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French urban elites

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In France, as in the Anglo-Saxon world, social history has undergone a sea change in recent years with the growth of interest in issues of culture and representation, with the result that historians have come to ask rather different questions about cities and their social fabric. The change was not, of course, achieved overnight: since the 1930s the *Annalistes* have been opening up new approaches to the analysis of power and status, while in the development of micro-history Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* occupies an honoured place. In this the lingering influence of a Marxist model has played an important part. For decades Marxist theory provided the key which opened up issues of social power and class division, the methodology which led to a widespread study of urban structures and social dominance. And though in some hands it might be criticized for leading to an over-arching concern with the urban economy and the growth of the industrial city, the same Marxist perspective also encouraged studies of such questions as the identity of urban elites, the extent of social mobility within cities and the development of suburbs. More recently French historians have been among the most innovative in exploring the culture of urban life in a variety of different contexts, whether – and here I shall simply cite representative examples – by the study of individual professions (Christophe Charle), of dress and public appearance (Daniel Roche), or of the appropriation of urban space (Bernard Lepetit). The three books under review here* all, in their different ways, contribute to our understanding of that urban culture and of the changes which it has undergone. Yannec Le Marec takes up Charle's arguments through a micro-history of the professional development of lawyers and doctors in the south Breton city of Nantes during the nineteenth century. Natacha Coquery, looking at the eighteenth century, explains the representation of social power implicit in the transfer of sumptuous Paris *hôtels* from private use to that of government ministries and their fast-multiplying staff. And Claude Petitfrère presents an edited collection of papers, emanating from

* Yannick Le Marec, *Le temps des capacités. Les diplômés nantais à la conquête du pouvoir dans la ville*. Paris: Belin, 2000. 335pp. 18.81 euros.
Natacha Coquery, *L'espace du pouvoir. De la demeure privée à l'édifice public. Paris, 1700– 1790*. Paris: Seli Arslan, 2000. 221pp. 36 plates. 22.50 euros.
Claude Petitfrère (ed.), *Construction, reproduction et représentation des patriciats urbains de l'Antiquité au xxe siècle*. Tours: Centre d'histoire de la ville moderne et contemporaine, 1999. 569pp. 24.39 euros.

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a conference organized by the highly influential *Centre d'histoire de la ville moderne et contemporaine* in his own university at Tours, which illuminates across time and place the ways in which an urban patriciate was first constructed, then reproduced and represented to contemporaries. Taken together the three volumes go far to illustrate current developments in historiography and offer an overview of the present state of urban social history in France.

In *Le temps des capacités* Yannick Le Marec makes a substantial contribution to the debate about social dominance in nineteenth-century French towns, and tackles one of the central questions of politics in the modern period. Just how did the France of *notables* which predominated under Napoleon and during the first half of the nineteenth century, the France studied so magisterially by André-Jean Tudesq, give way by the 1880s to a more democratic political nation that came to be dominated by its major professional groupings? It is less a question of conflict between economic classes than of more subtle realignment within groups which Marx would largely have characterized as bourgeois. Le Marec, in a book that started life as a doctoral dissertation, argues that standard analytical tools such as class and *mentalités* are insufficient to explain this transformation; he has been heavily influenced by Weberian ideas of social power and seeks his answers in group dynamics, particularly those of professional groups like the law and medicine, rather than in individual ambition and social ascent. His professions do, perhaps, require some reflection and definition, and this he is happy to provide. The older urban elites he interprets as being either the office-holders of the *Ancien Régime*, often themselves nobles, or – in the case of the great commercial cities like Nantes whose prosperity depended on Atlantic shipping – the more substantial merchants and men of commerce. Elites were defined by their status and wealth, their lifestyle and property holding. By the nineteenth century, however, their sway had been undermined by the Revolution and by the challenge of what contemporaries termed 'les capacités', men who were elevated into the elite by the function they performed for society, by their skills and education, by their membership of a profession that was respected by others as being in some way useful. They had been to university – his subtitle defines them as men who had taken their professional qualifications at Nantes – and they were not ashamed of their learning, taking their place in the city's cultural life at a time when fashionable society was increasingly attracted to museums and art exhibitions. As lawyers and doctors, architects and engineers they took an increasing part in the public affairs of the city – running charities, being elected to learned societies like the *sociétés scientifiques*, and standing for municipal office. They also accepted appointment to specialist commissions where their expertise was appreciated, dealing with such matters as agriculture, public health, town planning or the application of new technology. And increasingly, as with the *Société des Architectes de*

