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Contested Spaces of Nobility in Early Modern Europe

Edited by Matthew P. Romaniello and Charles Lipp

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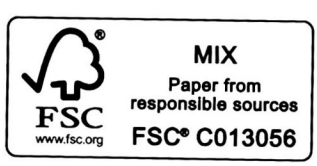

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CONTESTED SPACES OF NOBILITY IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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Acknowledgments

In the fall of 2005 we both began working at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, as postdoctoral fellows in the Western Civilization Program. Over coffee one afternoon, we had the idea to propose a panel for the Sixteenth Century Society and Conference's annual meeting in Minneapolis in the fall of 2007—"Contested Spaces of the European Nobility." Based on the lively discussions in Minneapolis, we decided to expand this project, which became a series of panels at a subsequent conference. This volume emerged from those conversations.

We would like to thank our contributors, who span six countries and more time zones than can easily be counted. Your collegiality, enthusiasm, and support have made preparing this volume for publication a joyful experience. We must also thank Kathryn Edwards of the University of South Carolina, who accommodated our panels at the 2009 meeting of the Sixteenth Century Studies and Conference in Geneva, as well as the other conference organizers. The conference allowed the contributors an opportunity to share and discuss each other's work, greatly enriching the final product. Also, we thank Richard Ninness, who was a presenter on the original panel in Minneapolis, and his insights have continued to inform our discussions.

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Chapter 1
The Spaces of Nobility

Matthew P. Romaniello and Charles Lipp

Considering the extent of their contemporary social dominance, the long-term scholarly neglect of the early modern nobility may appear surprising after several decades of revisionism.[1] Through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the story of Europe's traditional social elite was believed to be one of inherent decline because of an inability to cope effectively with the emerging "modern world." Modern in this case was defined in a variety of ways, but above all in terms of economics, with the supposed rise of a commercial bourgeoisie and, most notably for this volume, in terms of politics, with the emergence of strong, centralized monarchies.[2] Noble failure, therefore, was connected to what Herbert Butterfield termed a "Whiggish conception" of Europe's history, a conception that saw the late fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries as a key period of progress, with all of that term's implications, from the medieval to the modern.[3]

Based on this teleological view, traditional scholarship tended to establish oppositions between old and new. For instance, the reigns of Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1715; personal rule 1661–1715) Russia's Peter the Great (r. 1689–1725; personal rule 1696–1725) have long been portrayed as victories of the supposedly "progressive" centralized state over noble independence. Central to this process, it was argued, were courts, crucial spaces where monarchs eradicated the inherited medieval, and so, "backwards," social power of the nobles through the uses of patronage and the introduction of new customs and ceremonies.[4] One historian subscribing to this view wrote of Louis XIV's palace at Versailles that it was there that "the nobility were segregated and rendered

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[1] For an overview of the historiography of the early modern European nobility, see Scott, this volume.

[2] For an example, see James D. Hardy, Jr, *Prologue to Modernity: Early Modern Europe* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

[3] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).

[4] For an influential example, see Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

impotent ... [Moreover,] [i]t was at Versailles that the nobility were concentrated and demoralized by idleness and gaming."[5] Another, in describing Petrine Russia, stated that "Peter's revolutionary changes were fraught with social implications ... Peter combined the boyars, the service nobility, and landed military aristocracy in the *dvoryanstvo*, or nobility, all of which owed service to the ruler."[6] These discussions of centralizing rulers and their courts have been linked closely to the scholarly debate concerning absolutism, a socio-political system traditionally defined as one where royal power freed from inherited medieval restraints coerced elites and other social groups to accept centralized monarchical power. The past two generations of scholarship have largely rejected the notion that Louis and Peter (or their counterparts) were "absolute" monarchs, as the term is ahistorical at the very least, contemporaries never having used the term, and problematic on multiple fronts, in particular as it obscures the many instances of cooperation between rulers and elites.[7]

At the same time, much new work has challenged the related notion of the decline of noble standing to the benefit of monarchical authority. Beginning with the work of social historians examining how the nobility functioned as an estate, a new vision of nobility emerged in which nobles were not only individual political actors but also members of families, whose goals were as much about dynastic prosperity as political authority or social privilege.[8] From the work of historians Lawrence Stone, Robert Forster, and Jean Meyer in the 1960s, scholars increasingly have stressed noble resilience in the face of the great transformations of the early modern period, and nobles' great ability to adapt to change.[9] William Beik and James Collins, for example, have demonstrated the cooperative relationship between Louis XIV, the traditional model of an

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[5] David Ogg, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century*, 8th edn (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 297, 299.

