687 individuals (492 men and 195 women) who belonged to 312 families with numerous interconnections. The following chapter traces the success or failure of courtiers to secure their hold on court office in the long term, for specific ranks and individual families. It highlights the remarkable advantages of the courtier's position: without an absolute need for any specific great talent and far more secure than ministers who risked disgrace and exile, these men and women remained close to the fountain of honours. Horowski's analysis makes painfully clear how the court increasingly became the near-monopoly of a small circle of high-ranking *épée* families.

The last part of the book focuses on court faction and family strategies. The fifth chapter describes court faction from Louis XIV to the revolution in a richly detailed, arguably somewhat overloaded, story. The sixth chapter gives a penetrating interpretation of noble ideas and kinship and their impact on inheritance, alliances and mentality. We find ourselves in a world where genealogical expertise was as necessary for political survival as a (mental or physical) Tube map would be for travelling through modern London or Paris. Following this anthropology of court families, a brief conclusion summarizes the outcomes of the book as a whole. A printed prosopography follows the main text; a CD-ROM providing a more detailed prosopography comes with the book.

Horowski's grasp of family connections is unrivalled and on this basis he has succeeded in producing a coherent and convincing interpretation. The unlikely combination of qualities makes this book impressive and definitive. However, it also engenders minor problems. The text provides densely detailed information often spilling over into lengthy footnotes.

Specialists will need to read the footnotes but risk losing track of the argument while reading them; general readers get the impression of unending information. Horowski is indubitably right that careful analysis of families and factions is necessary, but at some points his work shows how difficult it is to capture such detail in a straightforward text. On the whole, the author manages this very well. However, the descriptive overview of faction, combining a long-term view with detailed descriptions and an eye for idiosyncrasies and apt quotes, should have been a separate book rather than a huge chapter (259-367). The general interpretation of court faction as based on family interest rather than general issues is convincing, but this perspective, necessarily following from Namierite methods, may underrate the intermittent importance of policy choices.

Horowski reconstructs how an increasingly limited group of families obtained a stranglehold on high office in the state, dividing the spoils of French monarchy amongst them, apparently irrespective of the intentions of the royal person in their midst. The *épée*-courtier families gradually found their way back into ministerial office and prevented the intrusion of less privileged groups into court circles. They alienated nobles in the country at large who couldn't boast any court connection. This was not a gilded cage of powerless figures, but one cannot escape an impression of claustrophobia. Horowski uses the term *Sklerotisierung* (147, 234) to describe this. Indeed, his story makes the reader await sweeping change.

Caiani's *Louis XVI and the French Revolution*, therefore, provides an apt continuation of the subject. While the title suggests a focus on the king himself rather than on his courtiers, in

fact the book is a history of Louis XVI as represented by his court staff and as seen through the eyes of the agents of the revolution. The king occupies centre stage, but not primarily through his own thoughts or statements, for which we have only a limited number of frequently analysed sources. Caiani provides a welcome addition to Philip Mansel's earlier work on the French court in the revolution; in approach this published dissertation (2008) clearly reflects the work of his supervisor T.C.W. Blanning on eighteenth-century royalty and the public sphere. [5]

In his introduction Caiani connects his research to the historiographies of the French Revolution and the early modern court. He rightly stresses the almost total lack of attention for the 'constitutional royal court' in the first years of the revolution, pointing to the severe limitations of the available sources. The seven chapters of this book are divided into two parts: 'Inventing a Constitutional Monarchy' and 'Reform and Survival of the *Ancien Régime*'.

The first chapter provides a description of the ceremonial services of the French court: the masters of ceremonies, introducers of ambassadors, heralds, and the department responsible for fittings and fixtures, the *menus plaisirs*. The second chapter focuses on the *liste civile*, the private budget granted to the king for his household; the third chapter aims to reconstruct as far as possible daily life in the *Tuileries* between the *journée* of October 1789 and the revolution of 1792. Caiani necessarily relies partly on indirect evidence, citing diplomats' reports, debates and reports of the *assemblée*, and newspapers.