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Nantes, founded in 1846, they saw benefit in collective strength, organizing themselves as professions both to extend their influence over public affairs and to form powerful pressure groups that could further their interests in the community. As Nantes faced up to the challenge of industrial development, so the *capacités* responded by offering professional advice and by seizing the opportunity this gave them to assume a degree of local leadership. This brought its rewards. During the 1830s and 1840s there is far less evidence of conflict between merchants and lawyers; both were now part of a common municipal elite, the merchants more prominent in municipal government, the professions on the department.

So did the lawyers and doctors actually displace the older notables? Here Le Marec's conclusion is sensibly prudent. If the more established of the professions gained their place among the municipal elite, it was less a question of replacing their social betters than of integrating with them into a wider, more functional elite who would be trusted with the leadership and management of a fast-growing industrial community, a city which desperately needed the benefits of their professional expertise as well as the financial know-how that came from experience of commerce. National governments, especially during the July Monarchy, also played their part in pushing for the wider involvement of the *capacités*, particularly in the allocation of those unpaid memberships of special commissions that were customarily left for *bénévoles*. Not all professions were equal to this, nor did all enjoy equal standing. Lawyers still exuded individualism – men who had risen by their personal talent and eloquence. By way of contrast, doctors and chemists emphasized their collective value as a profession, seeking placements and recognition to help them establish their credentials as healers and throw off the competition of quacks and charlatans; while architects, too, were keen to establish a base of expertise that distinguished them from building contractors and construction engineers. Through public service their value to the community was recognized, they argued, and their professional status came to reflect this, just as, much later in the century, a similar reliance on professional organization and political leverage would allow schoolteachers to join them, at least in that small-town republican France where the Radical Party was strongly implanted and where they did not face too much heavyweight competition. This, the author believes, explains the peaceful evolution of social power in a nineteenth-century city like Nantes, where the dominance of the traditional elites of merchants and property-owners was gradually destabilized by the arrival of successive waves of rivals for office drawn from the educated, professional classes, bringing about a sense of *ouverture*, a new openness in municipal life, and with it a redefinition of the urban elites themselves. At the same time, he notes ominously, the amount of real power that municipal elites of any sort could exercise was rapidly declining. The *capacités* might hold a greater share of municipal offices, but they did so at a time of political centralization, when more and more of the crucial

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decisions were being taken by the prefect and by central government personnel.

This last point is important, since at a time of increasing state authority the juggling of responsibilities between sections of the urban bourgeoisie could reflect the interests of the state as much as it did local perceptions or corporate ambition. The effects of the growth of state power on urban society are also a central theme of Natacha Coquery's study of the re-use and adaptation of private aristocratic town houses in Paris – she very aptly uses the term 'colonization' – in the course of the eighteenth century. But so is another of the major strands of Le Marec's thesis, the issue of professionalization, in this case the professionalization of public servants and the creation of a bureaucracy consisting of clerks and other ministry officials. Ministries began to be rehoused and consolidated, the new offices replacing many of the private households – or *maisons* – of the particular noblemen who happened to serve the king in a particular office. These *maisons* were, indeed, private dwellings on the model of the *Maison du Roi*, where noble office-holders and their families would live while in Paris, along with their entourage, their cooks and valets, and the scribes or clerks who served them in their official capacity. They disappeared, of course, during the Revolution and Empire, when the minister was more clearly a servant of the state, and when clerks and ministry officials were state employees rather than personal attendants. But, interestingly, this move to greater professionalization, to a rationalization of ministry staffs and the more effective exploitation of space, had begun before 1789, especially in the more complex departments like Finances and Justice which employed larger staffs – sometimes thirty or more people – who were often scattered across a number of separate buildings in the capital. The process of centralizing the work of the Finance ministry, for instance, began under Necker in the 1770s and was continued by Loménie de Brienne in the dying years of the *Ancien Régime*. But even before then a host of elegant residences, formerly *hôtels* of the rich and famous, had been acquired by the monarchy and converted into offices for the Banque or the Loterie, the Postes or the Douanes.