[6] John B. Wolf, *The Emergence of the Great Powers, 1685–1715* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 161.

[7] Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy* (New York: Longman, 1992); Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Fanny Cosandey and Robert Descimon, *L'absolutisme en France: Histoire et historiographie*, Series Points Histoire, L'Histoire en débats (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002). See as well the introduction in James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[8] David Warren Sabean, Simon Teuscher, and Jon Mathieu, eds, *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), especially the opening chapter: David Warren Sabean and Simon Teuscher, "Kinship in Europe: A New Approach to Long-Term Development," 1–32.

[9] For a discussion of this transformation, see Scott, this volume.

absolute monarch, and French nobles.[10] The revisionist approach to noble history was perhaps encapsulated best in Jonathan Dewald's *The European Nobility, 1400–1800*, which argued that the early modern period was not a time of progressive and universal noble decline, but rather a tumultuous era in which innovations in religion, politics, society, and economics provided opportunities to some if not all members of the elite for maintaining their traditional social place and privileges.[11] In regards to centralizing rulers, nobles, it has come to be seen, accomplished personal goals through negotiation with sovereigns rather than submitting before a monarch's "charismatic authority" or the growth of a centralizing state.[12] The older "absolutist" model of monarchical coercion has moved towards new concepts of political authority, emerging from a consensus between a monarch and his nobles as "composite monarchies" and fiscal-military states.[13] These revisionist models emphasize a sharing of power between rulers and nobles arising from both practical and ideological reasons. This idea of consensus has inspired an appreciation for the persistence of noble power in early modern Europe.[14] To put it simply, the scholarship of the early modern nobility has moved beyond an interest in the decline and failure of the nobles to confront change to the examination of adaptation and success.

In contrast to visions of deterioration or triumph, this volume's chapters demonstrate that the maintenance of the nobles' social position resulted from a complicated web of contestation, accommodation, and negotiation—nobles

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[10] William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); James B. Collins, *Classes, Estates, and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[11] Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility 1400–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For other overviews, see the notes in Scott, this volume.

[12] For an explanation of charismatic authority, see Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils*, eds Joseph Ben-David and Terry Nichols Clark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 150–71.

[13] H.G. Koenigsberger, "*Dominium Regale* or *Dominium Politicum et Regale*," in his *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); J.H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," *Past and Present*, 137 (1992), 48–71; and Jan Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic, and Sweden as Fiscal-Military States, 1500–1660* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[14] Today, noble power is seen as outlasting the early modern period and persisting through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. For the classic statement of this view, see Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

could rely not only on traditional mechanisms of authority but also new institutions, arguments, ideas, and privileges in order to claim a dominant space within a changing society. In short, it was the "contest" that allowed the nobles to claim continued legitimacy as social leaders and to pursue greater authority. The method that underlies this book as a whole is an innovative approach that views noble history as a series of "contested spaces," including those personal, physical, social, and political, among others. This methodology builds upon the theoretical work of scholars such as Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja. Lefebvre proposed that space could be analyzed as an overlapping "conceptual triad": spatial practice, in which spaces are defined through physical production; representations of space, linked to the idea of producing order through knowledge and signs; and representational spaces, in which the symbols and significance of spaces may become detached from the physical reality.[15] Edward Soja offered a different assessment of space that also suggests a potential historical methodology. Soja classified traditional historical approaches to space as limited to two illusions. The "illusion of opaqueness" posited that space was permanently delineated, and the "illusion of transparency" countered with the idea that all concepts of space were ephemeral. Both of these are based on concepts of physical spaces. Soja usefully proposed a third framework, "one which recognizes spatiality as simultaneously a social product (or outcome) and shaping force (or medium) in social life."[16] Spaces, therefore, are not only the product of geography but also a method of delineating society, including the resulting interactions created by attempting to impose new definitions.

This volume reflects these approaches to analyzing space as a dynamic arena of society, politics, and physical environment. In doing so, it contributes to the revisionism of our understandings of the nobility, shifting their history from a narrative of victims of historical change to one of active participation in the great transformations of the early modern era. This does not mean, however, that the nobles always succeeded in their contests, but rather reveals the developments of the late-fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries as not being a linear, smooth, inevitable teleology of progress. Nobles' challenges and adaptations, this volume suggests, helped drive the process by which Europe became "modern." The early modern period confronted Europe's traditional social elite with a wide array of challenges in almost every space of life—political, religious, economic, intellectual, and social. Though success varied, all of these challenges, and all of these spaces, were contested.

