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Épreuves de noblesse: Les expériences nobiliaires de la haute robe parisienne (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle). Ed. Robert Descimon and Élie Haddad. Paris: Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres, 2010. 459 pp. €35.00. ISBN 978-2-251-38107-7.

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The title of this volume edited by Robert Descimon and Élie Haddad entails an understatement. The thirteen collected texts discuss much more than noble experiences of the Parisian *haute robe* from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century; in fact, they aim at a new approach to investigating early modern elites. Hence, in all contributions, the nobility of the robe appears as the outcome of a complex social dynamic, and not as an “essence” given by biology, law, politics, or economics. The French *noblesse de robe* might be primarily renowned and repudiated for the venality of the offices it held in the major judicial and financial institutions, but here other methods of securing noble status by its members are examined too, such as jurisprudential maneuvering, cultural representation, and geographical anchorage. In this way, it becomes clear that the transmission of titles and offices within elite families was less straightforward than classic interpretations of venal officeholding suggest. Consequently, both editors insist on offering a sociological analysis (*sociogénèse*) of a group which was (re)configured by the very act of providing constant and varying “proofs of nobility.”

The volume is divided in four parts, each of which is introduced by a joint statement of the authors involved. First, the venality of ennobling offices is reassessed in terms of an ongoing *patrimonialisation de l'office*, a kind of neologism pointing out that public offices were transformed into a family inheritance. In fact, from the seventeenth century on, the inflation of the prices of offices foremost influenced matrimonial strategies among the leading *robins*. At the same time, jurisprudence underpinned the tendency towards *patrilignage* for the inheritance of titles and offices, even if women could still seize upon ambiguities of the system in order to negotiate degrees of independence. In the course of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, this patrimonialization linked officeholding to concepts of family, dignity, and royal service, but at the end of the Old Regime these associations were clearly falling apart. The drastic reform plans of Chancellor Maupeou in 1771, vainly trying to abolish most of the offices and their venality, are therefore discussed to outline the ideological debate on officeholding by the end of the eighteenth century.

The history of the *noblesse de robe* is often presented as a success, as the new social group was able to take firm root in the “second order” of the Old Regime. Still, the second part of this volume shows how questions of familial reproduction made the novel group in fact very fragile. This is illustrated by the endless heritage disputes of the family Spifame and the many discontinuities between individuals holding the name Hurault de l'Hospital. The “procès Pommereu” in the eighteenth century conveys how some families sometimes even opted for *matrilignage*, which enabled female resistance and autonomy. All three case studies underline the difficulties of the transmission of goods and offices between generations, which made the *patrilignage* in practice delicate and not at all “natural.” Nonetheless, it was exactly the fluctuating economic climate, the jurisprudential ambiguities, and the unsecured familial reproduction that enhanced the need for a cultural representation of unity and lineage. Hence, genealogy served as a symbolic strategy and counterstrategy to project or deconstruct this unity, as becomes clear through the discussion of the legitimating pedigree of the Bragelogne (1689) and of the imaginative countergenealogy of Sublet de Noyers (1755).

In the fourth and last part of the book, the *noblesse de robe* is compared with its constituent other, the *noblesse d'épée*. Recent scholarship contended a fusion of both elite groups, at least for the eighteenth century, but here the difficult integration of these two kinds of nobilities is once again stressed. Pretensions of nobles of the robe to become *noblesse d'épée* could cost much in terms of capital and reputation, as is shown by the study of Les Mesgrigny. In the same way, an ascension from the merchant class to officeholding did not happen without difficulty. Even if the *noblesse de robe* never became a closed group, it maintained exclusive forms of sociability, focused on the family. This different social profile was enhanced by its anchorage in the Parisian district of Le Marais. In a stimulating conclusion, then, Robert Descimon underscores the intrinsically conflictive and composite nature of the second order of the Old Regime.

The fact that the editors are author or coauthor of seven of the thirteen collected texts has contributed greatly to the methodological and thematic coherence of the volume, reason for which the different contributions have not been singled out in this review. One clearly feels that this book is the result of one of those productive seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. The book is amply documented with genealogies and chronologies on the legislation and jurisprudence of venal officeholding or the nobility of the robe. The generous indexes of names and notions (such as “race,” “roture,” “sang,” “maison”) will prove equally helpful. Readers might be disappointed that they will find only few instances of the works on venality by Roland Mousnier, but this might just reveal how far these researchers have moved away from his classic analysis. One can only hope that this book on Parisian elites provides an incentive for comparative studies on other French provinces and—who knows?—other European capitals.