The second part opens with chapter four on the guards, followed by relatively long and detailed chapters five and six respectively on the presentation of young nobles to the king (the 'honneurs de la cour') and on orders of chivalry. For these chapters Caiani uncovered new sources, which allows him to tell a largely unknown story. The final seventh chapter recounts the troubled history of the royal chapel in the revolution. [6]

Caiani's conclusion describes the 1775 *carrosse d'apparat* used for Louis XVI's Rheims coronation. He presents this as yet another example of the king's inability to adapt to changing expectations among his subjects, who were slowly turning into citizens. 'For him' Caiani states, 'a reduction in *éclat* was a symbol of defeat' (224). The king wouldn't bend or budge and hence holds some responsibility for the adverse reactions generated by his anachronistic representation.

Caiani's book is an important addition to Mansel's pioneering study of the French court 1789-1830, which discussed the constitutional court briefly in only one chapter. The information brought together here, partly on the basis of familiar sources, partly through new or rarely used materials, allows a far better picture of the constitutional court and its interaction with the revolutionaries. Yet as the author himself recognizes (25) his timely and useful reconstruction could not be comprehensive.

In the key ambition of this work, however, a re-evaluation of Louis XVI's representation and 'symbolic behaviour' little is new or unexpected. There is a long tradition of deploring Louis XVI's outdated royal representation or his decidedly unenthusiastic participation in revolutionary rituals. [7] While scholars may vary in their assessment of Louis' attitude, nobody will consider his attempt at representation in the early revolution as a marked success. Likewise, a near-consensus exists on the increasing inflexibility of the king's position after the failure of the *assemblée des notables* and the grave challenges of the revolution: clearly, this was never a merry monarch astutely surfing the waves of revolutionary fervour.

Caiani goes to great lengths to support a familiar view; in his rhetorical élan he risks overstating his case: the argument in *Louis XVI and the French Revolution* at times is farfetched. The 1775 *carrosse* cannot be particularly relevant for a discussion of this period - if so, why exclude Louis XVI's radical reduction of the court in the 1780's, or his attempts at reform? A famous but unproven dialogue on 23 June 1789 between Mirabeau and the king's grand master of ceremonies, the marquis de Dreux-Brézé, serves as basis for a lengthy

discussion of the clash between cultures (29-35); a rather bland portrait of the king printed on the cover and discussed in the book without further context (80-82) indicates a 'crisis of representation'. These instances may be suggestive, but they cannot be seen as evidence. Moreover, in his comments on royal behaviour Caiani frequently cites revolutionary journalists and leaders, leaving unclear whether he accepts their judgement (for example on the King's *toilette* upon his forced return from Varennes, 83-84).

The king's considerations are rarely at the centre of Caiani's argument: Louis XVI's position is inferred from his daily life and representation as far as these could be reconstructed and from revolutionary commentators - a vulnerable basis for strong judgements. [8] Caiani himself allows for the king's limited adaptations, although he discards them as too little, too late (99, 110, 112). At some points he perceptively analyses the king's dilemmas (77, 82, 95), before reverting to his more general, colder tone. While there is little to disagree with in this book, it conveys the impression that the verdict was there before the evidence was marshalled. The author presents conclusions with great flair but less balance and intellectual rigour.

These two books are very different in academic background and style. Horowski's work is definitive in its mastery of families and their connections. His contentions fit well into recent revisions of court history, royal power and nobilities while adding great precision and acuity to these views. On the whole his achievement is utterly impressive. Readers will have to accept some longer digressions, but they will be richly rewarded. Caiani's book is a lively written overstatement of a largely familiar position, placed on top of a noteworthy and timely reconstruction of the outlines of Louis XVI's constitutional court, a project hindered by the revolutionaries' enthusiastic destruction of sources. Both books will influence discussions, albeit in different ways. A connection between the two may be found in the strong grip of court families on ministerial and household office, and their power over the hapless and vacillating king. [9]

Notes :