The systematic choice of the most splendid palaces and private dwellings for the various departments of state cannot be explained only by the growth and professionalization of the bureaucracy. More modestly designed and priced space would have been adequate for their day-to-day functions. So why the insistence on such an opulent environment? Why did the state need the *grands édifices* of an earlier era to house its ministers and secretaries, clerks and messengers? Natacha Coquery makes clear that the pedigree of these *hôtels* was known to everyone: she cites eighteenth-century guidebooks to Paris that trace the topography of noble and gracious living. Their selection by the state was not a matter of chance; rather they were seen as buildings well suited to the status and aspiration of government ministries, noble buildings to eighteenth-century eyes,

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buildings which by their elegance and history conferred dignity and status on those who lived and worked there. In them the great officers of state both lived and worked: these were their Paris homes, buildings with a mixed residential and administrative function, where the minister both ran his department and entertained others on government business. They were imposing buildings, designed to impress both foreigners and those they administered, their very *monumentalité* intended as an unambiguous symbol of the grandeur and the outreach of the monarchy. Often a cluster of smaller residences housed the staff of the larger *régies* – the *Hôtels des Fermes* numbered over thirty in the later part of the century, and the *Compagnie des Indes* fifteen. They allowed their departments to be less scattered, to group around a central building or in a particular sector of the city. And they provided elegant, compact office complexes with an aura of dignity worthy of departments of state, a confident statement by the monarchy of its growing authority in the affairs of the realm. From the viewpoint of the urban historian the clustering of officials around particular poles in the city had another effect, that of creating more specialist *quartiers* within the city where business of a defined kind was transacted. Thus, even before the Revolution ushered in a further stage in the process of rationalization, judicial personnel – judges, barristers and their clerks – were concentrated in the streets around the Palais de Justice on the Île de la Cité, where various *hôtels* had also been adapted to provide them with sleeping accommodation while on business in the capital. In a similar vein those working in Finance clustered around the Butte Saint-Roch, the employees of the *Service de la Ferme* around the rue de Grenelle, and the agents of the *Compagnie des Indes* in the elegant streets to the north-west of the city centre which bordered on the gardens of the Palais Royal (Richelieu-Petits Champs). In this way the northern and western *quartiers* grew into an important hub of royal administration, a trend that had begun back in the 1630s when Richelieu had installed his *maison* on the rue Saint-Honoré.

What makes Natacha Coquery's book so interesting is its periodization, the fact that the years she is discussing – the eighteenth century up until the outbreak of revolution – form a period of transition, a period when buildings still had the dual function of ministerial office and private residence, a venal world in which ministers were appointed as individuals and where their office was often seen as property, something which in some more extreme cases they could hand on to future generations. That would swiftly change during the Revolution and Empire, and nineteenth-century Paris would positively bristle with government offices, with what were clearly ministry buildings. But in the eighteenth century there was still something rather incoherent about many aspects of government, a fact reflected in the uses these noble buildings were put to and the internal use of their space. Coquery is particularly good on the internal planning of these noble *hôtels*, so imposing on the outside, yet inside rather a