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[15] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 33.

[16] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 7.

In addition, this volume continues the reevaluation of the early modern elite by adopting an explicitly interdisciplinary and transnational approach. Contributing scholars include historians, literary critics, and musicologists. Their different methodologies allow for a multifaceted exploration of the nobles' many contested spaces, ranging from explorations of the body, gender norms, courts, architecture, literature, law, education, and others. The chapters explore examples from across Europe. The central issue in this volume is the "spaces" of nobility, not particular national histories. Since John Hale argued for "Europe" as a common cultural place during the Renaissance, divisions of Europe have been revealed as later innovations rather than contemporary realities.[17] For example, Larry Wolff has shown persuasively that the division of Europe between "East" and "West" was born of the Enlightenment and overrode an earlier north/south separation of the continent that traced its origins back to the Roman Empire in the south and the "barbarians" of the north.[18] Even this divide was ephemeral, as exchanges of ideas and material goods between these two spheres—a "Mediterranean" and a "Baltic"—were common, even as each region had its own tensions and crises.

By taking a continent-wide perspective, the commonality of European experiences becomes clear. For example, when the seventeenth century witnessed a year of global crisis in 1648, it challenged political authorities in London, Paris, Naples, Istanbul, and Moscow.[19] This is not to argue that every area did not have a unique culture or identity, or that every political unit did not emerge autonomously with its own mechanisms of control, but instead to suggest that there was more than one avenue for understanding early modern Europe. Every region in Europe was both particular in its own right and connected to larger events. Social elites were as likely to adopt strategies to negotiate historical change from their counterparts across the continent as they were to arrive at their tactics independently.

Moreover, this volume contributes to an ongoing reexamination of the early modern understanding of "nobility." From traditional views of a universal unchanging definition, modern scholars have come to stress that the very meaning of nobility changed over the centuries. This volume shows that though new roles and new members of the nobility emerged, a similar set of obligations and rights distinguished an elite social group across the continent. Each society from Portugal to Russia managed to separate social ranks through

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[17] John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1993), 3–39.

[18] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization in the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[19] Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis, 1598–1648*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

legal precedents, property rights, or status and privilege, a separation frequently made public through sumptuary rights if not office-holding or political power. While individual groups with these privileges in Europe may not have been technically termed "noble," their common challenges as individuals, families, or even as an entire social order reveal a common European experience among these demarcated elites.

Whether "noble," "notable," "boiar," or "*slazchta*," this elevated social estate exploited any and all opportunities to preserve, or even increase, their social, economic, and political positions. Rather than viewing the great events of the early modern era such as the emergence of Renaissance science or the Reformation's religious upheaval as weakening the nobility's social position, this book argues strongly that they created opportunities for nobles to advance their standing. Neither the Enlightenment nor the rise of a market economy necessarily led to a world shorn of Europe's medieval inheritance; rather each movement simultaneously created a new set of terms and ideas that could be used by nobles to renegotiate and defend the traditions they valued, including their families and their privileges. By not viewing the Europe of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the inherent evolution of the continent's society, the chapters in this volume reconceptualize European history as a long process of social negotiation in a variety of different spaces—personal, social, geographic, and political—in which all parties could accomplish individual goals and agendas.

The transformation of the study of nobility is the subject of the opening historiographic chapter by Hamish Scott, "The Early Modern European Nobility and its Contested Historiographies, c. 1950–1980." While earlier political histories presumed the victory of the monarchy and the state, the rise of social history in the 1960s created a new framework for the analysis of the nobility. First and foremost, nobles were reconceived as social actors, and not necessarily political agents. As increasing numbers of historians have examined the possible roles and outcomes of noble involvement in historical events, rather than considering nobles the "losers" of historical evolution, the nobility has emerged as a dynamic group capable of pursuing their own interests. Scott argues that the work of Lawrence Stone in particular was crucial in transforming the debate about the early modern nobility, and thereby provided the tools for later historians to understand the continuing strength of the elite, a reality which is reflected in this volume's chapters.

New approaches to history, building on the developments discussed by Scott, created new avenues for examining the nobility and the spaces in which they challenged authority. In "Negotiating for Agnes' Womb," Erica Bastress-Dukehart examines one of the most intimate spaces—that of a noble woman's womb—to unpack the ways in which new innovations in science challenged