[1] Norbert Elias: *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie. Mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft*, Darmstadt / Neuwied 1969; id.: *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 Bde., Bern 1969. See discussion and critique in Ronald G. Asch / Adolf M. Birke (eds.): *Princes, Patronage and the Nobility. The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age c. 1450-1650*, Oxford 1991; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie: *Saint-Simon ou le système de la cour*, Paris 1997; John Adamson (ed.): *The Princely Courts of Europe. Ritual, Politics, and Culture under the Ancien Régime 1500-1750*, London 1999; Jeroen Duindam: *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780*, Cambridge 2003. See also some important recent French contributions, somewhat distant from the discussion in the works cited above: Sophie de Laverny: *Les domestiques commensaux du roi de France au XVIIe siècle*, Paris 2002; Mathieu da Vinha: *Les valets de chambre de Louis XIV*, Paris 2004; Frédérique Leferme-Falguières : *Les Courtisans. Une Société de spectacle sous l'ancien régime*, Paris 2007.

[2] See the analytical study by Bernard Hours: *Louis XV et sa Cour. Le roi, l'étiquette et le courtisan*, Paris 2002; and the more descriptive works by William Ritchey Newton: *L'espace du roi: la Cour de France au château de Versailles, 1682-1789*, Paris 2000; *La Petite Cour: services et serviteurs à la Cour de Versailles au XVIIIe*, Paris 2006; and *Derrière la Façade - Vivre au Château de Versailles au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 2008.

[3] Among these see 'Such a great advantage for my son'. Office-holding and career mechanisms at the Court of France, 1661-1789. In: *The Court Historian* 8 (2003), 125-175; *Das Erbe des Favoriten. Minister, Mätressen und Günstlinge am Hof Ludwigs XIV*. In: Jan Hirschbiegel / Werner Paravicini (Hgg.): *Der Fall des Günstlings. Hofparteien in Europa vom 13 bis zum 17 Jahrhundert*. Ostfildern 2004, 77-125; *Hof und Absolutismus. Was bleibt von*

Norbert Elias' Theorie? In: Lothar Schilling (Hg.): Absolutismus, ein unersetzliches Forschungskonzept? Eine deutsch-französische Bilanz. München 2008, 143-171; Der Preis des Erfolgs. Gunst, Kapital und Patrimonialisierung am Hof von Versailles (1661-1789). In: Zeitschrift für historische Forschung 36 (2009), 71-92.

[4] Andreas Pečar: Die Ökonomie der Ehre. Der höfische Adel am Kaiserhof Karls VI. (1711-1740), Darmstadt 2003.

[5] Philip Mansel: The Court of France 1789-1830. Cambridge 1988; T.C.W. Blanning: The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, Oxford 2002.

[6] See Caiani's earlier 'Louis XVI's chapel and the French Revolution (1789-1792) '. In: French History 22, 4 (2004), 425-445.

[7] See numerous discussions of Louis' passive role in revolutionary festivities such as the fêtes de la federation, notably in the early study by Mona Ozouf: La fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799. Paris 1976, on the earlier phase see e.g. Chantal Grell: The sacre of Louis XVI: The End of a Myth. In: Michael Schaich (ed.): Monarchy and Religion. The Transformation of Royal Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe. Oxford 2007, 345-366.

[8] Some recent assessments of the king and the early revolution: a well-informed critical view: Joël Félix: Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette. Un couple en politique, Paris 2006; somewhat more friendly perspectives in Munro Price: The Fall of the French Monarchy: Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and the Baron De Breteuil, London 2003; John Hardman: Overture to revolution: the 1787 Assembly of Notables and the crisis of France's old regime. Oxford 2010; id.: Louis XVI: The Silent King (2000); for a hagiographic rather than serious defence of the King see Paul and Pierrette Girault de Coursac: Sur la route de Varennes, Paris 1984, and other titles by this couple.

[9] Caiani (16) cites Julian Swann: The French Nobility, 1715-1789. In: Hamish Scott (ed.): The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, London 1995, vol. 1, 142-173, at 168.