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clutter of conversion and subdivision. As an appendix she includes copies of architects' plans that show the internal layout of a number of them. Buildings that had originally been designed to be personal and intimate were often converted into functional space for administrators and their clerks, the new division into offices sweeping away much of the charm and diversity of the former residences to create an appearance of dull uniformity. In the new divisions such variety as was allowed became a signifier of administrative hierarchy within the service; or else offices were created of a standard size, in which only the number of their occupants was variable. The aura of opulence had gone: chaises-longues and chandeliers had given way to desks and cupboards. The buildings had ceased to be a private or a privileged space, since members of the general public were often admitted to conduct their business in the *bureaux*. Only the external magnificence remained to convey a sense of power, of the importance of the business being carried out within. In this they closely resembled other state buildings of the period, like libraries and museums, but not only state buildings. The same will to impress and dominate inspired much of the classical architecture of the eighteenth century, whether it was the design of municipal theatres and *hôtels de ville* in provincial cities, or that of company headquarters and chambers of commerce in the private sector. All were designed to make a public statement, and with the increasing importance attached to the administrative process the ministry buildings were among the most prominent and distinguished, taking their place at the very heart of Paris's stock of public buildings. Or, as Coquery phrases it, they began the process of creating a new 'patrimoine urbain officiel' in Paris, a process which would be continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is one of the hallmarks of any modern capital city.

Both Le Marec and Coquery share a common theme, though they treat it in different ways – the theme of advancement and professionalization in the modern city, surely one of the defining elements in modernization. Le Marec looks at career and human ambition, Coquery at the fabric of the city, the stones and monuments which that ambition left behind. Both, in their different ways, are concerned with the making of an urban elite, again, perhaps, a sign of the post-Marxist times in which we live. Claude Petitfrère's edited volume takes as its theme the formation and reproduction of urban elites across time, not just those of the modern era, but those, which he terms 'urban patriciates', which may fall more easily into the terminology of ancient and medieval society but which nevertheless have their counterparts in the modern era. The collection has both the strengths and the weaknesses of a conference collection – it is well focused on the central theme, the papers arguing their case from a given set of issues, and hence it does much to sanction and to refine the notion of the *patriciat* across time. But it can also appear a little uneven, the outcome of an international conference where, perhaps inevitably, the majority of the participants were French and where much, though not all, of the example

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is also French. In fact, the international element here is strictly limited. The central theme, on the other hand – the definition of what may at different epochs contribute to the notion of an urban *patriciat* – is of clear importance to urban historians of all periods, and it is refreshing to find such a strong ancient and medieval presence among the contributors. How should historians go about envisaging such a definition? It is a question of methodology as much as of semantics. In his introduction Petitfrère suggests that it is a subject that belongs in what the French have traditionally termed the history of *mentalités*, but which he prefers for the present purpose to think of as that of *comportements*, of the ways in which people behave and react towards one another. The term itself is offered rather tentatively and it certainly does not attract unanimous approval; it is notable, indeed, that among the various contributors to this volume the terminology varies widely, with some opting for other classifications, like 'elites' or 'notables', depending on the period and urban context. Was this *patriciat* an open or a closed grouping? Was it hereditary, even caste-like in its defence of privilege? How far did it depend for its power on the state as well as on its local municipal power base? Should it be described as something of a hybrid, as Jean-Marie Constant suggests, an *aristocratie urbaine* that developed slowly over the centuries, half-noble, half-bourgeois and including many of the office-holders of the greater cities? These and other questions lie at the heart of a wide-ranging debate which this volume seeks to initiate.

Of course no volume covering two thousand years of history can provide a coherent narrative, especially when it consists of a series of specialist examples and case studies, as many of the chapters here do. What comes across is the diversity of urban elites when the term is applied in different time-spans and different legal cultures. But it is also clear that, despite their differences, most urban *patriciats* are distinguished by talent and function, the leadership roles they perform rather than simple birthright. They were often hereditary, the honours of office passing from father to son, but recent research on the *Ancien Régime* in Europe suggests that there was less of a fixed patriciate than we might expect, but rather a rotation of functions among the most distinguished families of each city. Often they were the group to whom the citizenry turned in their hour of need, when threatened by plague, or civil war, or royal repression, and this in turn gave the *patriciat* – and it makes little difference whether they were magistrates, or judges, or municipal councillors – a vital element of popular legitimation. It is this which explains the popularity of local *parlements* and estates in the eighteenth-century provinces when local liberties seemed under attack. It explains, too, the marked tendency of towns to turn to judges and other legal luminaries when seeking men to serve as their mayors. They turned to them for their knowledge, of the law and hence of their rights, and for protection against those who would transgress them. This, the various

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authors are agreed, is a common feature of the modern period: Bernard Chevalier argues that in the late Middle Ages Europe saw a marked change in its urban elites, with the ascension to high office of advocates and men of law, and a recognition that power was something attained through knowledge. Something of that assumption remains right through into our own era. Yves Pourcher supplies an excellent vignette of the men who were seen as notables, as twentieth-century *patriciens*, in Marvejols, a modest provincial town in the southern Auvergne, showing how rival candidates fared in a popular election. The era of noble control and social deference had, of course, passed, giving way to a new generation of notables who were more in tune with their times. 'La Lozère a changé', he concludes, and now 'les élus sont roturiers, médecins et fonctionnaires.'

The final section is devoted to ways in which urban elites presented themselves to others and were in turn represented by their contemporaries, ways by which they emphasized the power and prestige of their position. It contains, as might be expected, no single thesis, but rather a variety of illuminating examples of pomp and pride, a series of thematic studies that must be read as parts of a greater whole. There are papers devoted to such topics as the standing of provincial chambers of commerce in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or the choice, by Mulhouse, to emphasize its industrial enterprise by selling itself as the 'French Manchester'. We are shown the importance of dress and clothing, a theme that is examined both in the representation of urban elites in the illuminated pages of the *Grandes Chroniques de France* – a text of 1274 – and in an examination of the ceremonial robes worn by provincial magistrates in the seventeenth century, robes intended both to impress the onlooker and to distinguish the wearer from those around him. Elites, after all, were concerned to emphasize their difference, their special qualities of learning or office, for in that difference lay the essence of their power. And power, in the final analysis, is what this study is about – how it was granted, how it was perpetuated, and how it was expressed. Cities are shown to be socially fluid, with competing claims to prestige and pre-eminence; but once gained, elite status was something men clung to tenaciously, in widely differing cultures and across the ages. They were intent on advertising their success and their achievement, and though they might do this in very different ways – by charitable foundations, for instance, or membership of religious fraternities – the desire to perpetuate their memory, to live on beyond the grave, is a recurrent theme in these pages. Urban *notables* celebrated their success by building large and lavish town houses that bore witness to their standing. Their heirs and families then perpetuated their memory, providing a living monument to their achievement. Urban dynasties came into being, the living carrying on their work and their name, while urban cemeteries bristled with ornately-carved tombs as a permanent monument to their memory. Two of the most interesting chapters in this collection are about life after death,

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Claude-Isabelle Brelot examining the tombs of municipal notables, seeing in them powerful symbols of *patriciat*, and Jean-Pierre Chaline taking his quest into the municipal cemeteries of nineteenth-century northern towns. There he finds not just individual tombs with an often ponderously ornate monumental architecture, making its potent statement about the worth of the deceased and his quality as an individual. There are also family tombs, memorials to urban dynasties, lined up in all their posthumous dignity. Not content with the impression they had made on their fellows in their lifetime, they continued to impress from beyond the grave, lawyers and councillors, merchants and industrialists, soldiers and educators, still flaunting their elite status as urban notables and 'patriciens pour l'éternité'.

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